Introduction

Most observers cannot help but notice that each of the major armed conflicts that occurred during the 1990s and the first decade of the present century – Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria – has involved the use of terrorism by one or more of the contestants, at one time or another. Conflicts involving armed non-state actors challenging states and each other have become the main form of warfare thus far in the new millennium. The main participants are insurgents and counterinsurgents. Their conflicts are primarily internal, though they occasionally cross borders. They often involve outsiders, including states and other non-state actors, supporting one side or the other. The conflicts are carried out with a type of brutality that can be expected when the people of a country turn on each other and the institutions responsible for upholding law and order and protecting the population begin to fail. The types of weapons used by contestants in the armed conflicts of the twenty-first century are less sophisticated than those available to states. Whereas states may carry out wars from the sky or sea, or at least from a distance, with the aid of satellites, long-range missiles and other sophisticated technologies, the armed non-state actors fighting in the present century's armed conflicts do so primarily on the ground and at close range.

Another feature of warfare in the twenty-first century – the global battle being waged against perpetrators of terrorism – was not part of earlier warfare. The "global war on terrorism" began with the aim of eliminating the threat posed by transnational terrorists, al Qaeda in particular. As the "war" progressed, political vacuums were opened, insecurities were manifested, and new violent actors emerged. Localized violence pitted armed groups (some of them affiliated with al Qaeda) against states, local communities, and each other. Meanwhile, some of the same armed groups, which are

identified at times as "terrorists" and at other times as "insurgents," have contributed to sectarian conflict in Iraq, civil war in Syria, and civil unrest in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Some of the "terrorist" groups that have received so much of the focus during the "war on terrorism" have become "insurgents," though they continue to use the types of violence typically identified as "terrorism."[1]

The discussion that follows concerns the role of terrorism in twenty-first century warfare.[2] This is a study of the ways in which militants use terrorism to trigger and sustain insurgency. It is also a study of the ways in which the resort to terrorism may signal an end to insurgency, or its failure. The text that follows introduces, describes, and analyzes patterns in the incidence of terrorism as a tactic used in wars past and present. Drawing insights from these patterns, this study addresses implications for efforts to counter the continuing threat.

An evolving threat

There are reasons to believe that terrorism's role in wider-scale warfare has changed since the beginning of the new millennium. The ways in which the use of terrorism has changed are apparent through observations of terrorists and their tactics, targets, and objectives. These changes are not occurring in a vacuum. They are not disconnected from the groups currently using terrorism or the ideologies that drive these groups. Nor are these changes occurring independently of other changes in the international environment.

The new millennium began a decade after the apparent end of communism as an ideological rival to Western ideas and influence in the world.[3] This period also marked the decline of a communist bloc capable of challenging Western hegemony and power. Communism and the superpower seemingly spearheading its spread ceased to be a common threat for its Western and non-Western opponents. The new era brought with it new ideas, which are shared via new technologies. This era has also seen the rise and fall of state and non-state actors, a new distribution of power and new perceptions of threats, as well as a continuation of an old competition among state and non-state actors seeking to maintain or increase their power. The relevance of non-state actors in this competition for power and influence represents a continuation of earlier efforts with two notable exceptions – the introduction of a religious ideology and objectives and the more global nature of some of these objectives. Among the armed non-state actors of the twenty-first century are some seeking not to change the government or political system within a single state but rather to establish a religious system of governance

that bridges continents and incorporates (or subsumes) otherwise diverse national and religious communities.

In this context, non-state actors challenge states – including the strongest states – as they learned to do decades earlier in places like Vietnam, Iran, and Afghanistan. These are archetypal weak actors, whose targets include even weaker actors: civilians. Most of their attacks take place locally, close to the groups' primary areas of operations. The same groups attacking civilians also target states and their militaries, as well as each other. These groups are the main actors in the first wars of the twenty-first century.

There are precedents regarding the use of terrorism by weak actors in warfare and, in particular, in insurgency. There is also observable evidence that terrorism and warfare are changing. Terrorists and terrorist groups have "adapted."[4] The tactics they use have changed as have the tools available for their use. In some cases, the same groups have been labeled as "terrorist" and "insurgent." Similarly, references to "counterterrorism" and "counterinsurgency" have become practically interchangeable.[5] Given attention to specifying definitions and references to these terms – in particular to "terrorism" in the first decades of the twenty-first century – it is possible that these developments indicate the evolution of a modern threat more than a lack of conceptual clarity.

Changes in terrorism are not surprising; they are practically expected. David Rapoport, for instance, observes changes in the dominant ideologies of groups using terrorism at different periods in time, as well as the targets of attacks and types of attacks that are prevalent at a given time.[6] Despite these variations, one understanding that has not changed much over the years is that terrorism is a "weapon of the weak."[7] Those groups relying primarily or exclusively on terrorism tend to do so when they are too weak to engage their adversaries directly. They are weak actors in military terms, especially in comparison to the military strength of states. They are also weak in political terms. They often lack popular support and legitimacy, even among their presumed or desired constituency. Their primary targets – unarmed civilians – are even weaker.

If terrorism is the weapon of these weak actors, then one may expect that terrorists could be easily quashed by the superior power of states and their militaries. This is not always the case. Terrorists' strength lies in their clandestine nature, their ability to hide among a noncombatant population, and their capacity to survive, even when they cannot achieve their objectives. In reality, some terrorist groups are more capable challengers than others. Hence, some terrorist groups may pose a greater threat than others.

There is another point of reference for the question of whether or not states can defeat terrorists. This is the twenty-first century's "global war

on terror." The goals expressed by those administering this "war" seem straightforward enough: reduce the threats posed by non-state actors willing to use terrorism, and especially those threatening national security and international peace.[8] With this goal in mind, it would seem like an oversight not to make note of the ways in which the armed groups on which the war on terrorism has focused – for instance, al Qaeda and its affiliates – use terrorism as one tactic within a more diversified arsenal. Moreover, it would also seem like an oversight to discount the violent conflicts that have followed the initiation of the war on terrorism. Many of these new wars are occurring in or near the places where the war on terrorism has been focused. Among the participants in these wars are some groups previously identified as terrorists. Some of the groups known to have used terrorism before and after September 11, 2001, are also engaging in forms of wider-scale warfare, including insurgency. This is not to suggest that the same groups have abandoned terrorism; instead, terrorism is a tactic they may continue to use in the context of insurgency.

The threat posed by insurgent groups in the twenty-first century is not limited to terrorism employed outside of war. These terrorists and now insurgents are engaging in wider-scale warfare. They seek to replace some prevailing order. In the process, insurgent groups can be expected to carry out the same types of attacks against military and civilian targets.[9] If their coercive capacity grows, they may find harder, better fortified state and military targets more accessible. As this happens, they are likely to expand their repertoire of tactics and targets. This does not mean that the terrorists-turned-insurgents will cease to attack civilians, nor does it mean that they will use different types of weapons when targeting state or military entities. Rather, they will likely continue using the same types of weapons (e.g., guns, bombs, suicide vests) with which they have become familiar and adept. They can apply the weapons and tactics rehearsed in attacks against softer (e.g., civilian) targets in their attacks on harder targets. To the extent that perpetuating fear is a goal of these groups, they may continue to pursue this goal and achieve it regardless of the targets of their attacks. There is an assumption that with sufficient resources, terrorist-insurgents may begin engaging in the types of activities more commonly associated with guerrilla warfare, including sabotage, hit-and-run attacks, and other tactics used by the weaker parties in militarized disputes. There is, however, no reason to assume that these activities must exclude terrorism, nor is there reason to believe that guerrilla warfare will be played out according to the styles set by earlier guerrillas. As Walter Laqueur has suggested, the conditions for guerrilla warfare as seen during the Cold War may no longer exist.[10]

Furthermore, the association between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency (COIN) is not surprising given the evolving threat posed by the

armed actors of the twenty-first century. In the years since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, attention has shifted somewhat from countering terrorism to countering insurgency. At the same time, COIN operations coincide with and may include counter-guerrilla operations and "unconventional warfare," as well as other operations aimed at addressing the threats posed by insurgent forces operating in weak states.[11] In the twenty-first century, these are among the duties of a conventional military's special operations forces.

Focus and objectives of this book

What is the role of terrorism in twenty-first century warfare? Answers to this question draw on assumptions regarding the strategies of armed groups as well as understandings of historical precedents and contemporary realities. Answers to this question also rely on assessments of the ways in which warfare and the actors responsible for waging it have changed and may continue to change in the twenty-first century.

"Terrorism" is a tactic, which may be used by a variety of groups to achieve a range of objectives. As a tactic, terrorism may be one part of a more comprehensive strategy that includes other tactics. References to terrorism do not refer only to particular acts of terrorism but rather to the purposeful attempt to perpetuate fear among a target audience for the purpose of achieving political goals.[12] As such, something is known about the use of terrorism as a tactic of armed resistance and within the context of wider-scale warfare.

As a tactic of armed resistance, terrorism is widely thought to be a weapon of the weaker actors.[13] Some armed groups turn to terrorism when they are unable or unwilling to engage in other forms of violent or nonviolent political action. A common assumption is that these groups use terrorism strategically. The "strategies of terrorism" serve some of these groups' shorter- or intermediate-term objectives.[14] Groups relying on terrorism may trigger a desired response from an adversary or create fear among a target audience; however, they are unlikely to achieve their ultimate objectives.

Though its use has been documented, terrorism is less frequently discussed as a tactic of wider-scale warfare. In some cases, terrorism is a tactic used by those who wish to incite insurgency, though they may be unsuccessful.[15] The types of attacks described as "terrorism" are also used by armed groups when their insurgency takes the form of wider-scale warfare.[16] It is unclear whether or not the identification of a conflict as "war" requires the relabeling of "terrorist" attacks as something else. This is apparent given the varying labels assigned to wider-scale armed conflicts ("civil war," "intra-state war,"

"insurgency") and the multiple, often interchangeable, labels given to the armed groups participating in them ("terrorists," "guerrillas," "insurgents").

The question of the uses of terrorism within wider-scale warfare takes on new significance if the ways of waging wars are changing. There are suggestions that the "great wars" of the past, involving states engaging each other on battlefields, are to be replaced by smaller-scale armed confrontations primarily involving non-state actors.[17] To the extent that this is the case, an understanding of the conduct of new wars requires giving attention to the tactics and strategies available to and employed by these non-state actors engaging in them.

It is from this point that interest turns to the uses of terrorism within wider-scale warfare and, in particular, to the timing of terrorism. Terrorism may be used prior to or early in a violent confrontation to incite further violence, gain attention, or for some other purpose. Terrorism used in these early stages is likely a sign of military weakness. Terrorism used later in the context of wider-scale warfare may indicate something different. It may indicate a weakening of an armed group. Terrorism may serve as a weapon of last resort, used when alternative forms of armed action are no longer available or seen as viable.[18] This situation may be due to losses incurred during an armed conflict or because the insurgents' adversary becomes more committed or organized in its fight. Terrorism may also be used throughout a conflict. Armed groups may remain relatively weak and their capabilities may vary over time and across geographic space. As a result, a group may rely on the kinds of attacks most identified as terrorism in places where, and at times when, it is a weak actor. Alternatively, the use of terrorism throughout the duration of insurgency or wider-scale warfare may indicate the adoption of a strategy combining terrorism with other tactics regardless of a group's relative strength or weakness. This outcome would suggest that armed groups include terrorism as one tactic within an armed struggle that is used concurrently with other tactics in attempts to achieve the group's objectives. As such, terrorism becomes one part of a group's strategy.

Some assumptions deserve further consideration. Terrorism is not, as many have suggested, necessarily the weapon of last resort.[19] Part of the debate regarding this point depends on how cases are interpreted and whether or not the interpreter accepts that there are no alternative courses of action. Second, while terrorism is a tactic used by groups that are weaker than their adversaries, the relative weakness or strength of these actors and their adversaries varies widely. Moreover, relative weakness is difficult to measure. Measurements based on military capabilities would differ from those based on popular support or ideological attractiveness. Assessments of relative weakness also fail to take into account the relative strength of

clandestine armed actors when it comes to surviving and posing a continuing threat, even if not achieving their objectives.

Other aspects of terrorism's use in warfare are unknown. Apart from anecdotal evidence, it has not been clear whether there are variations in the use of terrorism as a tactic of war across place and time. It has also been unclear whether groups with different ideologies or different types of capabilities use terrorism differently over the duration of a violent confrontation. We have not known how the numbers of terrorist attacks look when mapped onto the timeline of a war. And, while we know that the success of insurgents varies on the basis of whether terrorism – especially attacks on civilians – is used sparingly or liberally, and discriminately or indiscriminately, we have not necessarily known whether or how variations in the numbers of terrorist attacks over the course of an insurgency may signal insurgent success or failure.

We also have not known whether the "new" terrorists of the twenty-first century will use terrorism differently than their predecessors did. The insurgent groups using terrorism in wars of the twenty-first century are distinct from their predecessors in ways that may be important. Their ideologies tend to be religious. Their objectives tend to be grander, more global, and less achievable. In most cases, their main fields of operation are areas with majority Muslim populations. Although their tools are both rudimentary (beheadings, burnings) and innovative (bombings, suicide attacks), few are militarily sophisticated. They may, however, gain access to more sophisticated technologies unavailable to their predecessors. They already have access to information and means of communication that were unavailable to most of their earlier counterparts.

Some of these questions are difficult to answer on a cross-national or cross-case basis with the types of data that is available. Despite such limitations, on which we elaborate further, many of the tools needed to acquire a better understanding of terrorism as a wartime tactic are available. This study builds on existing insights and adds descriptive analysis in order to begin to fill some of the gaps in our understanding of the role of terrorism in twenty-first warfare.

The study also bridges the largely separate literatures on terrorism and warfare, focusing on the ways in which these two literatures inform our understanding of the tactics and goals of armed non-state actors. The study of terrorism, a relatively young field that grew in the early 1970s and exploded in 2001, has developed independently of the literature on warfare. The literature on wars, in contrast, is much older, drawing on foundations established by ancient scholars and philosophers, such as Thucydides, and their modern counterparts, including Carl von Clausewitz.[20] The divide in the studies of terrorism and warfare – and especially wars involving insurgency – is hardly

realistic. Terrorism is a tactic used by insurgents. It was a tactic used by armed anti-colonial and nationalist groups during the twentieth century; in the early twenty-first century, it is a tactic used mostly by groups with nationalist and religious ideologies. Terrorism may be used in various stages of insurgency, such as at the beginning or ending stages, or it may be used throughout insurgency alongside other tactics of warfare. More importantly, terrorism is a tactic used frequently in the first years of the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, the twenty-first century's terrorists have become insurgents engaging in wider-scale warfare. Recognizing this, the present study draws insights from both literatures.

Notes

1 Or, as Michael Boyle states, "many insurgent organizations also employ indiscriminate attacks that are not significantly different from terrorism." Michael J. Boyle, "Progress and Pitfalls in the Study of Political Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24, no. 4 (2012): 536. See also James Khalil, "Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing between Terrorists and Insurgents," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36, no. 5 (2013).

2 Few terms in the English language have been more disputed than "terrorism." After reviewing the history of terrorism Walter Laqueur threw up his hands and concluded a simple definition was virtually impossible. Bruce Hoffman, another widely respected analyst, defines terrorism as "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change." Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 40. Nineteenth-century revolutionary anarchists referred to "propaganda by deed." One could do worse. These days most countries in the Western world have devised legal definitions. These tend to expand and contract with the severity of the threat.

3 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, 16 (1989).

4 Bruce Hoffman, "The Changing Face of Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 27, no. 6 (2004).

5 For a discussion, Khalil, "Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing between Terrorists and Insurgents;" Michael J. Boyle, "Do Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Go Together?," *International Affairs*, 86, no. 2 (2010).

6 David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," in *Terrorism Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Horgan, and Kurt Braddock (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

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

8 See, for instance, "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism" (The White House, President George W. Bush, September 2006).

9 Ariel Merari, "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 5, no. 4 (1993).

10 Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, 75, no. 5 (1996).

11 United States Department of the Army, *Military Police Operations*, Field Manual No. 3-39 (August 26, 2013), for instance, xii–xiii.

12 See, for instance, Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Chapter 1.

13 See, for instance, Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism," in *Terrorism: The Second or Anti-Colonial Wave*, ed. David C. Rapoport (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 74.

14 Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security*, 31, no. 1 (2006).

15 See, for instance, Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013).

16 For example, see Andrea J. Dew, "The Erosion of Constraints in Armed-Group Warfare: Bloody Tactics and Vulnerable Targets," in *Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2008), 255–68; Andrew C. Janos, "Unconventional Warfare: Framework and Analysis," *World Politics*, 15, no. 4 (1963): 638–9.

17 See, for instance, Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace, Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 2001," *American Political Science Review*, 96, no. 1 (2002); Monty G. Marshall and Ted Robert Gurr, *Peace and Conflict 2005: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy* (College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, 2005); John Mueller, "War Has Almost Ceased to Exist: An Assessment," *Political Science Quarterly*, 124, no. 2 (2009); John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); G. Easterbrook, "The End of War?" *New Republic*, 232, no. 20 (2005); Nils Petter Gleditsch et al., "The Forum: The Decline of War," *International Studies Review*, 15, no. 3 (2013); Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2011).

18 Whether or not terrorism is a tool of last resort is a topic of debate. See, for instance, Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want," *International Security*, 32, no. 4 (2008); E. Chenoweth et al., "Correspondence: What Makes Terrorists Tick," *International Security*, 33, no. 4 (2009).

19 Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want;" Chenoweth et al., "Correspondence: What Makes Terrorists Tick."

20 Thucydides, *Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. C. Forster Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951); Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).