Terrorism During Civil War

(forthcoming in Abrahms, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Terrorism Studies: New Perspectives and Topics*, Routledge).

Costantino Pischedda, University of Miami

The study of civil wars and the study of terrorism have historically developed largely in isolation from each other. The past decade, however, has witnessed substantial cross-pollination. In particular, a growing body of scholarship examines terrorism during civil war, motivated by the fact that a large fraction of terrorist events occurs in civil war settings and several notorious terrorist organizations, such as the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the PKK in Turkey, Sendero Luminoso in Peru, and the Islamic State in Iraq, are also civil war parties (Findley and Young 2012a; Butcher 2017; Stanton 2019). This chapter presents an overview of conceptual approaches and findings in this emerging literature on terrorism in the context of civil war.

Definitions of terrorism during civil war

Civil wars are usually defined as large-scale fighting between the government of a sovereign state and politically motivated rebel organizations that are capable of mounting effective resistance. Though the definition is not without conceptual and operational complexities (Sambanis 2004), these pale in comparison to the fundamental disagreements that have plagued the study of terrorism since its inception (Schmid and Jongman 1988; Schmid 2011). The debate between the actor- and action-sense of terrorism is particularly relevant to the study of terrorism during civil war (Sánchez-Cuenca and de la Calle 2009; de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2011;

Asal et al. 2012). According to the action-sense, the nature of the violence constitutes the essence of terrorism, regardless of the type of actor that perpetrates it. Many definitions following this approach posit as distinctive features of terrorism the civilian identity of its targets and/or the difference between the immediate victims and the broader audience whose behavior terrorists intend to influence. By contrast, from the actor-sense perspective, attributes of the perpetrator are paramount: terrorism is violence carried out by actors that do not control any territory and thus only operate in a clandestine fashion, due to their extreme weakness vis-à-vis security forces. Note that while the actor-sense implies that actions by government agents cannot amount to terrorism, the action-sense perspective is compatible with the notion of state terrorism. However, it is common for studies adopting this perspective to focus on terrorism carried out by non-state actors (e.g., Fortna 2022).

Most studies of terrorism during civil war embrace the action-sense, as the actor-sense entails little to no overlap between the two phenomena in the Venn diagram of political violence.[1] Terrorism in the actor-sense is typically carried out by organizations that are too weak to engage the government in combat on a sufficient scale for the ensuing violence to pass the threshold of casualties required for inclusion in civil war datasets. From this point of view, some terrorist organizations may be considered as proto-rebel organizations, which might "graduate" to civil war (and thus leave the terrorism camp) if they gain sufficient strength to control some territory and to inflict significant losses on security forces (Merari 1993; Sambanis 2008).

Though the action-sense perspective is dominant in the study of terrorism during civil war, significant conceptual differences exist between individual works. Some (Findley and

[1] Some studies use "terrorism" as equivalent to "guerrilla warfare" and "insurgency", and thus encompassing all violent attacks by rebel groups during civil war, which makes it impossible to study the use of terrorism in civil war settings (Silke 1996; Hoffman 2006, 40).

Young 2012b; Thomas 2014; Polo and Gleditch 2016; Keels and Kinney 2019) embrace the very broad conceptualization adopted by the Global Terrorism Dataset (GTD), which considers intentional violence by nonstate actors as terrorism if at least *two* of the following three criteria are met (La Free and Dugan 2007): (1) the act aims at achieving political, religious, or social objectives; (2) there is evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a wider audience than the immediate target; (3) the act is outside the context of legitimate warfare (i.e., it targets noncombatants).[2] As a result, these studies include in their analysis attacks against both civilian and military targets, blurring the distinction between terrorism and insurgent activity.[3]

Other works on terrorism during civil war using the GTD focus on acts that meet all three criteria, thus excluding attacks on military targets (Findley and Young 2015; Belgioioso 2018; Asal et al. 2019; Polo and González 2019). The attacks that are included, however, consist of a heterogenous mix of forms of violence, which may have distinct etiologies and political effects. For example, the casual dynamics driving violence meant to compel the government to make concessions are likely to differ from those behind attacks aiming to intimidate a population into cooperating exclusively with the rebels or to remove it from a particular territory (Kydd and Walter 2006; Stanton 2016).[4]

[2] The study by Thomas (2014) belongs to this group despite the exclusion of attacks on military targets from its formal definition of terrorism. In fact, the online Supplemental Information indicates that Thomas' measure of terrorism includes GTD's attacks on military objectives.

[3] Note, however, that Polo and Gleditch (2016) also use an alternative operationalization of terrorism excluding attacks against military targets.

[4] Studies on civilian victimization during civil war using data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) analyze an even more heterogeneous set of attacks, given that they include acts of opportunistic violence, which is carried out upon the initiative of individual soldiers or low-level commanders (e.g., looting), in addition to strategic attacks, which are endorsed by the leaders of the rebel organization as part of its plan to achieve political goals (Stanton 2019; Balcells and Stanton 2021). By contrast, the GTD's criterion that terrorist attacks represent attempts to communicate with a wider audience than the immediate target implies the exclusion of opportunistic violence from analyses of terrorism adopting all three criteria mentioned above. Studies on civilian victimization during civil war relying on UCDP data typically do not use the term "terrorism" (Hultman 2007; Wood 2010; Fjelde and Hultman 2014; Salehyan et al. 2014; Wood 2014; Wood and Kathman 2014 is an exception, as it refers

Yet other studies adopting an action-sense perspective employ definitions that make it possible to distinguish terrorism from other forms of civilian targeting during civil war. Stanton (2013, 1010) defines terrorism as "the deliberate use of violence against civilians by a nonstate actor with the aim of achieving a political objective through the intimidation or coercion of the government." Given that Stanton envisions terrorism as a way for rebels to generate public pressure on the government to make concessions through the infliction of material and psychological harm on a broad section of the population, she operationalizes the concept as a campaign of attacks against civilians using bombs (e.g., car bombs and suicide bombs), as this type of attacks tends to achieve high public visibility and to indiscriminately affect the population. Thus, Stanton's conceptualization excludes attacks by rebel groups meant to induce the civilian population to exclusively cooperate with their personnel, as opposed to government personnel (e.g., targeted assassinations and massacres) and violence to eliminate civilians from an area (e.g., burning homes and crops and killing livestock). Similarly, Fortna et al. (2018, 783) define terrorism during civil war as "the systematic use of intentionally indiscriminate violence against public civilian targets to influence a wider audience", which they operationalize as armed assaults or bombings in places where the public congregates, such as bars and restaurants (see also Fortna et al. 2022). This definition seeks to capture the distinct element of apparent randomness that makes terrorist attacks so terrifying: "Anyone going about his or her daily business, riding public transportation or doing the shopping, could be a victim of such attacks" (Fortna et al. 2018, 783).

interchangeably to civilian victimization and terrorism). Kalyvas (2004) uses "terrorism" as short for violence against civilians by civil war parties aimed at controlling the population, as opposed to eliminating it. In subsequent work, he generally eschews the word terrorism and simply refers to the phenomenon as civil war violence (Kalyvas 2006).

Neither Stanton's (2013) nor Fortna et al. (2018, 2022)'s contributions are likely to be the last word in the debate about the conceptualization of terrorism during civil wars. After all, the best definition is the one that fits best with a study's research question and theoretical constructs. However, the studies by Stanton and by Fortna and her coauthors indicate that theoretical disaggregation, i.e., focusing on specific violent actions that theory suggests may have similar causes and/or effects, represents a fruitful direction for future research on terrorism during civil war.

Findings on terrorism during civil war

Though the diversity of conceptualizations just discussed makes comparisons of findings across studies difficult, some interesting patterns about the reasons why rebel groups resort to terrorism and about its consequences emerge from the literature.

Surprisingly, the deeply entrenched conventional wisdom envisioning terrorism as a weapon of the weak (e.g., Crenshaw 1981, 387; Merari 1993, 231; McCormick 2003, 483) receives limited support from studies focusing on civil war settings. Using the ratio of rebel fighters to government soldiers as a proxy for rebel strength, Polo and Gleditch (2016) find that outnumbered rebel organizations are more likely to conduct terrorist attacks. Moreover, Polo and González (2019) observe that, under some circumstances, rebel groups respond to major battlefield losses at the hand of the government (which can be interpreted as indicating the weakening of the rebels) by resorting to terrorism. Conversely, Asal et al. (2019) report that only rebel groups with particularly high numbers of fighters conduct terrorist attacks in response to coercive counterinsurgency tactics, which the authors interpret as at odds with the weapon-of-the-weak thesis. However, in the most thorough examination of the topic, Fortna (2022) does not

find robust evidence of an association between the use of terrorism and a broad range of measures of the strength of rebel organizations. Though Fortna is careful in noting that her results do not rule out the possibility that terrorism may be a weapon of the weak among nonstate actors that are not strong enough to engage the state in large-scale armed conflict (and thus to enter civil war datasets), her null findings suggest that the conventional wisdom needs revising.

Several studies indicate that rebel organizations consider potential image costs in their decisions about conducting terrorist attacks. Stanton (2013) finds that rebel groups with goals that require appealing to broad civilian constituencies tend to resort to low-casualty terrorism (i.e., attacks on infrastructure targets), in line with her expectation that high-casualty terrorism (e.g., a bomb in a market) would risk triggering a public backlash. Similarly, Polo and Gleditch (2016) observe that rebel groups with inclusive constituencies avoid attacks on "soft" civilian targets (preferring instead attacks on "hard" official targets) lest large civilian death tolls alienate potential supporters, while Polo and González (2019) report that rebels use terrorism as a tool for mobilizing their support base only in the presence of strong out-group antagonism among their core constituents. Furthermore, Fortna et al. (2018) find that rebel groups financing their activities with lootable resources are more likely to use terrorism, given that they are not concerned about a possible loss of support, unlike groups relying on foreign sponsors or the local population.

There is also some evidence that rebel groups take into account the likely response of the incumbent when deciding whether to resort to terrorism. Rebel organizations may follow a strategy of provocation (Kydd and Walter 2006), launching terrorist attacks with the objective of baiting the government into an indiscriminate response that radicalizes their core constituency and mobilizes fence-sitters. Yet, rebels should be weary of triggering a selective repression

response that may cripple their organization. Polo and González (2019) provide evidence in line with this logic, as they show that rebel organizations are more likely to use terrorism when facing governments that appear susceptible to provocation based on their history of adopting indiscriminately repressive policies.

By contrast, there is mixed evidence about whether rebel groups carry out attacks to outbid their competitors, that is, to signal to potential supporters their commitment to the cause and their capabilities in a crowded rebel camp. While Belgioioso (2018) finds that the more fragmented a rebel movement, the higher the chance of terrorism, studies by Findley and Young (2012b) and Stanton (2013) suggest the absence of a robust association between the number of rebel groups and the use of terrorism during civil wars.

Moving to the effects of terrorism during civil war, given the influential conception of terrorism as a tool for coercing governments (Merari 1993; Pape 2003; Kydd and Walter 2006), the dearth of evidence indicating that terrorist attacks help rebel groups achieve their ultimate political goals is striking. Thomas (2014) finds that higher the number of terrorist attacks conducted by rebel groups in post-Cold War Africa, the higher their probability of being included in negotiations with the government and obtaining concessions. However, the fact that Thomas lumps together attacks against both civilian and military targets makes it difficult to assess whether her findings tell us that resorting to a specific type of violence – terrorism – is beneficial to rebels or simply that rebel organizations that conduct more attacks tend to fare better.

By contrast, Fortna (2015) finds that resorting to high-casualty terrorism (that is, bomb attacks against public civilian targets, such as bars, restaurants, and cafes) reduces rebel groups' chances of outright victory and of concessions through negotiated settlement with the

government, even when restricting the analysis to civil wars in democratic states. Though these findings are in line with those of various studies on terrorism outside civil war settings (see, in particular, Abrahms 2012), future research should assess the robustness of Fortna's results by extending the analysis beyond the relatively small sample that she examines – 104 rebel groups involved civil wars meeting a high death toll criterion (1,000 battle deaths per year) in the period 1989-2004.

The apparent ineffectiveness of terrorism in furthering rebel groups' ultimate political goals does not necessarily imply that it is has no utility for the perpetrators. In fact, Fortna (2015) reports that civil wars involving terrorism last longer than other wars, which suggests that terrorism, in addition to undermining rebel groups' ability to promote their desired political change, may help them survive. Though understanding why that may be the case represents an important direction for future research, Findley and Young's (2015) study about spoiling provides a possible answer. These authors find that the terrorism tends to undermine initiatives to find negotiated solutions to civil wars by sowing distrust, thus averting the risk for a rebel group excluded from a peace agreement of becoming the focus of the undivided attention of government forces.

Conclusion

A growing body of scholarship examines terrorism during civil war, thus contributing to bridge the traditional divide between studies of these two forms of political violence. The bulk of the research on terrorism in the context of civil war embraces the action-sense perspective – terrorism as specific type of violence, which may be carried by a range of actors, including rebel groups – rather than the actor-sense perspective – terrorism as any type of violence perpetrated

by actors that do not control any territory. Yet, significant conceptual disagreements exist in the action-sense camp, with some authors casting their net so wide that they include attacks by rebel groups against both military and civilian targets, while others focus only on specific forms of violence against civilians perpetrated by rebel organizations.

Different conceptualizations complicate the task of comparing findings across existing studies on terrorism during civil war. Some interesting patterns can nonetheless be identified. First, the available evidence suggests that rebel groups' strength may not be an important driver of their decision to conduct terrorist attacks, thus casting significant doubt on the prevalent view of terrorism as a weapon of the weak. Second, rebel organizations appear to be strategic about resorting to terrorism, doing so when they anticipate low image costs and little risk of crippling government repression in response. Third, the evidence about outbidding dynamics is mixed, with some studies finding that competition in the rebel camp increases the risk of terrorism, while other studies do not find such an effect. Finally, despite the prominence of the idea of terrorism as an instrument of coercion, there is little indication that by targeting civilians indiscriminately rebels improve their prospects of achieving their ultimate political objectives. On the other hand, terrorism may be useful for rebel organizations interested in sabotaging peace processes by sowing distrust.

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