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The Usual Suspects: Debunking the Myth about the "Causes" of Terrorism

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This article addresses many of the so-called "causes' of terrorism to debunk the myth that structural, cultural or institutional factors operate as independent variables to generate terrorist violence. There are no "causes" of terrorism. Like most violence, terrorist violence is merely a tactic— employed by virtually anyone— as part of an overall strategy to obtain a particular goal.

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I. Introduction

What "causes" terrorism? Myriad attempts have been made to categorize and explain the various causes of terrorism. Countless books and journal articles in every academic discipline imaginable have been published, associating terrorism with a litany of variables including poverty, illiteracy, inequality, democracy, authoritarianism and mental illness— to name just a few.

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The causes of terrorist violence can be categorized various ways. For example, Taylor (1988) suggests a 3-part typology based on legal, moral and behavioral factors. Others argue that terrorism occurs in waves.

The wave analogy is common among social scientists. For instance, scholars refer to democratic transition as occurring in waves (Huntington 1993; McFaul 2002). Economic cycles are also often referred to as waves (Goldstein 1985). Scholars have used the wave analogy to categorize periods of terrorist activity as well (Rapoport 2004; Shughart 2006). The most famous use of the wave analogy in reference to terrorism is Rapoport's (2004) four waves of modern terrorism typology, which breaks the periods of terrorism into four categories: (1) anarchist, (2) national liberation and ethnic separatism, (3) left-wing, and (4) religious.

According to Rapoport, the terrorist organization known as Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) sparked the first wave of terrorism in 1878. This "Anarchist Wave" spread outward from Russia to Western Europe, Asia, the Balkans, and even America. Also known as the "Golden Age of Assassination," the first wave peaked in the 1890s but extended well into the 1920s. Rapoport includes the assassination of the American president, William McKinley, in September 1901 in this wave.

Rapoport's second wave lasted from the 1920s to the end of WWII as anti-colonial sentiment fueled the resentment of ethnic and religious groups suffering political marginalization due to the creation of purely artificial nation-states. The terrorism in this wave was marked by Arbitrary borders were drawn by the victors of WWI as they carved up the former Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and German empires, and also the African continent and elsewhere. Ironically, Wilson's doctrine of self-determination ultimately only applied to "hitherto sovereign countries conquered by Germany, Italy, and Japan" and therefore excluded colonies such as Algeria, Cyprus, Cochin China, Ireland and others(Hoffman 2013, p.47).As a result, nationalist and ethnic separatists in these regions resorted to terrorist tactics, demanding the self-determination denied them by the great powers.
Rapoport defines the third wave of terrorism as new left terrorism, which spanned from the end of WWII to 1979. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and PLO-affiliated groups drove international terrorism to its heyday. Opposition to the war in Vietnam created strong anti-American and anti-establishment sentiment, causing left-wing terrorist groups such as the Red Brigades and the Red Army Faction in Europe, and the Weathermen in America, to wage terrorist campaigns consisting of bombings, hijackings, and political assassinations.

Finally, the fourth wave in Rapoport's typology consists of religious terrorism. This wave begins with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and continues to this day. The pan-Islamic vision of the late Osama bin Laden defined this final wave. More accurately, however, while bin Laden's international franchise has contributed to the terrorism of this period, local and regional groups such as those in Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Philippines, Indonesia, Kashmir, and Chechnya commit the lion's share of terrorist attacks. Given that these groups are local in purpose and vision, international terrorism comprises only a tiny percentage of total terrorist activity in the fourth wave.

Siddique's (2009) analysis is useful here. Dividing terrorist extremism in Pakistan according to the target of an attack, Siddique creates a four-part typology of terrorist organizations in Pakistan. Type I organizations mainly target the West, Type II target Afghanistan and India, Type III target the government and security forces of Pakistan itself, and Type IV organizations are sectarian. Siddique found that groups operating in Pakistan focus primarily on local and regional targets.

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Tinnes (2010) observes a similar focus on domestic targets in her study of contemporary terrorist organizations throughout Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Tinnes notes that while the presence of American troops in this region has brought the far enemy much closer to home, it has also brought to light the many doctrinal and strategic differences between the various local *jihadist* groups that have assembled to fight that enemy. Since most groups' tactical and strategic goals are localized, these clashes have resulted in minimal cooperation between groups, if any. Thus, according to Tinnes, the threat of a unitary, pan-Islamic breed of terrorism is not as dire as was perhaps once believed.

Hegghammer (2010) agrees with Tinnes. He compares and contrasts Saudi Islamist militant groups with a variety of other *jihadist* movements and concludes that most are locally focused and share little in common with one another. *Salafist* groups such as Islamic State (IS) view the purging of Islam as the first step in global *jihad*. Therefore, the elimination of apostate groups is a priority (Wood 2015).

The ongoing differences between IS and al-Qaeda demonstrate the local and territorial nature of these groups. Hegghammer supports his argument by pointing out thatal Shabaab and Boko Haram, though claiming to be loyal to either (or both) al Qaeda and IS, have demonstrated no practical relationship with either of them. Furthermore, both al Shabaab and Boko Haram continue to experience infighting and division over issues of power and control of territory and resources.

Sedgwick (2007) builds upon Rapoport's typology by proposing that the diffusion effect explains increases in certain types of terrorism at certain times (Rapoport's waves). Simply put, the perception that terrorism is successful leads other rational individual utility maximizers to engage in it toward the achievement of their own goals.

The diffusion effect offers a round-about explanation as to why both al Shabaab and Boko Haram have pledged allegiance to groups such as al Qaeda and Boko Haram yet appear to have little or no real working ties to either. The perception of affiliation may serve to translate a success for one as a success for the other. This phenomenon, of course, is not the copycat effect that Sedgwick refers to, but it is related to it.

The obvious question that Sedgwick's assertion creates is if the perception that terrorism is successful leads rational individual utility maximizers to engage in it, why have such a relatively few chosen such a path?

Both Rapoport and Sedgwick offer useful descriptive analyses of the history of terrorism. However, neither provides much in the way of explanatory or predictive insight regarding why such a relatively small number of terrorists choose to break with the status quo while the majority of the population does not.

While the question of *why* an actor engages in violence (i.e., motive) is not as crucial to the strategic theorist as *what* that actor hopes to achieve (strategic objective), a potential bridge between the two is the Machiavellian concept that the ends justify the means. No doubt, in addition to Rapoport's waves and Sedgwick's diffusion effect, the majority of actors also condoned their violence by the ends that they ultimately pursued (Bassiouni 1975). Again, while strategic theory bypasses the need to legitimize violence altogether, it suggests that scholars address the question of how well the means serve the ends on a case by case basis rather than as a generalization.

Another well-known typology is the grievance typology, which loosely structures the causes of terrorism into broadly defined categories such as socio-economic marginalization, social-identity marginalization, religious fanaticism, and political grievance (Leuprecht et al. 2010).

Piazza's (2011) work, which explores the link between minority economic discrimination and domestic terrorism, is a prime example of the body of scholarship on socio-economic marginalization. Piazza concludes that poverty per se is not the critical factor, but economic discrimination against minority groups that sparks them to choose terrorism over the status quo. The terrorist violence in the Niger Delta fits within this category.

A representative piece of social-identity marginalization literature is Brinkerhoff's (2008) study investigating the potential for violence in socially marginalized diaspora groups. Brinkerhoff concludes that there is a potential risk among the most socially marginalized members of diaspora groups to join terrorist organizations. Bryden (2014) suggests that al Shabaab was particularly successful in attracting young Somalis from the diaspora for this reason.

Hoffman (1995)delivers a compelling discussion of religious fanaticism and terrorism, concluding that religion affords us a much more palatable justification of violence than any political position ever could. Mere justification aside, however, Hoffman also points to the apocalyptic vision that drives some religious fanatics to commit violence because they prioritize eternal life over temporal human life here on earth.

In the case of Islamic terrorism, however, scholars and policy makers need to acknowledge the difference between *Islamists* who seek the return of the caliphate (often through the democratic process) and *jihadists* who reject the idea of separation between religion and politics (Turner 2012; McCants 2015). A proper understanding of the religious ideology that drives al Shabaab and Boko Haram reveals much more about their respective political objectives (as well as why these two groups have chosen to employ violence to obtain them) than a mere political analysis alone.

Religion does not explain everything, however. As Heck (2007, p.8) asks, "is it fair to blame 1.4 billion

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and more than 200 million Arabs for the malevolent handiwork of an ideologically deviant few?" The answer is, of course not. Not only is it unfair, but it also makes for poor scholarship as well.

For example, it was political grievances that sparked Boko Haram's terrorist violence in the first place. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) conclude that political radicalization stems more from the perceived political grievances of groups than from individual political dissatisfaction.

There is an abundance of literature linking a myriad of grievances to acts of violence and terrorism. Stern (2003), for example, explores the various grievances that induce individuals to choose terrorism over the status quo such as poverty, unemployment, lack of better opportunities, exploitation, etc. Stern also reveals the disillusionment faced by many young recruits as they become aware of the practical realities of militant organizations such as ambition, corruption and the criminal activities that fund them and allow them to thrive.

The benefit of the grievance typology is that it attempts to identify a reason for discontent. In this respect, it is a bit more explanatory than Rapoport's wave typology which descriptively divides terrorist violence into four dispensations. However, one would naturally assume that most individuals who choose to engage in acts of violence have compelling reasons to do so. Critical to any analysis of terrorism is not necessarily the perpetrators' grievance, but identifying the strategic objective and assessing whether violence offers a sound strategy to address it.

The main problem with the typologies listed above is that they employ theoretical models that artificially separate terrorist violence into classifications that are highly oversimplified. The real world is never so neatly compartmentalized. Therefore, pinpointing specific causes of terrorism remains an elusive endeavor.

As Richardson (2007) puts it, there are two reasons why terrorism is so difficult to explain. One, there are so many terrorists, and two, there are so few terrorists. On the one hand, individuals who engage in terrorism come from such diverse backgrounds that it is difficult to generalize about them with any assurance of accuracy.

Scholars maintain that those who engage in terrorist violence tend to be younger (Russell and Miller 1977; Combs and Hall 2003), poorer (Kepel 1985), and less educated (Bergen and Pandey 2005) today than they were in the 1960s. However, even demographic generalizations such as these require agreement on what constitutes an act of terrorism.

In the next section, I will slice the data somewhat differently to look at four broad categories of factors that experts often cite as causes of terrorism: structural, cultural, institutional and rational.

a) Structural Explanations of Terrorism

Viewing individuals as embedded in socio-economic realities, structuralists look for causal mechanisms in large socio-economic forces rather than in the preferences of individual actors (Hay and Wincott 1998). By far, the most common alleged structural cause of terrorism is poverty. And while this claim resonates intuitively with most reasonable individuals, it does not hold up empirically.

For instance, Krueger and Malečková (2003) explore poverty and poor education as causes of terrorism among Palestinian suicide bombers and find that, not only were the bombers themselves from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, but those who expressed support for suicide bombings as a response to Israeli occupation were as well.

Ahmed (2005) supports this conclusion by observing that the overall sense of humiliation, bitterness, and anger among Palestinians transcends income, education and social class. Ahmed contends that suicide bombings are commonly viewed by the Palestinian public as justified given the barbaric Israeli occupation.

Krueger and Laitin(2008) consider poverty and civil liberties as causes of terrorism. They conclude that among states providing equal protection from the law, developing states do not experience higher rates of terrorism than wealthy countries. Instead they suggest that political repression generates terrorists who then, in the case of suicide bombers, often target more developed and more democratic nations.

Abadie (2004) argues that poverty is not a statistically significant variable but the level of political freedom is. Abadie also points out that domestic terrorism continues to account for the lion's share of attacks. For example, in 2003 international terrorism constituted only 240 out of a total of 1,536 terrorist attacks. Of course, how one defines terrorism is critical in this type of data collection.

Piazza (2006) looks at ninety-six countries between 1986 and 2002 and finds that, rather than low economic development, "social cleavage theory" offers a better explanation of terrorism.[1] Piazza uses the theory to measure the level of social division in society. Greater numbers of political parties equate to increased social division and hence, aa more probable likelihood of political violence.

In another study, while conceding that there is no evidence of a direct causal relationship between structural factors and individual acts of terrorism, Piazza (2010) notes a correlation between an overall reduction in global poverty and a corresponding decline in global terrorism. Piazza, therefore, suggests that there is a direct correlation between low economic performance

[1] Social Cleavage Theory proposes that political parties emerge out of social cleavages in society (Lipset and Rokkan1967).

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and terrorism at the systemic level even if no evidence can be found to consistently link individual acts of terrorism to poverty at the sub-systemic level. Similarly, Robison, Crenshaw, and Jenkins (2006)identify a positive correlation between increased foreign direct investment and a long-term overall reduction in terrorism.

Berman's model (2003) also suggests that systemic poverty and economic inefficiency indirectly aid terrorist organizations by allowing them to win the allegiance and loyalty of their members through the provision of public goods and services that would not otherwise be available. The fewer the market opportunities and government provision of public goods, the easier it is for terrorist organizations to secure such loyalty.

According to Berman, individual and collective loyalty to such groups in exchange for economic benefits is rational. And while groups that benefit from such loyalty may then attract other members who are not desperate for economic benefits (e.g., the nineteen hijackers in the 9/11 attacks), these latter members constitute the elite among the group rather than the rank and file. They constitute the exception not the rule. As Berman points out, al Qaeda would hardly send illiterate members to flight school in America when it had more qualified individuals at its disposal. Therefore, according to Berman's model, the single most effective way to eliminate support for terrorism is to improve the economic opportunities of local populations to reduce their dependence on the benefits provided by terrorist organizations.

Berman's model is also applicable to wealthier states with rapid population growth such as Saudi Arabia. Though wealthy now, the population in Saudi Arabia is projected to increase from its current level of approximately 27 million to over 41 million in 2025 and 60 million in 2050, making its abundant resources increasingly scarce (Ehrlich and Liu 2002).

Both al Shabaab and Boko Haram have benefitted from lagging economic conditions by recruiting from among the desperate and unemployed. Still, neither group would likely elect to lay down their arms should economic realities improve in their respective regions as their strategic focus is the implementation of *sharia* rather than a larger slice of the economic pie.

Utilizing a more localized group level of analysis, other scholars have noted a correlation between economic downturns and increases in terrorism (Angrist 1995;Honaker 2004; Blomberg et al. 2004). For example, Angrist (1995) notes that the early 1980s witnessed a rise in education among Palestinians. However, economic downturns also caused a significant increase in unemployment across socio-economic levels. High levels of unemployment led to dissatisfaction and social unrest. Is it a mere coincidence that this economic downturn coincided with the First Intifada? Honaker (2004) draws a similar connection between unemployment and terrorism in Northern Ireland. Ehrlich and Liu (2002) and Urdal (2006) find a positive correlation between population growth and terrorism, especially when increasing numbers of unemployed youth are involved. Finally, Bowman (2008) reports that the U.S. military paid former al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) detainees roughly $200 per month after their release to deter them from returning to AQI. Most were young, unemployed males who accepted jobs with AQI purely for the money rather than for political ideology or religious conviction.

Bueno de Mesquita(2005) utilizes an individual level of analysis to parse out the various causal factors involved in this phenomenon. While agreeing that economic factors play a significant role, Bueno de Mesquita argues a more complex relationship than the standard linear correlation. Acknowledging that individuals on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder are more inclined to volunteer for terrorist missions—particularly those individuals harboring discontent towards the government—Bueno de Mesquita argues that terrorist organizations only want to recruit the most qualified individuals. When economic contractions increase unemployment, terrorist organizations have a more qualified pool of volunteers from which to choose.

This inexpensive pool of highly-qualified candidates leads to an increased number of attacks because harsh government crackdowns often generate popular support which offsets the cost of future operations through a surplus of donations and recruits, and the cycle continues.

Hence according to Bueno de Mesquita, it is not poverty per se that drives terrorism, or even economic inequality, but economic downturns that create a surplus of highly qualified individuals who are angry enough and desperate enough to view terrorism as a viable alternative to the status quo. The question remains, however, how does one explain terrorism during periods of economic boom?

As this section demonstrates, the structural approach to explaining terrorism focuses on economic conditions that are beyond the control of individuals. These conditions escalate frustration and desperation for the multitudes they affect. Economic conditions also directly affect the choices individuals make by limiting the alternatives available to them. Finally, those who engage in terrorism may use economic realities to justify their actions or take advantage of desperate economic conditions to further their agenda as otherwise law-abiding citizens may be tempted to pursue illicit alternatives during cycles of economic downturn. However, the economic conditions alone do not explain why some choose terrorism over the status quo while

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others do not. I will now examine the cultural approach to comprehending terrorism.

b) Cultural Explanations of Terrorism

Culturalists strive to understand the social context from which values, norms, and identities that govern human behavior emerge. Therefore, culturalists argue that an understanding of political processes first requires an understanding of cultural factors (Almond and Coleman 1960; Almond and Verba 1963; Pye and Verba 1965; Dawson et al. 1969).

Culturally speaking, the two most common denominators shared by people are language and religion. Language has been a source of conflict in isolated incidents (such as the war between East and West Pakistan where Urdu was proclaimed as the national tongue despite the prevalence of Bengali in the East). Still, religious doctrine has played a more vital (if not a central) role in armed conflict throughout history (Fox and Sandler 2005; Silberman et al. 2005: McCormick 2006)

Culturalists suggest that religion can sometimes be absolute and unyielding, and it is often in these occasions that religious convictions (particularly those associated with monotheistic faiths) can spark violence when confronted with contrary belief systems or practices.[2]

When dealing with terrorism, culturalists search for social conventions that might serve to institute violence as a culturally viable option (e.g. Silverman 2002; Juergensmeyer 2003; Arena and Arrigo 2006). With the increasing prevalence of Islamic terrorism over the past several decades, there has been a surge of interest in Islamic culture in the search for cultural explanations of the phenomena (e.g., Omar 2003; Milton-Edwards 2006; Etienne 2007).

Since September 11, 2001, the body of literature on religion's relationship to terrorism has grown exponentially (e.g., Bergen 2002; Kulwicki 2002; Armanios 2003; Juergensmeyer 2003; Stern 2003; Kepel 2004; Roy 2004; Kalu et al 2005; McCormack 2005; Bergen and Pandey 2006; Ahmed 2006; Haynes 2007& 2009; Venkatraman 2007; Yates 2007; Selengut 2008; Hegghammer 2010; Kean 2011; Sageman 2011).[3]

Fukuyama (2001), for example, suggests that the Muslim world experiences terrorism than other regions due to the immense disappointment of falling so far behind the Western world.

Taylor (1988) asserts that as far back as the sixteenth century, Muslims faced two choices: either embrace those aspects of the West that made it so successful or return to the pure faith of the past. According to Taylor, adherents of the two alternatives have been at odds ever since. In more contemporary times, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of secular nationalism and the neo-fundamentalist ideology that opposed it.[4]

Payne (1989, p. 121) insists that "violence has been a central, accepted element, both in Muslim teaching and in the historical conduct of the religion. For over a thousand years, the religious bias in the Middle Eastern Culture has not been to discourage the use of force, but to encourage it."

Unfortunately, moral majority leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham, and Pat Robertson advance this misguided view of Islam by asserting that Islam is inherently evil, and therefore, the source of modern-day *jihadist* violence. However, anyone who wishes to look at the facts objectivelycan easily discredit this assertion.

Like all religions, Islam can be a unifying force. But of course, not all variants of Islam are the same, so Islam can also be a dividing force as well. However, this doesn't make it evil. Nor is mainstream Islam behind so-called "Islamic terrorism" (Esposito 2003).

Kepel (2004) contends that this phenomenon is divided between the nationalist Islamist political parties in predominantly Muslim countries and the internationally-oriented Islamists living elsewhere. According to Kepel, most Islamist movements in predominantly Muslim states have adopted a more nationalist agenda in the post-cold war era, and therefore religiously-motivated violence in these regions has increasingly been replaced by more politically-motivated violence. In contrast, Kepel insists that religiously-motivated Islamist violence has increased over the same period in the Diaspora, and particularly in the West, where some ten million Muslims reside in Western Europe alone.

Roy (2004) attributes this increase in politically-motivated violence in predominantly Muslim states to the highly politicized terrorism of al Qaeda, whose interpretation of *jihad*as a personal duty breaks with the more traditional notion of *jihad* as a collective, and primarily defensive, duty.[5] Roy also points to the increasingly individual nature of Islam in the West. Roy maintains that while the West may not politicize Islam as much as its Middle-Eastern counterpart, its increasing focus on individualism lends itself to radical views.

Venkatraman (2007) argues that according to the *Quranic* principle of *ijtihad*, Muslims are free to interpret Islam individually and choose their Islamic

[2] In the cases of al Shabaab and Boko Haram (and indeed, many other *jihadist* groups), one obvious explanation for the increase in violence is the belief that democratic forms of government are haram (prohibited) under *sharia* (Schacht 1959). Thus, they rebelwhen outsiders impose this foreign and (in their eyes) unlawful institution upon them,.

[3] For an excellent bibliography see, Haynes (2005).

[4] (Ajami, 1978) offers an excellent discussion of secular nationalism and pan-Arabism in the wake of the Six Day War.

[5] For more on the individual conception of *jihad*, see Lahoud (2010a; 2010b).

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practices as they wish provided they seek the will of God within an Islamic community. So whether it is due to the politicization of Islam in predominantly Muslim regions or the influence of individualism in the West, many scholars agree that there has been both an increase in politically-motivated conflict in Muslim states and an increase in religiously-motivated Islamist violence in the West.[6]

An excellent example is al Shabaab which initially opposed the Ethiopian military, the Somali forces Ethiopia propped up, and any outside militants that assisted them. While the group espouses a religious ideology, al Shabaab's fight was at one time primarily a nationalist cause- though it has successfully drawn Muslims from other states around the world to fight the "infidel crusaders" who have invaded Muslim soil (Vidino, et al. 2010).

Others consider the practice of honor killing as a culturally-specific social convention that institutes brutality(Kulwicki 2002). While this practice is horrific, it in no way represents an exclusively Muslim disposition towards violence as domestic violence against women is a global problem (Watts and Zimmerman 2002).

Examples of religiously motivated violence abound from the Christian Crusades to Muslim/Hindu conflicts and even Buddhist/Hindu conflicts. Scholars can hardly claim any one religion as the exclusive domain of violence, nor can they conclusively demonstrate that any religion causes violence (Martin 1997). Furthermore, religious violence in any society is almost always accompanied by some level of ethno political tension and struggle over limited resources, making this type of analysis particularly problematic (Barber 2001).

Despite the increase in Islamic terrorism, it is extremely challenging to demonstrate a direct correlation between the religion of Islam and extremist violence. Pearce (2005) concludes that no religion displays a significantly higher or lower propensity to violence than the others. Rather than attribute terrorism to any one religion, Wade and Reiter (2007) find a positive correlation between the number of religious minority groups in a given state and its overall level of terrorist activity. Thus, the search for culturally-specific causes of terrorism remains elusive.

In addition to citing specific cultures as prone to terrorist violence, others maintain that cultural differences produce conflict. The most famous of these is Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Theory which maintains that, since the end of the Cold War, intrastate war along cultural lines has replaced interstate aggression. While his general observation concerning the rise of intrastate war is accurate, scholars have attacked Huntington's theory for several reasons. Of primary concern to most critics is Huntington's focus on cultural factors over other considerations such as socio-economic and geopolitical realities (e.g.,Appleby 1999; Gopin 2000; Laue 2000; Perry 2002; Haynes 2003; Juergensmeyer 2003).

Turner (1993, p. 412) warned that by attempting to equate culture with clearly delineated boundaries, scholars "risk essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race." Similarly, Benhabib (2002, p.5) warns against such a reductionist approach to understanding culture. She reasons that the attempt to conceive of culture as a "clearly delineable whole" is derived from the desire to understand and control outgroups. Benhabib contrasts this approach with how most people view their own culture, not as an undisputed reality, but more as "a horizon that recedes each time one approaches it." From this perspective, culture is an elusive concept. We must not attempt to apply iten masse to rigidly defined groups of people.

Huntington's concept of "cleft" countries is particularly salient to a cultural analysis of conflict in states such as Nigeria and Sudan (during its civil war years). Huntington defines cleft countries as states divided between civilizations. Conflict occurs when those belonging to one civilization attempt to impose their norms, mores, and laws upon those belonging to another. Huntington attributes the civil war in Sudan between Muslims in the North and Christians in the South to Sudan's status as a cleft state. Likewise, conflict in Nigeria could arguably be viewed as a result of tensions between its Christian South and Muslim North.

However, even in religiously dichotomous regions such as Nigeria and the former state of Sudan, such simplistic explanations prove insufficient. Closer analysis reveals that in both states the North/South divide is just the tip of the iceberg. Each state has also witnessed various struggles between groups of very similar cultural and religious identities.

In Nigeria for example, local groups have clashed with each other over control of resources for decades. Also during the civil war in Sudan, Southerners battled each other just as fiercely as they fought the Northern forces over the question of unification or independence. Therefore, cultural differentiation and ethnoreligious fragmentation are not always the cause of conflict.

Nor does the absence of such diversity guarantee peace. For example, conflict has plagued Somalia- a largely ethnically and religiously homogenous state.[7] One would be hard-pressed to explain Somalia's inter-clan conflict and interstate disputes via Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Theory (or via Wade and Reiter's findings for that matter).

[6] Selengut (2008) offers a comprehensive treatment of the rise of religious violence.

[7] There are, of course, linguistic and other differences that diversify the Somali population. For example, see Solomon (2015).

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In fact, there is increasing skepticism concerning whether we can even consider discrete ethnic groups as the basic building blocks of society (Lieberman and Singh 2010 & 2012). A more satisfactory explanation suggests that stable, effective governance has more to do with peace than an absence of cultural diversity (Zubaida, 1989).

If ethnic or religious fragmentation were a significant cause of conflict, one could expect to see more consistent results. But the fact is, many countries in Africa score high for either ethnic fragmentation, religious fragmentation or both (Lane and Ersson 1994).[8] All have experienced very mixed results concerning violence within their borders.

There has always been–and there continues to be–conflict and violence in every culture (both across cultural lines and within them). Therefore, cultural explanations alone offer limited understanding as to why acts of terrorism occur in one place and not in another.

Finally, any discussion of a correlation between cultural factors and terrorism needs to address the hegemony of discourse contested by critical thinkers such as Said (1976, 1978, 1985, 1997), who argue that Orientalism was devised to establish European imperial domination, and despite its claims of neutrality, the Academy continues to perpetuate a mere caricature of the East as inferior to the West rather than a representation of the East as different from the West (see also Derrida 1974; Deleuze and Guattari 1977; Foucault 1980; Bhabha 1983; Fairclough 2013).[9]

I have lived, studied and taught in North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. I can attest from my own experience that many university students in these regions have been fed a steady diet of neo-Orientalism from their youth. Thus, many readily accept an international hierarchy that places them at the very bottom. Western scholars are no less susceptible. Indeed, like fish in water, Westerners are often so immersed in neo-Orientalism that many hardly notice its existence. Given this vulnerability, scholars need to be particularly careful when applying cultural explanations to terrorism as they are often laden with stereotypes on the one hand and a slew of unanswered questions on the other. In the next section, I will discuss institutional explanations of terrorism.

c) Institutional Explanations of Terrorism

Institutionalism asserts that institutions shape both the preferences of individuals as well as the acceptable means for attaining those preferences (Wildavsky 1987; Koelble 1995; Bowles 1998; 1999; Persson 2002). Institutions can be formal such as a state's laws, regulations, educational systems, economic policies and government (Stiglitz 2000; Bratton 2007). Institutions can also be informal arrangements of all kinds to include corruption, clientelism or something as simple as people allowing pregnant women and the elderly to go to the front of the line at the bank (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Grzymala-Busse 2010). As is the case with other systemic factors, institutional explanations for terrorism abound.

d) Political Explanations for Terrorism

There is broad disagreement concerning which type of political regime is more likely to experience terrorism. Some studies link terrorism to democracies while others tie it to authoritarian regimes. One view is that due to increased political representation and participation, democratic societies are less likely to spawn terrorism than authoritarian regimes (Schmid 1992; Gurr 2003).

Others conclude just the opposite, however, positively correlating political rights and civil liberties with terrorism (Ross 1993; Eubank and Weinberg 2001). Drakos and Gofas (2006) contend that non-democracies likely only appear to experience fewer terrorist incidents due to underreporting.

Eyerman (1998) finds that new democracies are especially prone to terrorism because they reduce both the cost and risk. Li (2005) claims that democracies with proportional representation experience fewer incidents of terrorism than democracies with majoritarian or mixed electoral systems because proportional representation generally creates more political space for new parties. Li's conclusion contradicts Piazza's (2008) findings (mentioned above) that tie terrorism to social cleavages.

Data from empirical studies also suggest an inverted U-shaped correlation between terrorism and both authoritarian states and democracies (Abadie 2004). Terrorism scholars refer to this correlation as the democracy curve. It is premised upon the idea that while authoritarian states are able to crush internal threats, democracies tend to experience fewer contingencies. The democracy curve in no way asserts that autocratic states deal with all forms of terrorism or that democracies never face the scourge of terrorism. One would have to ignore a myriad of realities to make such an assumption (e.g., the Chechen Wars, the Uighurs, 9/11 and the resulting decade-plus GWOT).

The democracy curve notes fewer incidents of terrorism inboth democratic and authoritarian societies. This observation leads some to conclude a positive correlation between semi-democracies and terrorism due to a lack of civil liberties such as freedom of the press (Sawyer 2005) and transparent legal systems (Kreimer 2007).

[8] Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côted'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda.

[9] Consider Said's academic (and what appeared to be personal) tit for tat with Bernard Lewis (e.g., Said 1976; Lewis 1982).

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Beyond regime type, other institutional phenomena that are purported to open the door for terrorist influences are poorly integrated party systems and endemic corruption. In Lebanon, for example, Hezbollah has been able to take advantage of the fact that there are few established political parties in the country (Norton 2007). In contrast, the endemic corruption of Fatah opened political space for Hamas in Gaza (Milton-Edwards 2007). But again, poorly organized party systems and malfeasance merely represent opportunities for terrorists to exploit (Shelley 2004; Shinn 2004). Neither demonstrates a consistent correlation with terrorism. In fact, many developing states possess both phenomena without experiencing a high incidence of terrorism (Diamond 2002).

Mohammad (2005) looks instead at a regime's overall legitimacy as the primary factor for terrorism among Arab states in the Middle East. After testing for other factors such as literacy rates, socio-economic development, regime type and support for Islamic extremism, Mohammad concludes that none contribute to violence as consistently as the perception that a regime is propped up by the West and that it is supportive of American foreign policy. Similarly, Savun and Phillips (2009) maintain that states are more likely to experience terrorism depending upon the type of foreign policy they pursue. The more isolationist the foreign policy, the lower the probability that a state will experience terrorist violence.

e) The Mass Media as an Explanation for Terrorism

The mass media is another institution that has been linked to terrorism as it sometimes serves the interests of terrorists (Nacos 2016). Exposure to the mass media is perhaps the most critical asset terrorists enjoy when it comes to generating popular support and attempting to propagate their ideology (Hoffman 2013). Without media coverage, terrorists fail to publicize their actions beyond the immediate victims. The lack of an audience reduces terrorism to acts of random violence (Nacos 2007).

Take the recent media coverage of the Islamic State (IS) for instance. The group is, without doubt, a threat. However, IS has been active since 1999 under a variety of names with little global attention since the death of al-Zarqawi(Zelin 2014). The recent events concerning IS are newsworthy. However, one also has to take into account the tremendous benefit that IS garners from publicity (Giroux 2016).

Wilkinson (1997) asserts that in democracies, where freedom of the press is supposed to be upheld, a symbiotic relationship often develops between the terrorist organizations seeking publicity and the media outlets that profit from sensational news stories. This relationship is offered as one reason why terrorism thrives in democracies more so than in authoritarian states.

Wieviorka (1988) denies the existence of such a simplistic, straightforward relationship, pointing to instances where terrorist organizations have targeted journalists and news outlets.[10] And while democratic governments are usually slow to resort to censorship, many have enacted anti-complicity statutes that prohibit media organizations from lending support to terrorist organizations through publicity.

Others point out that such publicity has a mixed record regarding the amount of popular support it generates (Murphy et al. 2004). Not only do mass media outlets publicize the terrorists' cause, but they also expose the atrocities committed by the group and such "publicity" often backfires. For instance, Funes (1998) examines how media coverage of the attacks perpetrated by the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* "Basque Homeland and Liberty" caused a significant loss of popular support for the group.

Some scholars argue that terrorists do not need their actions to be publicized as government reactions to terrorist attacks are often enough to incite public outrage. For instance, Bloom (2004) discusses how the media coverage of the harsh retaliatory crack-downs initiated by the Israeli government and military forces has served to outrage the Palestinian public, thus generating widespread support for Palestinian terrorist activity.

So while terrorist organizations attempt to use the mass media to raise awareness and support, regimes publicize the criminality of terrorism and thereby delegitimize the group in the eyes of the public. Both, however, run the risk of losing public support for their use of violence.

f) Madaris as an Explanation for Terrorism

Another debatable issue surrounding institutions is that of *madaris* (plural for *madrasa*) and the radicalization of school-age children. For example, the 9-11 Commission describes *madaris* as "incubators of violent extremism" (Commission 2004, p. 367). However, this depiction is inflammatory and not entirely accurate. In Arabic, "*madrasa*" means "school." Many *madaris* serve the impoverished, and as charitable organizations, prove to be harmless. In Somalia, for example, the formal education system ceased to function after 1991. Privately funded *madaris* were the only option available for low-income Somali children (Botha and Abdile 2014).

Much of the concern over the perceived link between *madaris* and Islamic terrorism stems from the fact that as many as 10,000 *madaris* in Pakistan, and thousands more around the world, are funded by Saudi *Wahhabi* groups (Armanios 2003; Benoliel 2003). However, the quality of education should also be considered (Botha and Abdile 2014).

[10] Interestingly enough, IS has recently threatened Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, and Twitter CEO, Jack Dorsey, for their efforts to deny the group and its affiliates space on their respective social media sites (Moore 2016).

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Since the 9/11 attacks, *madaris* have received a disproportionate amount of attention among Westerners as training centers for radical *jihadists*. However, Siddique (2009) argues against this conception. While it is true that *madaris* are known to offer religious education, by and large, according to Siddique, *militantmadaris* are the exception rather than the rule. Siddique concludes that to the extent that *madaris* are militant at all; they are much more likely to support local and regional extremism rather than international. Interestingly, none of the nineteen perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were educated at *madaris*.

Similarly, Bergen and Pandey (2006) examine the profiles of 79 terrorists involved in the five worst anti-West terrorist attacks in recent history (the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1998 attacks against the two U.S. embassies in Africa, 9/11, the 2002 Bali nightclub bombing, and the 2005 London bombings). They conclude that, unlike the average terrorist engaged in attacks against domestic/cross-border targets, the average global terrorist is highly educated. Bergen and Pandey further determine that the level of technological sophistication required to orchestrate a terror attack against a Western target is not provided in most *madaris*.

Puri(2010) also concludes that militant *madaris* in Pakistan play a relatively minor role in the overall equation of cause and effect. Not only are a very tiny proportion of Pakistani students exposed to such *madaris*, those who do attend militant *madaris*lack the necessary skills to engage in high-tech terrorist attacks.

Stern (2000) insists, however, that the relatively few militant *madaris* in Pakistan encouraged their students to engage in *jihad* and sent them to *jihad* training camps. Likewise, Magouirk et al. (2008) report that *madaris* proved an integral part of the equation in securing recruits for Jemaah Islamiyyah.

While many *madaris* around the world are funded by Saudi sources, Coulson (2004) argues that the real blame for the existence of militant *madaris* in Afghanistan is to be laid at the feet of the Reagan administration which invested some $51 million towards textbooks that incite *jihad* against Soviet troops. These textbooks depicted extremely violent "lessons" such as math problems asking students to calculate the length of time it will take a *mujahid's* bullet to reach a Russian's head. This covert plan to indoctrinate, fund, and arm the *mujahidin* was part of the larger $3.2 billion Operation Cyclone (Davis 2002). After the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Taliban movement emerged and was mainly comprised of students (the word "*taliban*" is Pashto for "students") influenced and trained by the very *mujahidin* the U.S. backed in the 1980s.

Mazzetti et al. (2010) also suggest that the Pakistani government, which continues to receive over $1 billion per year from Washington for its part in the GWOT, also funds certain *madaris* toward similar ends. But here again, the focus is on local and regional rather than international terrorism.

The perception of *madaris* as training centers for radical *jihadists*, while meriting consideration, is at best misguided and incomplete, and at worst blatant propaganda. The alarm generated over *madaris* stems from the funding they receive by *Wahhabi* groups in Saudi Arabia. However, as noted above, U.S. funding has been linked to militant *madaris* as well. While some *madaris* may incite hatred, very few students who attend such *madaris* will ever obtain the technical ability and financial means necessary to orchestrate a terrorist attack against the West.

One can see that, as with structural and cultural factors, institutional explanations alone prove incomplete. While institutions may shape both the preferences of terrorists and the opportunities available for them to exploit, they do not explain why only a tiny percentage of the population within a given institutional design choose to engage in or support acts of terrorism. Nor do they further our understanding of whether such actors are likely to achieve their strategic objectives through violence.

Finally, scholarsalso cite systemic causes as the culprits behind terrorism. However, the sheer randomness of terrorism suggests that something much more specific also needs to be considered. Hence, I will now explore the role of rational explanations as a potential key to understanding this phenomenon.

g) Rational Explanations of Terrorism

Scholars in this camp analyze individual strategic interactions as the primary causal factors of political outcomes (Fiorina 1995; Kiser 1996; Levi 1997). Thus, it is possible to distinguish rational choice scholars from structuralists, culturalists, and institutionnalists by the level of analysis that they employ. Rationalists tend to approach problems deductively rather than inductively. They are more interested in broad generalization than deep understanding. The deductive method is evident by the three fundamental assumptions of the rational-choice approach. First, all individuals have fixed and ranked preferences. Second, all individuals are self-interested and strive to maximize their goals. Third, all individuals are interdependent and therefore act strategically based upon their expectations of what others will do. Rational choice scholars apply these three assumptions to all cases regardless of individual circumstances.

The rationalist camp in the body of terrorism literature attempts to understand terrorism via the preferences, incentives, and choices of individual utility maximizers who act deliberately toward the most efficient means to an end based upon their perception of what other actors will do (Enders and Sandler 2000; Berman 2003: Frey 2004).

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For example, kidnapping is a rational act provided there is reasonable cause to believe that someone will comply with the perpetrator's demands. While this crime is sometimes used to raise awareness or to negotiate the release of political prisoners, it would not be employed for these purposes if there were zero expectation that the media outlets or governments involved would comply.

Kidnapping also raises a substantial amount of money. It is estimated that the 409 international incidents perpetrated between 1968 and 1982 yielded some $350 million (roughly $850,000 per victim), generating significant revenue for the perpetrators and therefore constituting a rational act (Rapoport 2004).

Still, no one kidnaps homeless children in Manila. Nor does anyone make demands in exchange for the safe return of a hostage possessing insufficient political or emotional value to those negotiating. Kidnappers only target victims likely to generate a ransom. Thus, it is an example of a purely rational act-engaged in only when the perpetrator(s) perceive it to be the most expedient means to a desired end. Likewise, acts of terrorism can be understood more clearly when one adds the rationalist lens to the looking glass.

One could argue that terrorism is not entirely rational in that the fruits of terrorism are also a public good because any political concessions achieved are shared by all regardless of whether they participate in the act or not. While this is true, it in no way precludes terrorism from being rational.

Berman (2003) argues that terrorist organizations gain tremendous popularity despite the destruction they cause if the public goods they provide exceed those provided by the government. In this respect, even the provision of public goods is rational as it benefits the organization.

Even in the extreme case of suicide terrorism, any potential benefits are almost entirely in the public realm, making the rationality of suicide terrorism for the individual a particularly challenging idea. Still, suicide terrorism is rational if the bomber believes that there are rewards to be had in the next life. What is more, the bomber's family also often benefits from the support of the group sponsoring the act (Zakaria 2007).

Petter(2004) elaborates on the rationality argument by identifying four distinct terrorist profiles in a typical *jihadist* cell—each with their rationale for membership: (1) the entrepreneur, (2) the protégé, (3) misfits, and (4) drifters. The entrepreneur is carving out a niche and making a name for him or herself. For the entrepreneur, terrorism is a business. The protégé sees an opportunity to utilize his or her ability. Finally, misfits find a place to belong while drifters obtain a convenient, albeit temporary, economic opportunity.[11]

Unsurprisingly, Rosendorff and Sandler (2010) find that supporters will join terrorist organizations if they stand to gain more from their participation in the cell than from other economic opportunities available to them. Therefore, as real earnings from wages rise, so do the opportunity costs for engaging in terrorist activities. This point is so intuitive that it hardly merits mention.

However, Rosendorff and Sandler also suggest that in addition to fewer acts of terrorism, policymakers can also expect more egregious types of terrorism in times of economic prosperity. The reason there are often more suicide bombings and other particularly lethal attacks during times of economic prosperity is that terrorist leaders hope to provoke the government into overreacting. Harsh retaliation by the government generates support for the terrorists' cause and therefore lowers the group's cost of engaging in terrorism through increased financial support, approval, and volunteers.

This tactic works particularly well against liberal democracies since elected officials respond to political pressure to do something. Harsh retaliation on the part of the state, in turn, generates support which then allows the terrorist organization to continue to operate even in times of economic prosperity (Bloom 2004, Rosendorff and Sandler 2010).

Enders and Sandler (2005) propose that individuals can choose how they respond to systemic factors such as the economy and the political structure, thus specifying their models with the individual's choice as the independent variable. This distinction is particularly salient in the post 9/11 era.

The United States and its allies targeted al-Qaeda and its affiliates, captured or killed roughly two-thirds of the leadership (along with some 3,400 operatives), and froze more than $135 million in assets. Al Qaeda responded by decentralizing its network and thereby adapting to the new economic and political realities.

Decentralization renders the larger organization more resilient against infiltration and attacks as each local cell is much more independent than before the GWOT. If one cell is infiltrated and the leadership is captured or killed, the entire organization is no longer compromised. Likewise, the nature of the new design makes it exponentially harder to track and freeze the organization's financial assets as (ideally) each cell is financially independent of the other.

This resilience on the part of al Qaeda demonstrates that it is a rational actor. It does more than simply react to systemic forces. It strategically adapts and responds according to its preferences. Rosendorff and Sandler (2010) further contend that terrorists can

[11] Horgan (2005) makes a somewhat related point in his discussion of the complexity of human behavior, stating the need to understand that the reason(s) an individual initially engages in terrorist activity is not necessarily the same as the reason(s) that person continues. Nor is it always relevant to the decision to cease terrorist activity.

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choose to manipulate the government's response.[12] This is different from the many approaches that specify the terrorists themselves as the dependent variable.

For example, in addition to the ideas mentioned earlier, Gurr(1970) advances relative deprivation, and Tilly (1978) promotes his theory of political opportunity. While Gurr investigates the link between economic distribution and political violence, Tilly considers the level of state oppression as the factor in determining how much conflict will be tolerated. Both theories offer compelling arguments and have spawned large bodies of literature, yet neither views the terrorists themselves as the independent variable.

Likewise, Lichbach (1987) introduced a rational actor model with three propositions: (1) Government repression of nonviolent opposition will result in more violent resistance. (2) The factor that determines whether an opposition group will increase or decrease all resistance activities is the government's accommodation policy toward that particular group. (3) It is not repression per se that increases violent resistance, but inconsistency in government policy toward opposition. While offering a rational explanation of sorts, Lichbach essentially sidesteps the human agency of the terrorists altogether by specifying the state as the independent variable.

II. Conclusion

This article has considered many of the so-called "causes' of terrorism to debunk the myth that structural, cultural or institutional factors operate as independent variables to generate terrorist violence. There are no "causes" of terrorism. Like most violence, terrorist violence is merely a tactic— employed by virtually anyone— as part of an overall strategy to obtain a particular goal. In this sense, it is entirely rational.

However unlike pure cost-benefit analyses, actors who engage in terrorism often do so as more than mere utility maximizers. Structural, cultural, and institutional factors, no doubt, affect actors' circumstances and influence the resources available to them. These, in turn, affect the decision whether to utilize violence as a tactic or not. At the heart of the matter is not what is causing terrorist violence, but the strategic objective(s) behind the violence—what do the actorsinvolved hope to accomplish through the violence? There are no cookie-cutter formulas that we can apply en-masse. Every incident is distinct and demandsan in-depth strategic analysis.

[12] (See also Celestino and Gleditsch2013) who conclude that nonviolent opposition to authoritarian governments substantially improve the chances for a democratic transition while violent resistance increases the likelihood of another dictatorship.

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