

# Root Causes of Terrorism: Some Conceptual Notes, a Set of Indicators, and a Model

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The answer to the question “What are the causes of terrorism?” is first of all dependent on the definition of terrorism. Since terrorism is an essentially contested concept in political discourse and since there is no universally accepted legal definition in the United Nations, the controversy over causes will continue. Yet any meaningful discussion will need at least a working definition. For the purpose of this short paper here, terrorism refers to a criminal tactic of conflict-waging, involving some of the same acts of violence which would qualify as war crimes if a state of war existed – deliberate attacks on civilians, non-combatants and third parties, wilful murder, the taking of hostages and the killing of prisoners (kidnapped persons). Many acts of terrorism can be considered as peacetime equivalents of war crimes, performed by clandestine groups to provoke, intimidate, coerce, impress, or persuade target audiences in the struggle for political power.

One should also stand still for a moment about what one wishes to understand under “causes,” a seemingly straightforward concept but in reality one of considerable complexity. In this regard it is instructive to look at a related field, polemology (the study of war and peace) and its approach to the “causes of war.” Quincy Wright, a life-long student of war, noted already in 1942 that the phrase ‘cause of war’ has been used in many senses:

“To some a cause of war is an event, condition, act, or personality involving only a particular war; to others it is a general proposition applicable to many wars. To some it is a class of human motives, ideals, or values; to others it is a class of impersonal forces, conditions, processes, patterns, or relations. To some it is the entrance or injection of a disturbing factor into a stable situation; to others it is the lack of

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essential conditions of stability in the situation itself or the human failure to realize potentialities. These differences of opinion reflect different meanings of the word “cause.” Social scientists, historians, and politicians often ascribe different meanings to causation, and so they have different views about the causes of war.”<sup>2</sup>

Terrorism as we know it today has not much to do with wars like the Second World War—the time when Quincy Wright wrote this paragraph. Yet some of its features are reflected in the concept “fourth generation warfare” which was described in 1989 as a situation where hostilities are “widely dispersed and largely undefined,” where “the distinction between war and peace” is blurred to the vanishing point,” where there are “no definable battlefields or fronts” and where “the distinction between ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ may disappear” and actions occur concurrently “throughout all participants’ depth, including their society as a cultural, not just physical, entity.”<sup>3</sup>

If this is description accurately reflects some features of contemporary alQaedaist or Islamic Jihadist terrorism, the question of causality would have to be answered in the form of a series of sub-questions such as

1. Why are hostilities widely dispersed?
2. Why are there no definable battlefields or fronts?
3. Why is the distinction between civilian and military disappearing?

These questions are in principle answerable, along the following lines

1. Hostilities are dispersed because there are foreign diasporas, there is global mobility of terrorists and there are both public and private worldwide communication networks terrorists can rely—all of which has made distance less of an obstacle;
2. There are no definable battlefields or fronts because this type of terrorism does not involve the clash of two organized armed groups as in classical war; rather, it is characterized by attacks of small, commando-style armed groups acting from the underground on soft targets of which there are many. The conflict is not so much over territory as it is over the state of mind of people experiencing terror and interested onlookers;
3. Since World War I there has been a gradual shift from military to civilian victims in modern warfare and respect for the laws of war and the protection of civilians has declined across the board, with terrorists being the most conspicuous but not the most lethal killers of civilians.

Yet such answers are strangely unsatisfactory and do not appear to bring us much closer to the discovery of root causes. Yet we should be aware that root causes cannot be discovered in the same way one discovers the subterranean roots of a tree. As one author warned:

“Causality is in reality never perceptible. Causality is a construct of scientists that certain factors in reality have been of influence for the presence of a particular phenomenon. Yet actual causal working of these factors is not open to perception but can only be approached by means of theories. This implies that only then a causal working of factors can be assumed as proved when confirmation has been reached by means of testing of theories.”<sup>4</sup>

If this is so we need one or several “theories.” “Theorizing” involves the “construction of a system of abstract statements, verified by a body of research findings, on social phenomena,” as J. A. Turner put it.<sup>5</sup> One building block of theories are variables—those changing factors and varying influences which produce an effect when one observes or measures a phenomenon (others are concepts and relational and existential statements). An act or even campaign of terrorism can be considered a “dependent variable” with the causes of terrorism being the “independent variables.” Between these might be “intervening variables” which co-determine whether or not a “regularity of sequence” occurs.<sup>6</sup>

It would be unwise to search for the causes of terrorism in a void. Acts of terrorism occur in the context of conflict and terrorism is a peculiar tactic or form of violent conflict-waging – sometimes preceding, sometimes paralleling and sometimes substituting for other forms of conflict-waging. “Conflict” too, is by no means an uncontroversial or simple concept. There are dozens of partly overlapping, partly conflicting definitions. Synthesizing various definitions, we can conceptualize conflict as an antagonistic situation or adversarial process between at least two individual or collective actors over means or ends such as resources, power, status, values, goals, relations, or interests. The range of outcomes includes victory, defeat, domination, surrender, neutralization, conversion, coercion, injury or destruction, and elimination of the opposite party or, alternatively, the solution, settlement, or transformation of the conflict issue.”<sup>7</sup>

In a conflict it is useful to distinguish between the “conflict situation” and “conflict behavior”<sup>8</sup> Of interest to us is the question “Which conflict situations lead to a conflict behavior wherein terrorism is used as an instrument of conflict waging?” Subsequent questions of relevance are:

- How can the behavior of a party using terrorist tactics be
- influenced by one party (either the antagonist or a third party)
- so that the recourse to terrorism becomes less attractive?
- What are the factors facilitating the choice of terrorism as a tactic?
- What are the factors inhibiting the choice of terrorism as a tactic?

Conflict occurs whenever individuals and groups of people have incompatible interests and goals and as such it is an unavoidable part of human interactions.

The use of violence in conflict—waging is less frequent than other forms of conflict behavior (but remains a persistent, though fluctuating, feature in conflicts within and between collectivities. However, many societies and the international community have made, and to some extent succeeded in, efforts to ban and reduce both the general level of violence and certain especially abhorrent forms of violence like blood revenge. Unfortunately, the scourge of terrorism is not among them. One reason for this is that the monopoly of violence of the state has never been complete. Another is that there has been abuse of power by those holding state power, including state terrorism. The root causes of terrorism by non-state actors can rarely be understood without also looking at the behavior of state- and state-sponsored actors. The state can, both through its weakness (which provides opportunities for revolt) and through its strength (which might cause abuse of state power and bring about resistance from both civil and uncivil society) contribute to the emergence of terrorism.

However, there are good reasons to believe that if there is

- a) good governance,
- b) democracy,
- c) rule of law, and
- d) social justice, domestic revolt, including forms of revolt involving tactics of terrorism, is less likely.

The reasons for this are obvious:

- a) When governance is bad, resistance against corrupt rule gains followers, support and legitimacy.
- b) Democracy is essential: when unpopular rulers cannot be voted away in democratic procedures, advocates of political violence find a wide audience. Democracy is the recognized, non-violent method for changing the groups of people who hold the reigns of government. Democracy is based on the will of a majority of the people but at the same time must not infringe on the rights of minorities. That is where the rule of law comes in.
- c) The rule of law, as opposed to the rule of man, is a basic principle. When rulers stand above the law and use the law as a political instrument against their opponents, the law loses its credibility. The rule of law also protects the weak against the powerful.
- d) When long-standing injustices in society are not resolved but allowed to continue for years, without any light in sight at the end of the tunnel, one should not be amazed that desperate people are willing to die and to kill for causes they—and often also others—perceive as just.

The behavior of state actors is often mirrored and reciprocated in the behavior of non-state actors—behavior which is, however, dependent on the power resources available to each side and their projection in the form of persuasive or coercive activities. This mirror effect is addressed in the following table:

The premise on which this table is built is that the use of persuasion and coercion in the political process occurs on three levels: “conventional politics,” “unconventional politics,” and “violent politics” respectively. Often the opposition is not in a position to “play in the same league” as those holding state power. The power asymmetry can ‘force’ it to respond on a different level. Violence by a state actor can be countered by non-violent campaigns for pragmatic reasons (no weapons are available), as well as for principal reasons (the desire to hold the moral high ground in a conflict in order to attract domestic or international support). On the other hand, there are situations where the state holds the moral high ground and where terrorists use provocations from

**Table 1:** The Spectrum of Political Action.

<i>State of Peace</i>	
<i>State Actor</i>	<i>Non-state Actor</i>
<i>Conventional Politics</i>	
I. Rule of Law (Routinized rule, legitimated by tradition, customs, constitutional procedures)	I. Opposition politics (Lobbying among power holders, formation of opposition press and parties, rallies, electoral contest, litigation (use of courts for political struggle)
<i>Unconventional Politics</i>	
II. Oppression (Manipulation of competitive electoral process, censorship, surveillance, harassment, discrimination, infiltration of opposition, misuse of emergency legislation)	II. Non-violent Action (Social protest for political persuasion of rulers and masses; demonstrations to show strength of public support; non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and other forms of non-violent action)
<i>Violent Politics</i>	
III. Violent Repression for control of state power III. 1. (Political Justice. Political Imprisonment) III. 2. Assassination III. 3. State-terrorism (torture, death squads, disappearances, concentration camps) III. 4. Massacres III. 5. Internal War III. 6. Ethnocide/Politicide/ Genocide	III. Use of Violence for contestation challenging state power III. 1. Material destruction III. 2. Assassination. (Individuated political murder) III. 3. Terrorism (De-individuated political murder) III. 4. Massacres III. 5. Guerrilla Warfare III. 6. Insurgency, Revolution (if successful).
<i>State of War</i>	

Source: Alex P. Schmid et al. Political Terrorism. Amsterdam, North-Holland Publ., 1988. 58–5.

the repertoire of violent politics to upset a democratic government playing the political game by the rules of conventional politics.

The table refers to domestic terrorism. The situation is more complicated in the case of international terrorism. Yet the underlying logic is the same. In order to understand the rationale of certain actors to choose the tactic of terrorism from the repertoire of political action, we should not lose sight of the fact that acts of political terrorism occur next to a multitude of other political acts, some violent, some not, some conventional, some not—some by the terrorists themselves, some by like-minded but less violent people who share their goals without approving of their methods. These are all part of the general repertoire of persuasive political communications and coercive actions available to participants in the political process. To isolate terrorist acts and terrorist organizations from this wider interplay of actors in political conflicts is not contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism. Leonard Weinberg and Ami Pedahzur have shown as that 124 of 399 terrorist groups investigated had links to political parties, not infrequently being splinters of such parties.<sup>9</sup>

Let us return to the question of causes. It is useful to subdivide the causal complex, adapting categories developed by Martha Crenshaw:

- *Precipitants*: specific catalytic events or phenomena that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism
- *Preconditions*—background factors that set the stage for terrorism to occur—factors which in the known past have created enabling social circumstances for terrorist campaigns. Such preconditions can be subdivided into
  - 1) the long-term structural *Root causes*, producing social and other tensions that might, alongside with other conflict behaviors, generate terrorist campaigns;
  - 2) medium-term situational, so called *Proximate causes*, that increase the concrete risk of one violence-prone actor turning to terrorist acts.
- Both types of proximate circumstances are influenced by facilitating *Accelerators* and inhibiting *De-accelerators*. These enabling or disabling factors are usually not causally related to the campaign, but intervene, thereby speeding up or slowing down the process.<sup>10</sup>

Given the fact that the tactic of terrorism makes its entry in many different conflict situations, it is difficult to come up with a list covering all possible situations. Here, however, is a list of indicators developed by Mathenia Sirseldoudi with the collaboration of the author, which might be worth considering—for discussion and for testing with the help of data from past conflict situations where the outcome—terrorism—is already known.

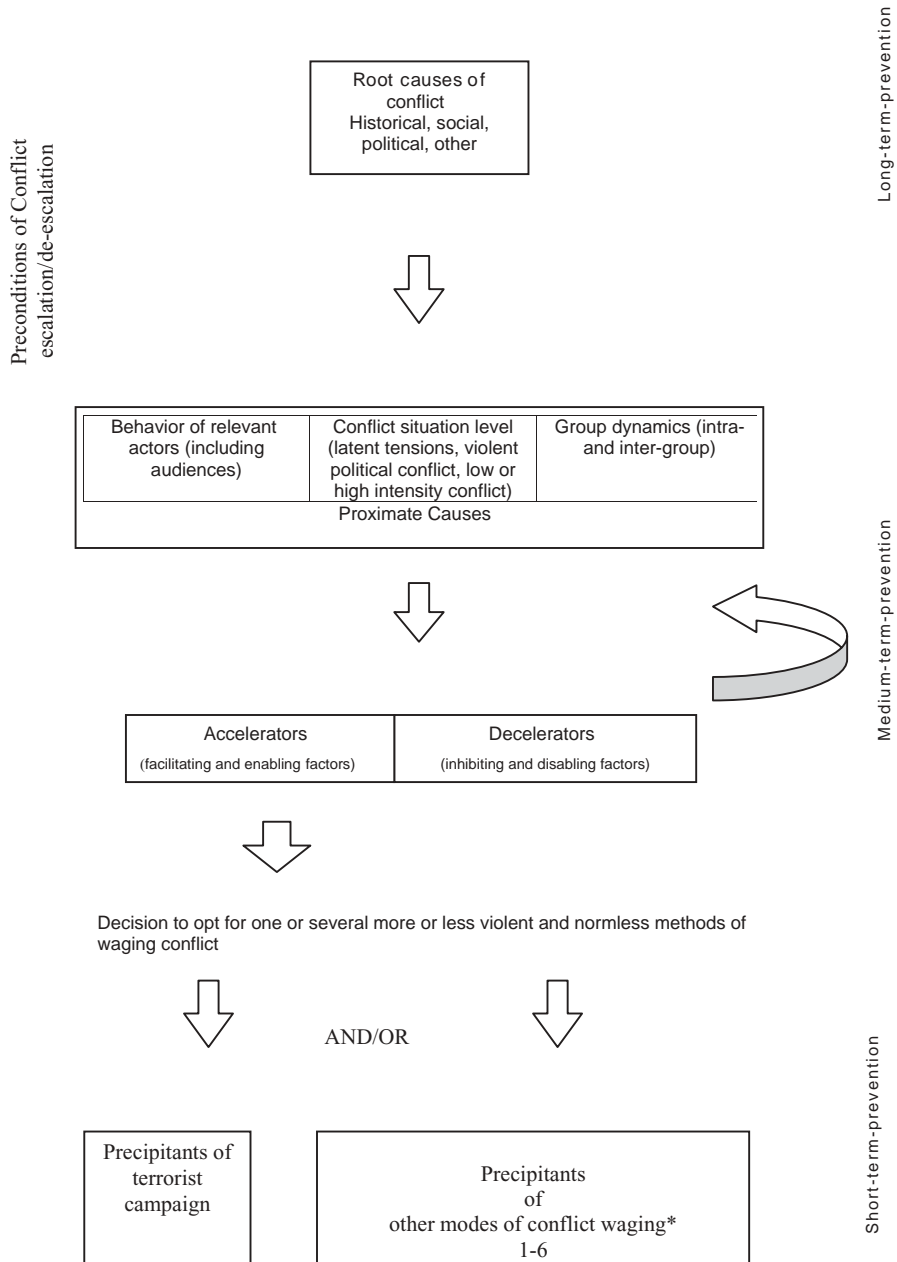
**Table 2:** Indicators Pointing towards the Formation of Terrorist Groups and the Occurrence of Terrorist Campaigns.

Root Causes	Accelerators
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of democracy</li> <li>2. Lack of rule of law</li> <li>3. Lack of good governance</li> <li>4. Lack of social justice</li> <li>5. The backing of illegitimate regimes</li> <li>6. High/rising distributive inequality</li> <li>7. Historical experience of violent conflict waging</li> <li>8. Support for groups using terrorist means</li> <li>9. Vulnerability of modern democracies</li> <li>10. Failed states / safe havens outside state control</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Counter-terrorist campaign causing many victims "calling" for revenge and retaliation</li> <li>2. Humiliation of the group or its supporters</li> <li>3. Threat</li> <li>4. Peace talks</li> <li>5. Elections</li> <li>6. Symbolic dates</li> </ol>
<p>Proximate Causes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Escalatory counter strategy</li> <li>2. Expectations of support group (esp. regarding diaspora)</li> <li>3. Declining support / rising support</li> <li>4. Declining media coverage</li> <li>5. "Successful" rival groups</li> <li>6. Problems of internal group cohesion</li> <li>7. Group's leader's personal image-strategy</li> <li>8. De-escalating low intensity conflict</li> <li>9. Escalating violent political conflict</li> <li>10. Entrance of new actor in existing conflict situation</li> </ol>	<p>De-celerators</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Moderate counter-campaign using legitimate means</li> <li>2. Loss of charismatic leaders/ key resources / territory for retreat</li> <li>3. Essential concessions towards the terrorist constituencies' political demands</li> <li>4. Responsible media coverage</li> </ol> <p>Precipitants</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Risk assessments of attacks</li> <li>2. Logistical preparations</li> <li>3. De-legitimation of the enemy</li> <li>4. Disappearance of key persons</li> <li>5. Rising interest in potential targets</li> <li>6. Increase of internal violence</li> </ol>

Source: adapted from Matenia P. Sirseloudi. Early Detection of Terrorist Campaigns. *Forum on Crime and Society*, Winter 2004/05 (Special Issue on Terrorism, edited by A. P. Schmid); partly based on PLOOM Checklists for Country Dispute and Tension Profiles; PLOOM Checklist for Country Conflict Escalation Profiles. In: Alex P. Schmid. *Thesaurus and Glossary of Early Warning and Conflict Prevention Terms*. London, FEWER, 2000, pp. A 2-A 43. For a discussion of these indicators, see M.P. Sirseloudi's forthcoming article in *Forum*.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude this brief conceptual discussion with presenting a model that reflects some of the root causes and indicators discussed above. It is built on the premise that many of the factors which give rise to more traditional forms of revolt are also present in the origin of terrorist campaigns. The



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Model for the Emergence of Terrorist Campaigns.<sup>11</sup>

\* Other modes of conflict waging include: 1) legal (unarmed) political opposition in parliament and party politics, 2) demonstrations and riots, 3) non-violent campaigns/ civil disobedience, 4) guerrilla warfare, 5) rebellion/coup d'état, 6) civil war/revolution, or a combination of one or more of 1-6.



choice for terrorism as a tactic as opposed to the choice of other tactics is based on factors like group size (small groups are more likely than very large ones to engage in terrorism); group resources (e.g. access to guns and bomb-making material and availability of methods of delivery); receptivity of mass media to providing coverage to terrorists deeds; internal group dynamics within underground organization; relative strength compared to the political opponent and—last but not least—the group’s ideology and the conflict behavior of the opponent itself.

## NOTES

1. The views and opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not reflect official positions of the United Nations where the author serves as Senior Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna. Email: Alexander.Schmid@unodc.org
2. Quincy Wright. *A Study of War*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970 (1942), pp. 103–104.
3. William S. Lind, Keith Nightingale, John F. Schmitt, Joseph Sutton and Gary I. Wilson. ‘The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation,’ *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1989, pp. 22–26; cit. Randy Borum et al. The Role of Operational Research in Counterterrorism. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 17: 2004, 422.
4. R. W. Boesjes-Hommes. *De geldige operationalisering van begrippen*. Meppel, Boom, 1970, 12–13.
5. Jonathan A. Turner. (1997) *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Homewood. The Dorsey Press, 328.
6. Moritz Schmick (1949: 517) denied that there is anything more in the concept of causality than regularity of sequence, writing “Metaphysicians regard such regularity as a sign of some peculiar “intimacy” or “: tie” between cause and effect, but if the existence of that mysterious “tie” is verified *only* by the observation of regular sequence, then this regularity will be all the meaning the word “tie” actually has and no thinking, believing or speaking can add anything to it”.—Cit. A.J.F. Koebben. *Cause and Intention*. In: R. Naroll and R. Cohen (Eds.). *Handbook of Method in Cultural Anthropology*. Garden City, N.Y., The National Historical Press, 1970, 90.
7. This definition borrows from several authors, including Kenneth Boulding (1962) *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory*. New York: Harper, Lewis Coser (1956) *The Function of Conflict*. New York, Free Press; H. Miall. *The Peacemakers: Peaceful Settlement of Disputes since 1945*. London, Macmillan, 1962; T.R. Gurr. *Handbook of Political Conflict*. New York; Free Press, 1980.
8. K. Koch. *Politiek conflict*. In: M.P.C.M. van Schendelen (Ed.). *Kernthema’s van de politicologie*. Meppel, Boom, 1981, 225–226.
9. L. Weinberg and A. Pedazur (2003). *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*. London: Routledge.
10. M. Crenshaw. *The Causes of Terrorism*. *Comparative Politics*, July 1981, 381. M. P. Sirseldoudi, op. cit. A. P. Schmid Research on Gross Human Rights Violations. Leiden, COMT, 1989, 11. For further details on conflict accelerators or decelerators see Barbara Harff, (1998), *Early Warning of Humanitarian Crises: Sequential Models and*

*the Role of Accelerators*, in: J. Davies, and T. R. Gurr, (1998), *Preventive Measures*. London: Rowman & Littlefield 70–78. and Schmid A.P. (2000), *Thesaurus and Glossary of Early Warning and Conflict Prevention Terms*. London: FEWER 1, 34.

11. The model depicted here was jointly developed with M. Sirseloudi.

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