

Is terrorism a ‘rational choice’?

One common theme within the study of terrorism and the narratives constructed of it in both state policy and the media is the notion of irrationality. Individual terrorists and the groups they represent are commonly associated with words such as “fanatic”, “lunatic”, or “madman”, in an attempt to demonise and vilify them in the eyes of the general population, and thus justify measures above and beyond what would otherwise be considered a proportionate response.¹ This tendency has been fed by the notion of a rise in ‘new terrorism’, in which some argue that the terrorist organisations of the twenty-first century are more destructive, and less inclined to negotiate than their historical predecessors, and are thus ‘hell bent’ on the utter destruction of western civilisation.² Yet it is arguable that these labels, and the consequent assumption that terrorists are irrational, are unhelpful to the study of terrorism, and have created a discourse that threatens to obscure the often highly rational and logical reasons why such groups and individuals feel compelled to resort to violent means. If instead, terrorism and the violence associated with it is taken as a form of political dialogue, and present assumptions of irrationality are set aside, it becomes possible to objectively analyse terrorism and recognise the complex reasons why individuals and groups feel compelled to resort to violence, whilst also emphasising the unique contexts in which each instance of terror occurs. Ultimately, setting aside this superficial assumption enables us to conclude that terrorism is an action taken by rational actors, with a set of definable goals and thus on both an individual and organisational level can be seen as a rational choice.

It is firstly important to clarify precisely what constitutes a rational actor within the study of terrorism, as Robert Nalbandov emphasises “there is a remarkable lack of the coherent and parsimonious theory of rationality that would bring it different forms under a uniform theoretical framework”.³ Robert Pape’s 2003 study of the rationality of suicide terrorism provides a good starting point for the discussion wherein he highlights that the presence of timing, goals, and target selection in a study of 188 attacks between 1980 and 2001 is indicative of a perceivable “strategic logic” within suicide terrorism. This strategic logic belies the assumption that even suicide bombings – perceived as the most illogical of terrorist methods – are symptomatic of

¹ For a classic example of this see Sageman, Marc. *Understanding Terror Networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

² For a more in depth overview see Crenshaw, Martha. “The Debate over “New” vs. “Old” Terrorism.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 2007.

³ Nalbandov, Robert. “Irrational Rationality of Terrorism.” *Journal Of Strategic Security*, Vol.6, No.4 (2013). p.92.

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“irrational or fanatical behaviour”.⁴ If Pape’s reasoning is applied to terrorist activity in general and not simply suicide terrorism, it becomes possible to create a definition of rationality that emphasises a perceivable logic in the actions of various terrorist organisations. However, recent discussions have led to a more nuanced understanding of rationality within the sphere of terrorism studies which are also worth emphasising. For Amien Kacou the definition is based on the notion that rationality depends on the presence of a decision maker whose “decisions are logically consistent with his or her interests” and who displays an ability to prioritise those interests by “logically ordering their choices accordingly whenever possible given their environments”.⁵ For Claude Berrebi, the notion of rationality is threefold, on a base level recognising that “all actions are rational so long as the individual is using them to achieve predetermined ends”, on a secondary level recognising that “individuals choose the best action according to stable utility functions and the constraints facing them”.⁶ On the most advanced level, Berrebi argues that an actor or actors can be considered rational if “individuals respond to incentive and behave according to rational expectations”.⁷ What both these scholars agree on is the idea that rationality is not simply a binary notion, they indicate that there are multiple degrees of rationality and simple labelling of individuals and groups as ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’ is an inadequate basis for analysis that fails to capture the nuances of a terrorist’s *raison d'être*. Indeed as Amitai Etzioni highlights, “rationality is best treated as a continuous and not as a dichotomous variable”.⁸

With this in mind it is also important to note the distinction between the rationality of an individual, and the rationality of a terrorist group, whilst also highlighting the tension that exists between the two. Generally speaking, it is possible to argue that terrorist groups are driven by a logic of consequences and calculations of utility which best serve a group’s ultimate goal.⁹

⁴ Pape, Robert A. “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol.97, No.3 (2003). p.347.

⁵ Kacou, Amien. “Five arguments on the rationality of suicide terrorists.” *Aggression And Violent Behavior*, 18 (2013). p.540.

⁶ Berrebi, Claude. “The Economics of Terrorism and Counterterrorism: What Matters and Is Rational-Choice Theory Helpful?” in *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*. ed Davis, Paul K. and Cragin, Kim. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009. p.169.

⁷ Berrebi. “The Economics of Terrorism and Counterterrorism”. p.169.

⁸ Etzioni, Amitai. “Rational Actors: Neither Mad nor M.A.D.: The Meanings of Rationality, Rogue States and Terrorists.” *Defense & Security Analysis*, 26, no. 4 (2010). p.432.

⁹ Nalbandov. “Irrational Rationality of Terrorism.” *Journal Of Strategic Security*. p.93.

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Terrorist activity is not carried out haphazardly, but is instead a pragmatic use of violence in order to achieve a definitive aim. Berrebi breaks down this rationale into a series of broad categories: firstly, building upon Pape’s arguments, terrorist organisations base calculations for their activities on an operational and tactical rationality of any given attack.¹⁰ This entails taking into account the selection of targets, locations, and times of day in order to maximise an attack’s destructive potential. Whilst it is important to emphasise that no distinct uniformity exists in the goals of differing terrorist organisations, the presence of an operational rationality designed to best fulfil the desired outcomes of any group is indicative of a common thread of pragmatism and logic. Second, Berrebi emphasises a broader “strategic rationality” based on the context and circumstances that lead to the occurrence of terrorism, emphasising economic cost-benefit calculations and the use of terrorism in order to achieve territorial and liberation goals.¹¹ For instance, Osama bin Laden, in a speech released to Al-Jazeera in 2004, suggests that the September 11 attacks cost Al-Qaeda an estimated \$500,000, yet emphasises the enormous financial cost to the American government and the resulting declaration of a ‘Global War on Terror’.¹² Whilst September 11 is an event unique in the history of terrorism, it highlights an important point about the nature of terrorism: that, as Richard Jackson emphasises, “the carefully formulated and finely calibrated tactics... demonstrate a powerful strategic rationality that conforms to the logic and precepts of asymmetric warfare”.¹³ Ultimately, this recognition of rationality reveals a complex set of considerations that provide a logical base of analysis for a vast array of terrorist groups. It becomes possible to conclude that the nature of terrorism is inherently political: it is, at the most basic level, a form of political dialogue, albeit of a violent and destructive nature, yet impossible to dismiss as the irrational actions of a few fanatical individuals. By extension, this multifaceted rationality framework enables scholars to capture the intricacy of the array of reasons why groups and individuals resort to terrorism, and how they achieve their aims, above and beyond the assumption that groups are ill-organised, aimless or

¹⁰ Berrebi. “The Economics of Terrorism and Counterterrorism”. p.171-177, Pape. “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.” *The American Political Science Review*. p.347.

¹¹ Berrebi. “The Economics of Terrorism and Counterterrorism”. p.171-177.

¹² *Full Transcript Of Bin Ladin’s Speech*. 1 November 2004. Al Jazeera.

¹³ Jackson, Richard. “Constructing Enemies: ‘Islamic Terrorism’ in Political and Academic Discourse.” *Government & Opposition*, Vol.42, No.3 (2007). p.419.

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opportunist in their methods.¹⁴

Yet the rationale of a group, and the rationale of individuals of which the group comprises are not necessarily the same. As Etzioni highlights in the case of suicide attacks: "it may indeed be rational (in the sense of serving the goal) for the terrorist organizations and their leaders to send some of their recruits to die in acts of suicide; but that does not make it rational from the viewpoint of the individual recruits".¹⁵ This tension is indicative of the need for a more comprehensive theoretical framework when studying the rationality of terrorism, and the problems that can occur when groups of terrorists and the individuals within those groups are classified under the same umbrella terms. The advantage of looking into the reasons an individual may resort to terrorism or join a terrorist organisation is that emotion arguably plays a much larger role, and the sometimes misleading, politically charged language of terrorist manifestos can be analysed within a much more nuanced framework. Analysis at the individual level also opens the door for psychological evaluation of individuals, and enables scholars to tackle issues such as accusations of "brainwashing" and "radicalisation" so often put forward by the western media.¹⁶ Indeed as Martha Crenshaw highlights, "the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality": they are not pathologically insane, nor driven by a blind desire for death and destruction; instead they are individuals whose experiences have led them to resort to extreme means, often as a last resort.¹⁷ As John Alderdice further emphasises: "many who get involved in terrorism describe experiences of major trauma in which friends or family members were killed or badly injured by bombings or shootings and where they felt that the official institutions – the police, the army, and the justice system – gave them and their community inadequate protection or were indeed the instigators of the violence".¹⁸ An individual's resort to terrorism can thus be seen as the manifestation of grievance, and conviction in terrorism as the means with which to change their situation,

¹⁴ Palano, Damiano. "Terrorism as "A political world": Identity, strategy, values" in *Understanding terrorism: A socio-economic perspective*. ed Caruso, Raul and Andrea Locatelli. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014. p.141.

¹⁵ Etzioni. "Rational Actors: Neither Mad nor M.A.D." *Defense & Security Analysis*. p.434.

¹⁶ For a more thorough discussion see Berrebi. "The Economics of Terrorism and Counterterrorism". p.178, see also Jackson. "Constructing Enemies". *Government & Opposition*. p.411-412.

¹⁷ Crenshaw, Martha. "The Causes of Terrorism." *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981). p.390.

¹⁸ Alderdice, John Thomas. "Sacred values: psychological and anthropological perspectives on fairness, fundamentalism, and terrorism." *Annals Of The New York Academy Of Sciences* 1167. p.159.

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perhaps even as the last resort after hopes of other means of dialogue have been extinguished.¹⁹

However, the problem remains how to consolidate the rationality of the individual with the rationality of the wider group, particularly in circumstances where the two contradict. One solution lies in the idea of “axiological rationality”: a notion outlined by Damiano Palano.²⁰ Palano argues that in becoming part of a terrorist organisation, an individual subscribes to a particular group dynamic and in turn these societies “define common beliefs and values that influence individual behaviour. These values (and norms) are therefore conceived of as a reflection of social structure, which determines (or influences) actors’ behaviour”.²¹ Ultimately, this produces a tendency for individuals to conform to “a type of interest which stands in sharp contrast to [their own] material interest” and thus believe that their ultimate demise can still bring about goals which they aspire to fulfil.²² The tension that exists between these two levels of analysis perhaps suggests that neither one nor the other have a monopoly on academic discourse surrounding the rationality of terrorism. Instead, as Jackson et al advocate in regard to a levels of analysis approach to the causes of terrorism, a multifaceted theoretical approach is perhaps best suited. This nuanced approach focuses on the idea of a “social movement theory framework” that recognises that interaction shapes various levels of theoretical frameworks and that an analysis based purely on micro, meso, and macro causes of terrorism is inadequate without recognising the interconnectivity between them, and by implication the influence that one level exerts on another.²³ In the case of analysis of individual and group rationality this framework can also be applied, and draws attention to how “individual beliefs change as a result of participation in group dynamics and macro-level changes” and how resultantly, these disparate factors combine to give us the most comprehensive framework possible for understanding the rationality of terrorist organisations and their individual members.²⁴ Ultimately, applying this framework enables us to conclude that both individuals and groups who engage in terrorist conform to a rationality that is complex, yet disenable, and

¹⁹ Crenshaw. “The Causes of Terrorism.” *Comparative Politics*. p.387.

²⁰ Palano. “Terrorism as “A political world””. p.145-7.

²¹ Palano. “Terrorism as “A political world””. p.145.

²² Palano. “Terrorism as “A political world””. p.145.

²³ Jackson, Richard, Jeroen Gunning, Lee Jarvis, and Marie Smyth. *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. p.214.

²⁴ Jackson et al. *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. p.215.

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simple application of labels such as rational or irrational is perhaps an ineffective means of capturing the nuances associated with terrorist activity and their intricate motivations.

Thus far, the distinction between individual and group rationality has been discussed, however, it is also worth noting where the assumptions of irrationality derive from, and why they have taken such hold in both academic and public discourse. One of the principle reasons for the assumption of irrationality is the rise in what some perceive to be a 'new terrorism'. Theorists such as Walter Laqueur, Bruce Hoffman, and Marc Sageman argue that there has been a fundamental shift in the very nature of terrorism, resulting in a transformation of the way groups are organised, the motives behind their actions, and the methods they utilise to achieve their aims.²⁵ Of particular note is the idea that the new terrorism paradigm "sets up an understanding of an enemy that is not only more apocalyptic and dangerous, but also less amenable to traditional forms of control".²⁶ In turn this leads to the idea that terrorist groups are "ideologically (as opposed to politically) driven organisations" and are thus "beyond the boundaries of negotiation or reasoning".²⁷ One need only look at the preface of Sageman's book *Understanding Terror Networks* to pinpoint highly politicised phrases such as: "a new type of terrorism *threatens the world*, driven by networks of *fanatics* determined to inflict maximum civilian and economic damages on distant targets in pursuit of their *extremist goals*... they target the West, but their operations *mercilessly slaughter* thousands of people".²⁸ Whilst it is true that advances in technology and weaponry and greater levels of global interconnectivity have enabled terrorist organisations to transgress national borders and coordinate attacks with an increased level of effectiveness and deadliness, the utilisation of language as highlighted above suggests a dangerous shift within the new terrorism literature. This shift holds the potential to misrepresent the goals and logic of terrorists and terrorist organisations, and has contributed significantly to the labelling of such actors as irrational. By implication, this labelling aids governments in justifying extraordinary means to deal with the problems that terrorism creates, setting a dangerous and unhelpful precedent.

The question thus remains why support such a label? Who in particular does the labelling of terrorists as irrational benefit? One key group is state governments, particularly the US and

²⁵ For a full discussion see Crenshaw. "The Debate over "New" vs. "Old" Terrorism".

²⁶ Burnett, Jonny and Whyte, Dave. "Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism". *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* 1 (4). p.5.

²⁷ Burnett and Whyte. "Embedded Expertise and the New Terrorism". *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media*. p.5.

²⁸ Emphasis added for illustrative purposes. Sageman. *Understanding Terror Networks*. p.vii

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those orientated towards the West. By utilising a particular kind of discourse, state governments can generate divisions, and, as Nicholas Appleby highlights, this creates “a category of sameness but also forms division within society, creating a foreign ‘other’”.²⁹ In turn, creating the sense of ‘others’ within domestic and global society, succeeds in playing upon the notion of collective fear, which Appleby suggests “stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd”.³⁰ The idea of rationality plays into this creation of ‘other’, and becomes what Jackson labels as an “oppositional binary” within terrorist discourse, part of a tradition of categorising terrorist action into a narration of “extremists versus moderates, violent versus peaceful, democratic versus totalitarian, religious versus secular, medieval versus modern and savage versus civilized” – or in this case rational versus irrational.³¹ This oppositional binary enables states to demonise and vilify terrorist groups and construct a discourse that is academically unhelpful and publically misleading. As Jackson further emphasises: “the application of labels such as ‘terrorist’, ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘extremist’ to groups like Hamas and Hezbollah...functions to obscure their simultaneous existence as political party, social welfare provider, protection force, local association, relief agency, charity, education provider, bank, guerrilla force...as well as position them as the enemy of Western societies”.³² The utilisation of such a discourse succeeds in creating the perception that terrorist organisations are irrational, existential threats to society and should thus be handled in the most immediate and effective way possible. Even if this means the deployment of military troops in place of attempts to engage in a diplomatic dialogue that could risk humanising those the government deems it prudent to class as ‘other’. Ultimately by portraying terrorist organisations as irrational and fanatical, a discourse is created which “depoliticizes, decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the grievances and political struggles of groups and societies, thereby de-linking the motives of the terrorists from the policies of Western states or their allies”.³³

By de-linking the rational motives of terrorist groups from widely accepted discourses surrounding terrorism studies, a secondary permissive effect becomes visible. Denying the rationality of terrorist organisations and creating a perception of them as fanatical, succeeds in

²⁹ Appleby, Nicholas. “Labelling the innocent: how government counter-terrorism advice creates labels that contribute to the problem.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* Vol.3 No.3. p.422.

³⁰ Appleby, Nicholas. “Labelling the innocent”. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. p.421, Palano. “Terrorism as “A political world””. p.149.

³¹ Jackson. “Constructing Enemies”. *Government & Opposition*. p.401

³² Jackson. “Constructing Enemies”. *Government & Opposition*. p.401-2.

³³ Jackson. “Constructing Enemies”. *Government & Opposition*. p.421.

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creating a discourse that “normalizes and legitimizes a restricted set of coercive and punitive counter-terrorism strategies, whilst simultaneously making non-violent alternatives such as dialogue, compromise and reform appear inconceivable and nonsensical”.³⁴ This notion plays into a wider context which includes the notions of securitisation and speech acts put forth by the Copenhagen School, and its key proponents Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver.³⁵ As Jørgen Staun emphasises: when a violent act is denoted as a terrorist threat it becomes “a performative utterance, not just a constative utterance”.³⁶ As a result, this labelling “lifts” it out of the normal criminal sphere (normal jurisprudence) and into the sphere of terrorism (national security laws), thereby implying the possibility that other, more severe means might be used in battling and punishing the organisation or person behind the act”.³⁷ These severe means can include brutal interrogation methods, emphasis on pre-emptive attacks, and extensive surveillance of civilian populations; in short methods that violate the ethical standards which states often seek to emulate, and elicit public support for “costly responses that have long-term and uncertain pay-offs”.³⁸ As Ryder McKeown highlights, this discourse permits the creation of a “category ‘beyond soldier and civilian’ to whom the Geneva Conventions barring cruel, humiliating and degrading treatment and torture do not apply”.³⁹ An immediate example of this mind-set is the US handling of Osama bin Laden. In April 2011, the Obama administration approved a clandestine kill or capture mission, which ultimately led to bin Laden’s death the following month. Official government documentation is unlikely to be released in the near future, and thus it is difficult to ascertain exactly what orders were given to US forces, yet what is important to emphasise is that the expectation of taking bin Laden alive was low, and the underlying assumption, as suggested by one government official is that “this was a kill operation”.⁴⁰ Whilst bin Laden’s crimes were significant, and his perceived threat to the US’s national security was high, the decision to kill bin Laden instead of attempting to extract and try him as a criminal and imprison him according to the court’s verdict is indicative of the type of

³⁴ Jackson. “Constructing Enemies”. *Government & Opposition*. p.421.

³⁵ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 1998.

³⁶ Staun, Jørgen. “When, how and why elites frame terrorists: a Wittgensteinian analysis of terror and radicalisation.” *Critical Studies On Terrorism* Vol.3, No.3. p.410.

³⁷ Staun. “When, how and why elites frame terrorists”. *Critical Studies On Terrorism*. p.410

³⁸ Crenshaw. “The Debate over “New” vs. “Old” Terrorism”. p.28-9.

³⁹ McKeown, Ryder. “Norm Regress: US Revisionism and the Slow Death of the Torture Norm.” *International Relations*, Vol.23, No.1. p.13.

⁴⁰ Hosenball, Mark. U.S. Commandos Knew Bin Laden Likely Would Die. 2 May 2011. Reuters.

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“extraordinary measures” the Copenhagen School seeks to emphasise.

Ultimately, the discourse surrounding terrorism and the debate on the notion of rationality comes down to the matter of perception. It is easy for those in the West to view terrorism as the irrational actions of a group of fanatics set on utilising violence to ensure the maximum level of destruction possible. Yet in creating this portrayal of terrorist organisations, we deny the complex context through which these organisations have developed. By no means does this justify the acts that terrorists commit, yet it becomes possible to understand the multifaceted combination of culture, history, political grievance, and systematic oppression that has lead such individuals and organisations to commit acts of violence. As Nalbandov highlights, “no man is qualified to declare what would make another man happier or less discontented, which means that the core of rationality is essentially subjective”.⁴¹ What we may perceive as an irrational act, may indeed be a calculated instance of violence and means through which a wider message is communicated in the hopes of achieving change or realising certain, predetermined goals. Arguably this tendency plays into a larger context of orientalism within terrorism discourse, in which terrorists are portrayed as “exotic and mysterious” and “reflect deeper social-cultural fears, anxieties and stereotypes of the oriental ‘other’ that go back to the imperial age”.⁴² Through this lens it becomes easy for a discourse to be created that permits states to act in ways that ethical norms would not usually permit. Thus when examining if terrorism is a rational choice, we must, as Jackson suggests, “remain highly sensitive to the politics of labelling and continuously explore the silences and consequences that follow discussions and designations of terrorism”.⁴³ By extension, it is only through recognising these constraints and social constructions within terrorism discourse, that will enable academics to move beyond them and ultimately examine terrorism and the rational versus irrational debate in a truly comprehensive manner.

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⁴¹ Nalbandov. “Irrational Rationality of Terrorism.” *Journal Of Strategic Security*. p.94.

⁴² Jackson. “Constructing Enemies”. *Government & Opposition*. p.400.

⁴³ Jackson et al. *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. p.114

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