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Terrorism

On 15 December 2014, a man named Man Haron Monis took hostage a group of patrons at the Lindt café in Martin Place, in downtown Sydney. The police Tactical Response Group was called. There was a stand-off lasting over 16 hours. In the dramatic climax of the siege, Monis killed one of the hostages, the police stormed the café, another hostage was killed (probably by a stray police bullet) and so was Monis.

This event received saturation coverage in the media, with continuous television treatments and page upon page in the daily newspapers. After the siege was over, there was an outpouring of sympathy for the two hostages who died, with Martin Place being covered with thousands of bouquets.

The siege seemed to unite people in support of the state.[1] The prime minister, Tony Abbott, took a strong stand against Monis' action and in support of the police, and the federal opposition leader, Bill Shorten, backed him to the hilt.

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1 Paul H. Weaver, *News and the Culture of Lying* (New York: Free Press, 1994), makes the point that news is oriented to crisis, thereby promoting crisis government, giving greater power to the executive and removing power from routine decision-making processes.

Was it a terrorist incident? This was debated in the aftermath. Monis certainly was not a typical terrorist, and was not part of any group making demands. The most common view was that he was a "disturbed" individual, with a long history of crimes and strange behaviour.

Association with Monis was toxic politically. Some years earlier, the New South Wales opposition leader, John Robertson, had written a letter in support of Monis, who was a constituent. Although this was nothing special at the time, after the siege it was deemed sufficient to trigger a push for Robertson to resign.

Whether or not Monis' siege counts as terrorism, it served much the same function—from the point of view of the state. It illustrates how terrorism serves the state. US President George W. Bush, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, declared, "You are either with us or with them [the terrorists]."[2]

The state is normally considered to include the government, various government agencies, and perhaps government-owned businesses. The eminent sociologist Max Weber defined the state as the governing entity claiming a monopoly over the use of legitimate violence— legitimate in the eyes of the state. "Legitimate violence" here refers to the police and military. Armed challenges to the state are considered illegitimate, and are to be repressed without reservations.

The basis for the legitimacy of the state is that it protects the population against threats, most dramatically the threat of invasion, conquest and subjugation. In times

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2 See also the discussion of this quote in chapter 8 on language.

of war, the power of the state increases dramatically in order to defend the population—and the state itself.

Terrorism provides a substitute for war in terms of mobilising support for the state. Citizens identify with the government and look to it for protection. If "War is the health of the state," terrorism is a booster shot.[3]

Why is terrorism so effective in boosting state power? After all, many people die every day, for various reasons. Some die from disease; some are killed in traffic accidents; some are murdered; some kill themselves. Furthermore, in most places these and other dangers cause far more deaths than terrorism. In many countries, traffic accidents kill hundreds or thousands of people per year, and many could be prevented by safer roads or by diverting travellers to safer modes of transport, such as trains. After 9/11, many US travellers avoided planes and drove instead. Because driving is much riskier than flying, the death rate from travelling accidents increased, perhaps raising the death toll by more than the 9/11 attacks themselves.[4]

It is worthwhile, therefore, looking at the mechanisms by which terrorism serves to generate support for the state.[5] The first tactic is exposure. A siege in a café,

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3 Randolph Bourne famously said, "War is the health of the state." See chapter 13.

4 Gerd Gigerenzer, "Dread risk, September 11, and fatal traffic accidents," *Psychological Science,* Vol. 15, No. 4, 2003, pp. 286–287.

5 The exposition here presents the system-support tactics outlined in chapter 1.

with hostages, is ideal fodder for media coverage. It has drama, danger and an enemy, with police as the saviours, providing a story that combines fear and potential reassurance. Traffic accidents and heart attacks seldom offer such a compelling narrative.

In large part, terrorism obtains media coverage because it is designed to do so. Some analysts have described terrorism as "communication amplified by violence."[6] The goal of what is conventionally called terrorism is to capture public attention. The victims of the terrorists are not the actual targets, but tools to generate attention. The media come calling and provide the conduit for gaining awareness from the wider public.

Terrorist attacks provide an ideal opportunity for agents of the state—police or the military—to be heroes. They respond to the threat, becoming the protectors of the population. In this way, protection of the state becomes fused with protection of the population. The state is seen as the guardian of public safety. Terrorists are cast as villains, as pure evil. For the purposes of the state, the terrorists need to be evil, so a classic morality play is enacted. Humanising the terrorists—seeing them as

6 Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage, 1982). See also Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Joseph S. Tuman, *Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terrorism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

regular people, perhaps even fighting for their ideals—would confuse the message.

Terrorism is usually explained to the population in simple terms: the bad guys, the terrorists, are trying to harm "us" and destroy "our" way of life.[7] Other factors are ignored or skated over, such as the harm or injustice that might have created grievances (especially harm done by the state itself), the double standards involved in ignoring state terrorism (discussed later), or that there might be better ways to deter or discredit terrorism. Official explanations for terrorism almost never mention that if suitable opportunities for citizens to express their views existed, many grievances would evaporate. In cases of so-called "international terrorism," almost always there are "international grievances"—government involvement in foreign countries, such as invasions, occupations, corporate exploitation or drone attacks—for which no opportunities for citizen participation in decision-making exist.

The most important technique by which terrorism is interpreted by the state is framing, usually in a Hollywood template with the government as the good guys and the terrorists as the bad guys, with the only way for the good guys to win being through superior force. With this way of thinking, terrorism provides an unquestionable justification for state violence.

Anti-terrorism is enshrined through laws and regulations. In this way, the state indicates that terrorists are the official enemy, and that opposing terrorism is legally

7 Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?* (Cambridge: Icon, 2002).

mandated. Indeed, anyone who does not go along with this agenda might be caught up in anti-terrorism laws and regulations. The connection between anti-terrorism laws and patriotism is most obvious in the US Patriot Act, an anti-terrorism law passed after 9/11. The acronym[8] is intended to indicate that anti-terrorism is patriotic.

The state's agencies usually give a stamp of approval for anti-terrorism policies, with the main debates occurring within a narrow band of disagreement of how unrestrained agencies can be. A whole range of agencies may be involved: government executives, parliaments, courts, the military, police, spy agencies, and corporate contractors. By going along with government anti-terrorism agendas, they help legitimise them.

Finally, anti-terrorism is imposed on the population through repressive measures, including extensive surveillance, interrogations, arrests and show trials. Vocally opposing the government's anti-terrorism agenda may be enough to trigger targeted surveillance, harassment (for example, extra screening at airports), denial of jobs, or worse. Imposing penalties, formal or informal, for being critical of anti-terrorism discourages dissent. On the other hand, those who enthusiastically join in the anti-terrorism chorus may be rewarded with jobs, promotions, research funding and media opportunities. Conspicuous patriotism, via anti-terrorism, can pay.

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8 The USA PATRIOT Act stands for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act.

Thus in a range of ways, governments can mobilise support by drumming up concern about terrorism. The irony is that terrorists play right into the government's hands.

Terrorism backfire
A physical attack on civilians is a powerful method of gaining attention. As noted earlier, it is a mode of communication, using violence against civilians to send a message to a broad audience, with special salience for governments.

Normally, when groups do something seen as unfair, or just bad, they try to reduce public outrage by hiding their actions, disparaging the targets, explaining away their actions, using official channels to give a stamp of approval, and intimidating or rewarding people involved. Although harming innocent civilians is widely seen as reprehensible, do terrorists use any of these methods to reduce outrage? Quite the contrary: terrorists routinely try to *increase* outrage.[9]

The most powerful terrorist actions are open rather than hidden. Bombings or shootings are done in public. Sometimes terrorists film and publicise their atrocities, for example beheadings. They often try to maximise media coverage. The 9/11 attacks were highly successful, occurring in broad daylight for all to see, targeting icons of US capitalism and the state. Individual terrorists may try to

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9 Many of the ideas here are addressed in Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), chapter 12.

hide their identity, but usually their organisations take responsibility for acts. That is the whole point: terrorists are trying to gain attention through the use of violence.

Terrorists can do little to reduce public outrage from their acts. They have minimal capacity to devalue their targets or to use official channels to give an appearance of justice. They seldom have access to sympathetic media to reinterpret their acts by lying about what they have done, blaming others, or minimising the consequences. Indeed, they are just as likely to exaggerate the impact.

So it seems that terrorists do everything possible to generate outrage over their actions. They almost seem to want to make violence backfire against them, generating greater disgust and opposition. How then can terrorism be considered a rational strategy? The one plausible explanation is that terrorists hope their opponents, who are much stronger, will over-react, use excessive state violence and trigger greater resistance to the government. Other explanations involve processes that are less functional for achieving the explicit goals of the terrorists. Terrorism can be an expression of resentment, getting back at detested governments or officials. It can build in-group solidarity, and attract new followers, through a type of initiation, but at the expense of generating greater opposition at the same time. Most terrorist acts are carried out by men; using violence can be a way of asserting male superiority and excluding most women.

Whatever the reasons, anti-state terrorism serves the state, so there is a mutually reinforcing interaction between states and their violent opponents, with neither side having much incentive to search for alternatives. Yet,

if terrorism is considered purely in functional terms, namely being effective in achieving its goals, then nonviolent alternatives would be far superior in most cases. But for states, terrorists provide the ideal opponents, offering a rationale for their own violence.

The words "terrorism" and "terrorist" are widely used as if they have a clear meaning. I have used them here to refer to the use of violence against civilians by non-state groups, with al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks as a prime example. However, looking more closely at the concept of terrorism soon generates confusion.[10] There are actually dozens of different definitions. Furthermore, governments seldom bother with academic definitions, but simply label their opponents terrorists. The US government, fighting in Vietnam, labelled the National Liberation Front, commonly called the Viet Cong, as terrorists. In South Africa under the racist system of apartheid, the government labelled its opponents, the African National Congress, as terrorists. In the Philippines, the government labels its armed opponents, engaged in a rebellion in rural areas, as terrorists. In India, Maoist rebels fight the government in parts of the country; the government calls them terrorists. But in these conflicts, governments often

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10 See Conor Geerty, *The Future of Terrorism* (London: Phoenix, 1997) for a critique of the expression "terrorism" as originally referring to state terror and eventually becoming an incoherent term of condemnation. On the peculiar logic underpinning anti-terrorist practices, see Richard Jackson, "The epistemological crisis of counterterrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism,* Vol. 8, No. 1, 2015, pp. 33–54.

are responsible for far more rape, pillage, torture and murder than their opponents. So perhaps these governments should be called terrorists too.

That is exactly what some scholars have done. They take the term "terrorism" at its face value, namely as referring to actions that strike terror into the minds of citizens, and note that by this definition, governments are by far the biggest terrorists. High-level aerial bombing can be just as terrifying as explosions in marketplaces, and torture by governments can be just as devastating as torture by insurgents. Terrorism by governments is called "state terrorism."[11]

In the Indochina war, two or three million Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians and others died due to US military actions, which included bombing, torture, assassinations (tens of thousands of them), and forced movements of populations into secure compounds, which might be called concentration camps. A large percentage of the victims were civilians. Similarly, in places like Guatemala and Indonesia, where hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed, nearly all the killing has been on behalf of governments.

When governments undertake large-scale killing, they nearly always accompany this by measures to reduce public outrage.[12] They usually

- hide what they are doing, at least from wider audiences
- devalue their targets (using the label "terrorists" is just one technique)
- reinterpret their actions by lying (for example, civilians killed are called insurgents), minimising consequences, blaming others (such as "rogue elements" being covertly funded) and framing their actions as worthy (for example, protecting national security)
- use official channels to give an appearance of justice (such as formal inquiries into killings)
- intimidate and reward people involved, including journalists and witnesses.

The double standard is stark.[13] Governments kill, or threaten to kill, large numbers of civilians, something that

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11 Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (Boston: South End Press, 1979); Frederick H. Gareau, *State Terrorism and the United States: From Counterinsurgency to the War on Terrorism* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2004); Alexander George (ed.), *Western State Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez (eds.), *The State as Terrorist: The Dynamics of Governmental Violence and Repression* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984); Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez (eds.), *Terrible Beyond Endurance? The Foreign Policy of State Terrorism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988). See also the discussion of state crime in chapter 4.

12 Brian Martin, "Managing outrage over genocide: case study Rwanda," *Global Change, Peace & Security,* Vol. 21, No. 3, 2009, pp. 275–290; Brian Martin, "Euthanasia tactics: patterns of injustice and outrage," *SpringerPlus,* Vol. 2, No. 256, 6 June 2013, http://www.springerplus.com/content/2/1/256.

strikes terror into the hearts of potential victims. Yet many of these same governments are able to escape censure for their own activities, while pointing the finger at allegedly dangerous enemies, the so-called terrorists, turning their comparatively low-level attacks into justification for massive mobilisation and retaliation. This double standard is accomplished by parallel sets of tactics, on the one hand to reduce outrage from the government's own actions and on the other to mobilise outrage against the "terrorists."

It is not surprising that there is vastly more scholarship on non-state terrorism than on state terrorism, and that the very idea of state terrorism is almost never presented in the media or textbooks and is largely unknown to the wider public. It is in this context that it is possible to say that terrorism strengthens the state. This doesn't happen automatically: governments do everything possible to ensure that it does.

In the face of armed opposition, governments might adopt measures to de-escalate conflict, for example by promoting social justice, opening avenues for citizen participation, prosecuting government agents involved in torture and killing, and introducing a range of measures to promote reconciliation. In a free and open society, with opportunities to bring about change through the system, terrorism would lose much of its attraction, and it would not aid recruitment or popular support.

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13 See also Brian Martin, "How activists can challenge double standards," *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements,* Vol. 7, No. 2, 2015, pp. 201–213.

What often happens instead is an insidious process of reinforcement. After an anti-state terrorist attack, the government responds massively, for example with arrests, torture or bombings—and in the course of this response harms previously uninvolved civilians. This results in new grievances, giving support to insurgent groups, who mount further attacks, leading to more reprisals, and so forth. The government, by choosing repression as its response to terrorism, fosters the very conditions that stimulate more terrorism. Do governments seem to worry about this? In many cases, not at all. The more they are attacked, the more governments gain greater power and legitimacy.

This pattern was apparent in Afghanistan after the western invasion in October 2001, supposedly in retaliation for the 9 September 2001 attacks in the US. (Nearly all the 9/11 attackers were from Saudi Arabia.) Bombing in Afghanistan killed thousands of civilians, but this was not publicised in the west, a type of cover-up. The intended targets, the Taliban, were demonised as terrorists, even though the CIA had supported them in the 1980s after the Soviet government invaded Afghanistan. The bombing of Afghanistan was explained as part of the war on terror, even though it terrorised the Afghani population. The attack was authorised by the United Nations Security Council some time afterwards.

If anyone wants to increase the power of the state, a terrorist attack is probably the single most effective way to do so. After 9/11, there was enormous international sympathy for the US government and people. The government massively increased military funding and especially funding for national security. Dissent was

portrayed as a threat. Patriotism was given an enormous booster shot. The same thing has happened in other countries after terrorist attacks, including Australia. In October 2002, there was a bombing in Bali; though this was in Indonesia, the primary victims were western tourists, with 202 killed, 88 of them from Australia. The number of Australians killed was nearly as high a proportion of the Australian population as the 9/11 death toll was of the US population. Similarly, legislation was introduced to give much more power to security agencies, and their funding was increased dramatically.

What to do?

For those who are critical of excessive patriotism and wary of the power of the state, what can be done to oppose the role of terrorism in strengthening the state? This is a very big subject, so only a few possible actions and initiatives can be mentioned.

On an individual level, it is possible to become better informed about violence around the world, to be better able to put terrorism in context. Since the end of the cold war, there have been dozens of major conflicts, with the most deadly ones being in Africa, including the Congo, Algeria, Rwanda, Sudan and Burundi: in each of these countries, hundreds of the thousands of people have died in wars or genocides. The wars in the Congo have been the most deadly, with some five million deaths. Compared to this, international terrorism leads to relatively few deaths. The implication is that the threat from non-state terrorism in the west has been blown out of all proportion—thus serving to strengthen states—while more

serious threats to the lives and safety of the world's population are mostly unknown to wider audiences. Becoming aware of the figures and examples can provide an antidote to the continual drum-roll about dangers from terrorism.[14]

It is also worth studying the figures about other threats to personal safety, such as traffic accidents, drowning in bathtubs, falling over and domestic violence. For most people, these are much greater threats to safety than terrorism.

Another approach is to support alternatives that undermine the attractions of terrorism for potential terrorists. Greater social justice—treating people more fairly, and addressing grievances—can foster commitment to a society. Also important is opening channels for change through the system. When people feel that they are being treated badly and that there is no legitimate way to make a difference, some of them may want to resort to violence, even when it is counterproductive.

Research shows that methods of nonviolent action, such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins, are usually more effective than violence in achieving the goals of campaigners. Spreading the message about the power of nonviolent action, and developing campaigns that use this power, provide models for others to follow.[15]

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14 Virgil Hawkins, *Stealth Conflicts: How the World's Worst Violence Is Ignored* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

15 For specific applications to terrorism, see Tom H. Hastings, *Nonviolent Responses to Terrorism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); Senthil Ram and Ralph Summy (eds.), *Nonviolence: An*

Although nonviolent action may be more effective, the sad reality is that governments seldom promote it, but rather raise the alarm about terrorism, repress dissent, resist nonviolent protest, and create the conditions that foster terrorism. Nonviolent campaigners thus face a double challenge: to demonstrate to others that nonviolence is a better option than violence, and to confront authorities that resist peaceful change and thus create conditions that stimulate violence. This is the challenge of dealing with a government-terrorism symbiosis.

When alarms about terrorism are raised, another approach, at an individual level, is to say "ho, hum" and treat the whole issue as unimportant. Whenever terrorism is reported on television, change the channel. If everyone ignored it, the purveyors of concern about terrorism would lose credibility. Unfortunately, this approach would not make much difference unless adopted by a large number of people.

Humour is another response. Indeed, quite a few people feel that terrorism alarms are silly, and make jokes about them. This can be risky at airports, where authorities over-react to the slightest comment. Some types of humour may be safer and more revealing. A "supportive" humorous political stunt involves pretending you support the cause you are making fun of. For example, you could go around an airport or railway station reporting

unattended bags—even if unattended only briefly—or perhaps reporting "suspicious behaviour" by well-dressed businessmen. The next step is to work in teams. One member leaves shopping bags unattended, each one containing a balloon, or a present for the finder, while another reports these potentially dangerous bags to the authorities. However, stunts like this could go seriously wrong if there was an actual attack while staff were investigating false alarms.

My assessment is that it is not easy to develop a campaign to address the out-of-proportion alarm about terrorism. Governments do what they can to tout the risk, and this feeds perfectly into media news values, while meanwhile more serious problems are neglected. At a basic level, the first step is not to get caught up in the terrorism alarm, but beyond this, it is difficult to develop a campaign to change the agenda. This is an area where social experimentation is needed: activists can try out various ways to redirecting attention, making fun of terrorism alerts, promoting non-state responses, or in other ways addressing the mutual reinforcement cycle between states and terrorists.

Alternative for Defeating Global Terror(ism) (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2008). For my approach, see "Nonviolence versus terrorism," *Social Alternatives,* Vol. 21, No. 2, Autumn 2002, pp. 6–9. See also the discussion in chapter 13.