

DHP P244: TERRORISM & COUNTERTERRORISM

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**Exploiting Group Vulnerabilities and
Encouraging Terrorist Disengagement**

Counterterrorism

- Incapacitation / Traditional Decapitation
- Deterrence
- Socio-political
- Containment
- Exploiting the vulnerabilities of terrorist groups/networks
- Promoting Disengagement
- Countering Violent Extremisms (*next week*)

Each of these has potential advantages, as well as Limitations and negative side effects

Incapacitation Approach

- Objective: "Kill or capture", removing the capacity of violent actors to make more damage (and decapitation = focus on eliminating group "leaders")
- Who: Military forces, police, prison services
- What: (Violent) force, detention, drones
- Advantages: Mostly effective when targeting groups with limited membership; Governments usually possess relevant capacities
- Limitations and negative side effects:
 - May have limited effects in groups with a high recruitment and a strong social basis (resonating ideology, enablers)
 - May reinforce recruitment and extremism
 - May undermine human rights and moral legitimacy

Deterrence Approach

- Objective: Increasing the costs of terrorism by (threat of) punishment / retaliation to reduce motivation
- Who: Criminal justice system, military force
- What: Repression, violent force, punishment, media attention, economic and diplomatic sanctions
- Advantages: May be particularly effective towards state sponsors of terrorism, or others with territory, assets that can be threatened
- Limitations and negative side effects:
 - Limited effects towards highly motivated terrorists, in particular suicide terrorists
 - Difficult to strike at actors which can not be located
 - May affect innocent third parties (“collateral damage”), e.g. family members of suicide terrorists
 - May force governments to respond in ways where they weaken and undermine their own legitimacy

Socio-political Approach

- Objectives: Reduce motivation for terrorism by removing root causes, frustrations
- Who: Governments, NGOs, peace mediators, community leaders
- What: Conflict resolution, political processes, social development, non-discrimination, rule of law, etc.
- Advantages: May have positive effects on other social and political problems
- Limitations and negative side effects:
 - There is no single root cause of terrorism; many & complex
 - “Root causes” are difficult to solve (e.g. protracted conflicts, deeply ingrained social problems, economic disparities)
 - Efforts often take a long time before they make an impact
 - Terrorism is frequently sustained by other reasons than those which gave rise to the terrorist campaign initially

Containment Approach

- Objective: Long-term war of attrition; patiently wear the terrorist movement down, confident they will eventually fail
- Who: Political leaders, criminal justice system, media, society
- What: Refusal to be terrorized or over-react to terrorist attacks; focus on reducing capabilities as well as their will to launch attacks
- Advantages: May be effective long-term; More pragmatically viable (“defeating terrorism” raises unreasonable expectations)
- Limitations and negative side effects:
 - Requires unusually high level of societal resilience and patience
 - Opposition politicians can take advantage of perceived “softness” toward terrorism during election periods
 - Does not satisfy “bloodlust” among some members of society victimized (directly or otherwise) by terrorist attacks
 - Limited effects towards highly motivated terrorists, in particular suicide terrorists; Potentially costly (financially and human lives)

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

- Objectives: Reduce interpersonal trust and operational effectiveness within terrorist networks; increase doubts about righteousness, success; make individuals *want to leave terrorism*
- Who: Government intelligence agencies, informants
- What: Perceptions influence; exacerbate disagreements; encourage suspicion, distrust; reduce operational security
- Advantages:
 - Reduces operational effectiveness; internal squabbling, distrust undermine ability for planning or conducting operations
 - Encourages terrorist network to fall apart from within
- Limitations and negative side effects:
 - Requires extensive knowledge on who & what influences behavior
 - Efforts could take a long time before they achieve results
 - Does not satisfy public desire for revenge following terrorist attacks

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

- Survival is a central objective of any terrorist network
- Why do so many terrorist groups fail, and fairly quickly?
- What separates those that survive from those that fail?
- Knowledge is a critical asset for any terrorist network
 - Successful terrorist networks are committed to the long-term training and education of its members and supporters
 - Successful terrorist networks study and learn from other terrorist networks
- What do they need to know and do in order to survive?
 - Financial autonomy, reliability of resources, personnel, etc.
 - Operational capabilities; motivation; facilitating environment
 - Intelligence on CT efforts, peer competitors, opportunities

Trust is critical

“To work well, networks require strong shared beliefs, a collective vision, **some original basis for trust**, and excellent communications”

- Brian Jenkins, 2006

In human networks, **trust is established** by various social mechanisms and **shared beliefs**

Anyone can plug into the network if they use the proper protocols (the “**trusted handshake**”), usually enabled by previously established network credentials

Trust is critical

Examples of the “trusted handshake”

- Shared academic/scientific knowledge base
- Mutual friends/acquaintances who vouch for you w/their life
- Family ties, clan, tribe, etc.
- Religion (doctrinal knowledge, credentials, etc.)
- Battlefield veteran status (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq)
- Shared experiences (prison, battlefield, oppression)

Some individuals have a very high level of "betweenness centrality" – these are **critical knowledge brokers** connecting different types of members (e.g., veterans & new recruits; scholars & mujahideen)

Trusted virtual entrepreneurs connect a “wanna-be” with others

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

- Terrorist dependence on knowledge, material resources, competent leadership, etc. can all be potential vulnerabilities
- Necessity of interpersonal trust (common for all clandestine networks) is also a significant vulnerability

Vulnerabilities of Clandestine Networked Organizations

PART ONE: Effectiveness Requirements

1. Operational Security
2. Transaction Integrity

PART TWO: Preference Divergence

1. Tactical Control
2. Strategic Authority

1. Operational Security

- Any organization involved in clandestine activities faces similar challenges in terms of **operational security**
 - Includes ferreting out spies within the organization
- Must maintain a level of security that facilitates conducting meaningful transactions of information and finance
- Secure long-distance communication can be time consuming and expensive
- Constant fear of (and hiding from) intelligence agencies, law enforcement

Technology and OPSEC

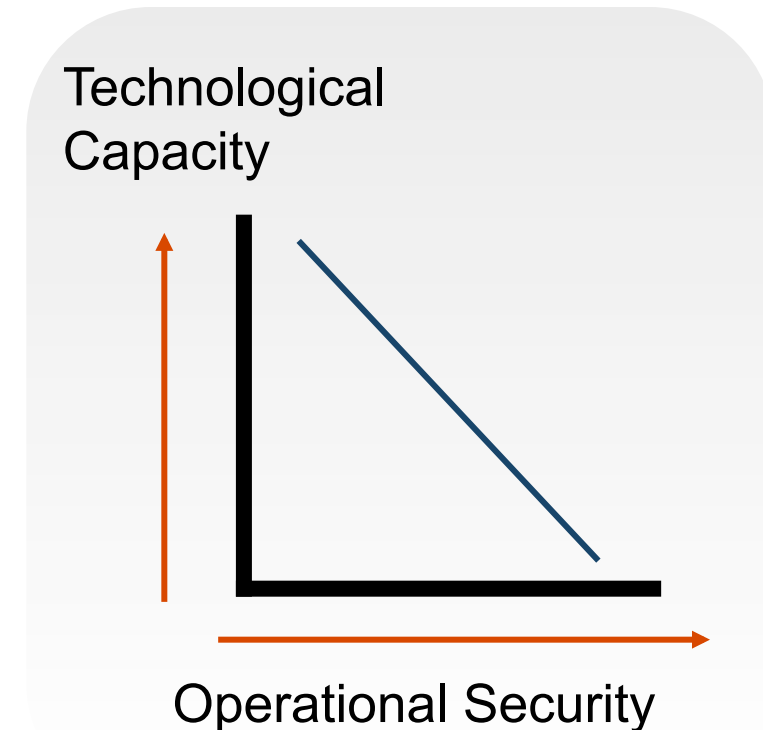
Technology enables organizations to become more “networked”

Constraining their technological capacity (through technology-based intelligence gathering) forces more face-to-face interaction

More frequent face-to-face interaction can increase a clandestine network’s vulnerabilities

- technology, eavesdropping
- human intelligence, spies

Idea: Promote the perception that we have the capability to intercept any and all kinds of technology-based communications



2. Transaction Integrity

Without money, terrorists can do nothing

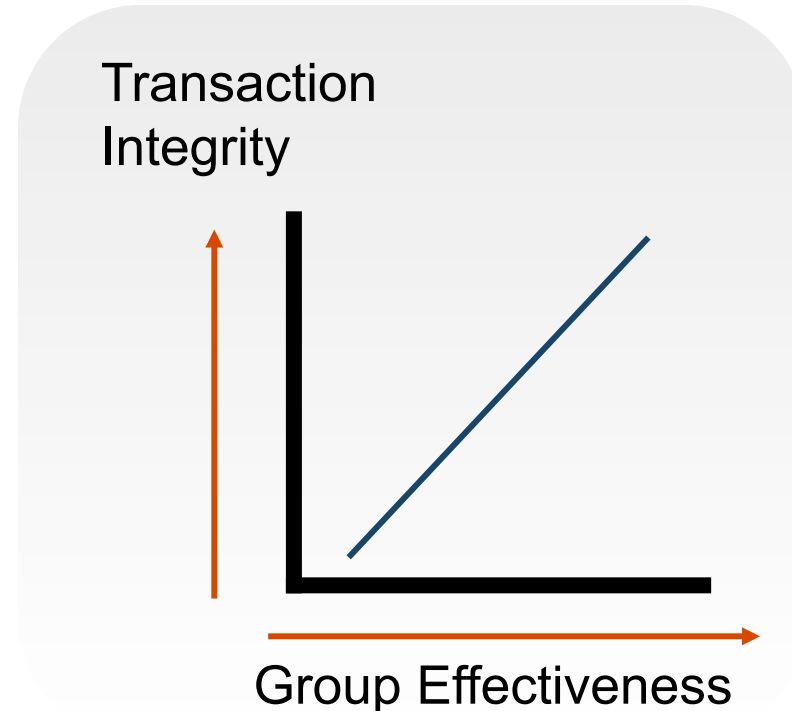
The ways in which terrorists obtain and use money can also be a vulnerability if deemed repulsive by potential supporters

Problem: **Limited or no accountability** regarding financial transactions, movement of assets, weapons, people

- Because of operational security needs, a clandestine organization cannot offer much transparency regarding its finances
- This allows considerable latitude for **abuse, corruption**

Transaction Integrity

- Strength of any network is based on the level of its integrity for conducting transactions (communication, financial, etc.); **reliability and trust of a network are critical**
- **Expectations** of money to support operations will be made available in a timely fashion
- **Expectations** that individual recipients will do the correct things with those funds
- **Transaction integrity necessary to maintain operational effectiveness**



Exacerbating Transaction Integrity Challenges

Slow the transfer of funds, assets from one node to another; cause unexplained transaction delays

Encourage internal looting (or perception of looting)

Get money to disappear with no reason

Have **conspicuous consumption items** (big screen TV) appear in place of the missing money

Encourage acrimonious debates over **preferential treatment**, special benefits given to certain members of the network unfairly

Publicize examples of “**lavish lifestyles of AQ leaders**” focusing on KSM and his playboy antics; al Fadhil stealing money in Kenya; the Montreal cell and its money mismanagement, etc. Paint a portrait of these guys as anything but humble, pious, devout Muslims or competent financial decision makers.

Overall objective is making a network's members want to leave, disengage

Exacerbating Transaction Integrity Challenges

Promote suspicion, rumors, mistrust

Publicize accounts of financial mismanagement, **corruption**, misappropriation, fund diversion

Encourage suspicion that donations, funds will not necessarily be used as donor intended (e.g., to pay drug couriers, prostitutes, murderers of schoolchildren, etc.)

Force leaders to consider punitive actions against agents/operatives

Degrade the integrity within financial networks; **make asset management more difficult**

Overall objective is making a network's members want to leave, disengage

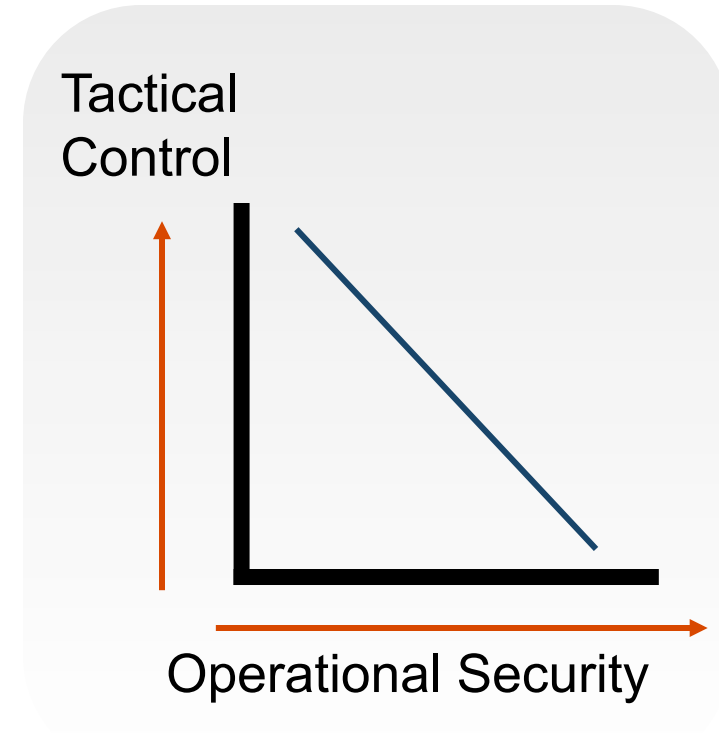
Agency Theory

- A network's members have different preferences, based on personal experiences, perceptions, etc.
- **Preference divergence** impacts the level of trust/expectations of shared effort toward common goal
- Preference divergence can make it harder for a network's principals to maintain:
 1. Tactical control
 2. Strategic authority

These create vulnerabilities within terrorist networks that can be exploited

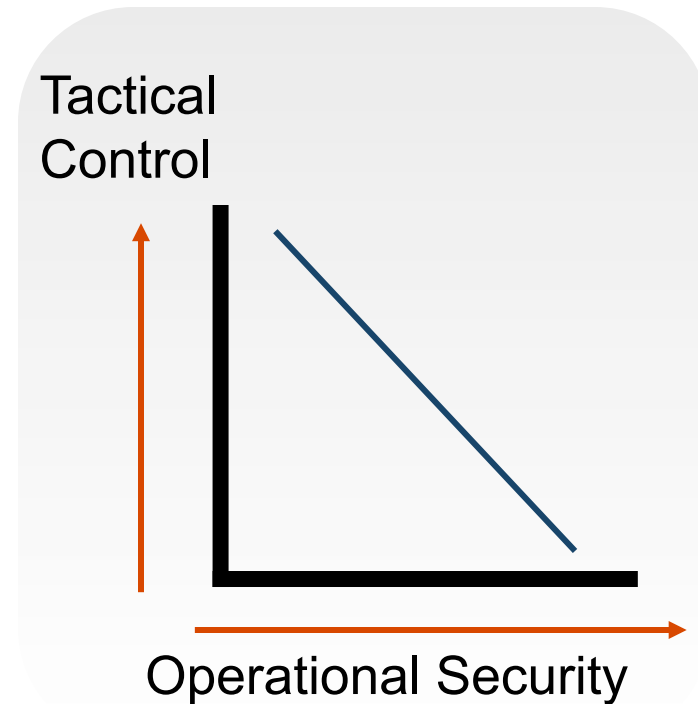
Tactical Control

- Cellular structures complicate C2
- Political and ideological leaders—the principals—must **delegate certain duties** to middlemen or low-level operatives, their agents.
- But because of the need to maintain operational secrecy, terrorist group leaders cannot perfectly monitor what their agents are doing.
- Thus, **preference divergence** creates operational challenges which can be exploited to degrade a terrorist group's capabilities.



Tactical Control

- Preference divergence over **controlled use of violence**
 - Terrorists cannot afford to alienate the center of gravity, or risk losing support
 - Must reign in overzealous members, prevent low-ranking members from initiating their own attacks against strategically high-value targets
 - Difficulties in resolving chains of command
- Preference divergence over who needs what kinds of **situational awareness**
- Preference divergence over what should be done to **maintain security**



*Increased potential for **fratricide** (“own goals”)*

Exacerbating Tactical Control Challenges

Exacerbate **Tactical Control** challenges - Force leaders to consider punitive actions against agents/operatives

Make information management more difficult; **degrade the C2 network channels** with noise, static

Flood the network nodes with requests for info/requests for clarification of intent, strategy, etc.

Goal: overwhelm the decision-makers from within

Encourage perceptions of counterproductive plans or actions among low-level operatives; raise concerns among political ideological leaders about their lack of tactical control

Overall objective is making a network's members want to leave, disengage

Strategic Authority

Within all networks, there are forces which influence how the nodes operate.

if Mafia, certain family leaders/patrons . . .

if Jihadis, certain influential scholars . . .

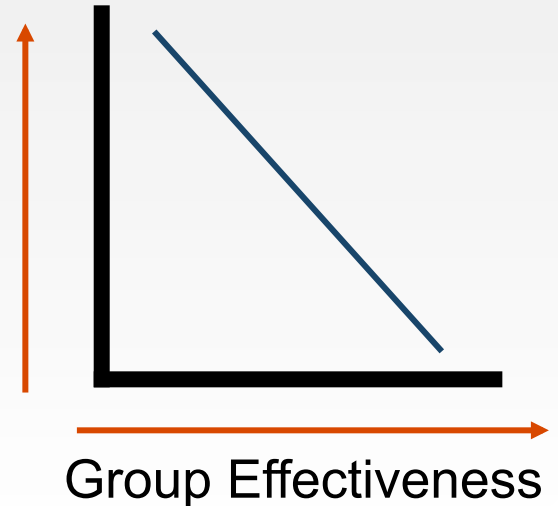
Preference divergence over
“who’s in charge”

Internal dissension among the
network’s leadership is a challenge

Strategic disagreements within network lead some members to
subvert the authority of senior commanders

Principals must combat perceptions of **strategic drift**,
disconnections between rhetoric and actions

Strategic
Dissension



Exacerbating Strategic Authority Challenges

Identify the most influential members within each network; who is trusted most? Whose word carries most weight, and why?

Identify and **exploit rivalries** within each network **and between networks**

- Disagreements already exist in these networks
- How to exacerbate them, make them more acrimonious?
- Encourage debate; force them to defend their ideas

Highlight personal agendas of those who are “in charge”

Discussion forums and social media provide insights about internal debates rooted in religious doctrine and pragmatic necessity; Influence and promote debates about strategic coherence, **leadership competency**, direction

Overall objective is making a network's members want to leave, disengage

Break

Disengagement Strategy

- Objective: Make active terrorists quit, individually or collectively
- Who: Governments, criminal justice system, NGOs, family members, community & religious leaders, et al.
- What: Amnesty, witness (protection) programmes, negotiations, political processes, alternatives to violence
- Advantages:
 - Reduce the size of terrorist groups and prevent recruitment
 - May cause internal splits and weaken the terrorist group
 - Could provide vital intelligence and witnesses in court cases
- Limitations and negative side effects:
 - Probably has major impact only on declining terrorist groups
 - Amnesty programmes may easily be abused; risk of recidivism
 - Amnesty may be difficult to accept by the victims of terrorism

Disengagement Strategy

The choices a person makes . . .

1. Before terrorism
2. During terrorism
3. After terrorism

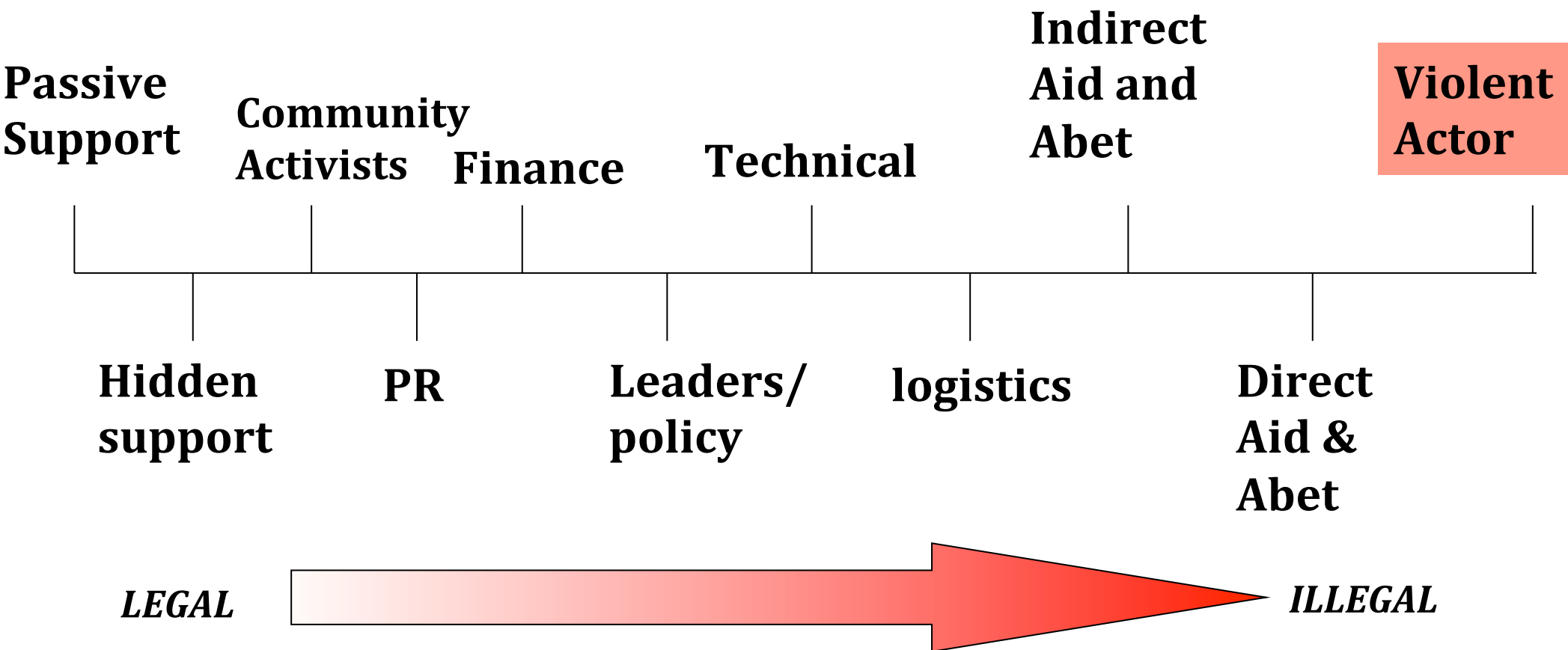
1. Before terrorism

What have we learned about the multiple pathways through which people become engaged in terrorist activity?

- Radicalized? Recruited? Were they forced into it?
- Is there something unique or different about these individuals?
 - Psychological? Family background? Poor? Religious?
- What patterns can we identify, if any?

2. During Terrorism

What have we learned about the various kinds of roles an individual can play within a terrorist network?



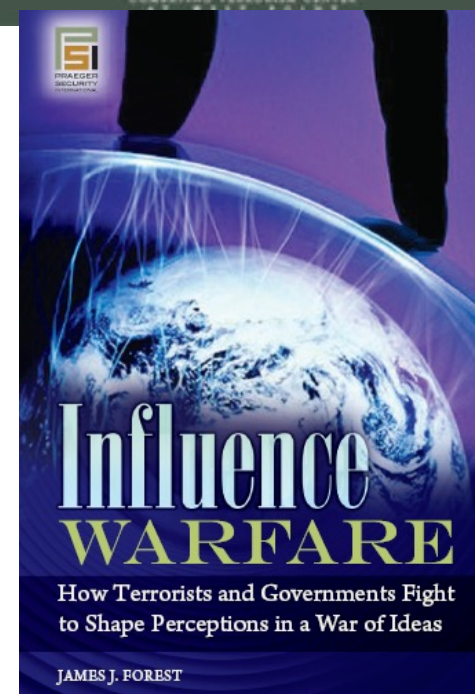
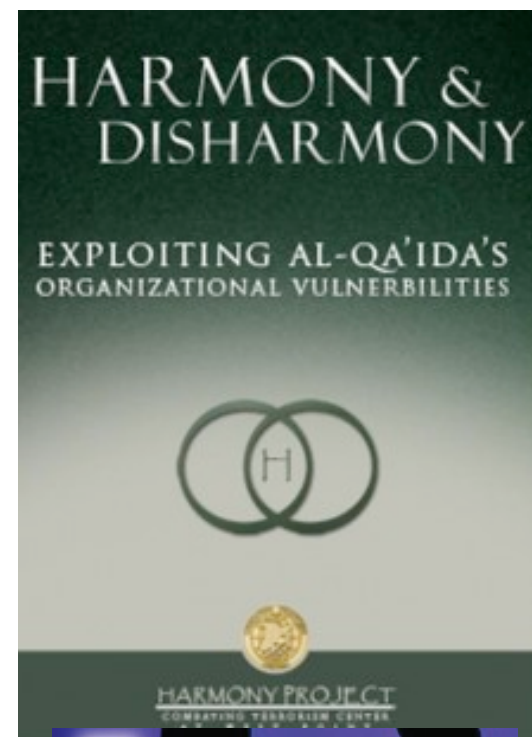
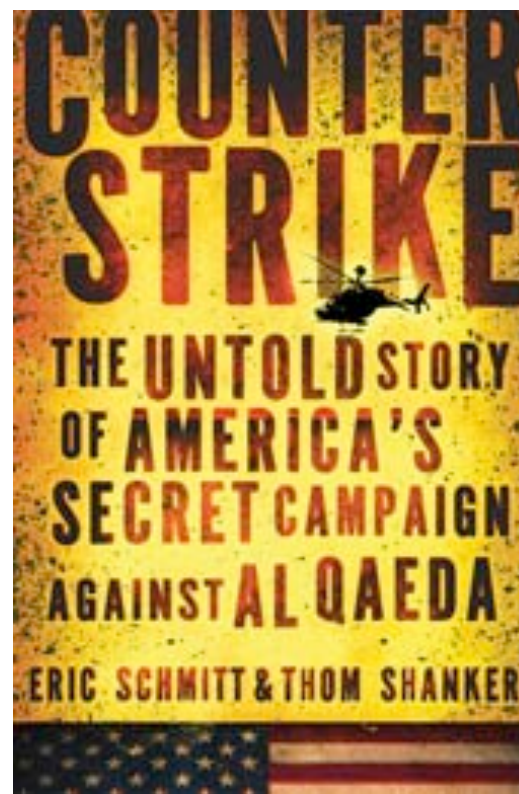
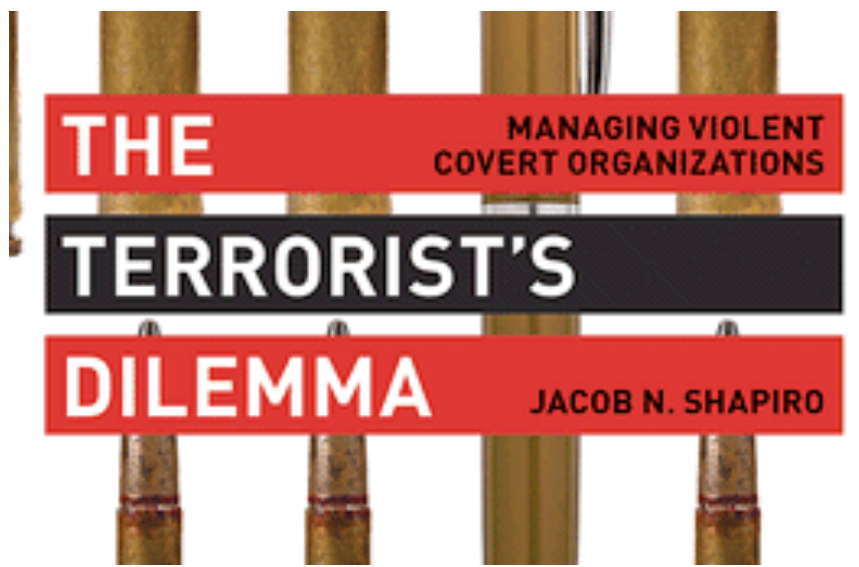
2. During Terrorism

What can governments do to encourage individuals to voluntarily leave a terrorist network?

- Does a person's role within a terrorist network impact the ways in which we might be able to encourage or incentivize them to voluntary disengage?

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

- Operational secrecy
- Strategic direction and authority
- Morale among members
- Ideological coherence and resonance
- Financial dimensions
- Perceived credibility
- Tactical control



3. Leaving Terrorism

What have we learned about the many ways in which individuals leave a terrorist network?

- Disengagement
 - The behavioral act of stopping one's engagement in terrorist behavior
- De-radicalization
 - The cognitive change that is sometimes associated with disengagement
 - Also a term used to describe programs that seek to rehabilitate former terrorists
 - Can this be measured or assessed effectively?

“Push” Factors

- Disillusionment with
 - Overall strategy or specific actions
 - Leadership
 - Other members
 - Day to day tasks/routine
 - Loss of faith in ideology
 - Burnout
 - Fear of being caught/victimized
 - Clandestine lifestyle
 - Having to cope with attacks

“Pull” Factors

Competing loyalties

Longing for a conventional life

Employment/educational opportunities

Desire to marry and establish a family or the demands of having a family

Promise of amnesty

Potential Benefits

Investment in disengagement programs could:

- Provide exit pathways from terrorism
- Help reduce # of active terrorists
- Re-socialize ex-members
- Build civil society cooperation, resilience
- Sow dissent and doubt within terrorist networks
- Acquire intelligence, evidence
- Reduce dependency on repressive counterterrorism
- Increase the legitimacy of the state
- Reduce economic & social costs of imprisonment
- Foster ex-terrorists as potential influencers

Potential Benefits

For the terrorist, disengagement effort could offer them:

- Full amnesty for crimes committed
- Reduced sentencing
- Improved conditions in prison
- Serving in prison with other ex-members
- Ideological dialogue/training/indoctrination
- Job training and education
- Economic subsidies to participant and/or family
- Assistance to get married
- New social networks
- New job
- New identity

Potential Benefits

In return, terrorists would likely need to agree to:

- Stay away from terrorist or other violent activities
- Stay away from radical organisations and politics
- Accept to serve (reduced) sentences for committed crimes
- Provide intelligence and/or witness in court
- Meet victims, confess and ask for forgiveness
- Distance themselves (publicly) from terrorism (and extremism)
- Take part in activities to reduce recruitment to extremist groups (including CVE – *next week's lesson*)

Summary

- Disengagement is a complex, dynamic process
Multiple factors

Major reason for leaving: disillusionment from disparity between fantasy vs. reality

- Can be sudden, but it is usually gradual
- Disillusionment can happen at any time (early or late)
- Some who disengage do not de-radicalize, and some who de-radicalize cannot easily disengage
- Many terrorists become disillusioned early but cannot express it – In fact many compensate for it by becoming 'more' extreme

Research Questions

- How does [*terrorist group x*] deal with the organizational tradeoffs between security and efficacy?
- How does a person's pathway into the terrorist network influence their reasons or opportunities for leaving?
- How does a person's role within the terrorist network influence their reasons or opportunities for leaving?
- Who within this specific context is best suited to influence an individual's motivations for leaving terrorism?

Final Exam Ideas

- What are some critical challenges faced by all contemporary terrorist groups?
- How can a government best leverage its strengths and exploit the weaknesses of a terrorist network like al-Qaeda or the Islamic State?

Wrap-up

Questions?

Reminder: CT Briefing papers due at start of final class session
next Monday, May 1st