Terrorist Governors and Transnational Civil Wars: The New Normal?

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New actors are contesting the basic norms of statehood, borders, and non-intervention at the local, state, regional, and global levels. But is Europe prepared?

Analysts of violent conflict have long recognized that the causes and nature of war and terrorism change dramatically over time and that transition periods from one era to another often render earlier understandings of conflict practically obsolete.

The fact that the causal mechanisms of violent conflict shift substantially across historical epochs represents a central challenge for policymakers seeking to better predict and prevent the onset of violent conflict and governance breakdowns. Revolutions in economic production, innovations in military technology, and the shifting power distributions among major players in the international system—as well as the number and strength of the alliances between them—can be major drivers of conflict in one era, yet causes of peace in another.

Fortunately, the post-World War II decline in wars between powerful states, by far the most lethal conflicts—continues, for the moment. But other types of political violence are threatening the security of the EU and its member states. Not only did terrorist incidents rise globally by over one-thousand percent between the 9/11 attacks and 2017; when we examine modern terrorism, we can identify quite distinct "splitting events" that demarcate qualitatively different eras of terrorist waves, each with its own motivating ideology, goals, tactics, technologies, media, and funding sources.

The assassination of Czar Alexander II of Russia in 1881, as Rapoport's history of modern terrorism shows, heralded the launch of an anarchist wave of terrorism that plagued Europe and America until World War I. Between 1920 and 1962, a second, anti-colonial wave dominated attacks in Europe and its colonies, only to be succeeded by the new-Left terrorism of the 1960's and 1970's, which was fed by Cold War rivalries. A fourth, splitting event took place in 1979, when the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan triggered an Islamist-religious wave of political violence that continues to this day.[1]

The distinguishing feature of these distinct periods is that they typically occur when three elements in the international system experience rapid transformation:

1. the identity of major actors capable of facilitating or constraining violent conflict;

2. the global ideological, political, and economic norms and institutions guiding interaction between those major actors; and

3. the technology for mobilizing and engaging in conflict.

A new, transformational moment is now unfolding, one that is again altering our security environment in ways we don't yet fully understand but that the EU and its member states will have to contend with for years, perhaps decades, to come. Just as the two World Wars produced large shifts in the causal model of violent conflict between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the present transformation of the international system is dramatically shifting the nature of terrorism and civil war.

Terrorist organizations—once relatively small, clandestine, and having to spend much of their resources on evading state authorities—are morphing into terrorist governors, notably along Europe's Eastern and Southern flanks; and especially in the Sahel, North Africa and the Middle East, including Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

These rebel governors—referred to variably as hybrid terrorist organizations, Mezzanine Rulers, and terrorist semi-states—control territory and populations in areas of limited statehood, develop governance infrastructures and independent sources of finance, possess sophisticated communications and encryption technologies, and increasingly wield a range of conventional military capabilities, guerilla, and terror capacities.[2] Some of these terrorist governors attract a significant number of foreign fighters from around the globe—over 40,000 from 120 different countries in the case of the Islamic State—and many of them conduct attacks both against the weak state authorities whose territory they control and against third party victim states across borders.[3]

Alongside this evolutionary leap of terrorism is an even more insidious transformation of civil war. Specifically, we are seeing a dramatic upsurge in the number of "internationalized" civil wars—internal conflicts in which other states intervene militarily on one or both sides. In 1991, 4 percent of conflicts were internationalized, according to this definition. By 2017, that number rose tenfold to 40 percent. Of the 48 active conflicts within states in 2017, nineteen were internationalized civil wars—one of the highest numbers in the post-World War II era, second only to 2015, which had 20.[4] Such external troop involvement typically increases the lethality of conflicts, prolongs their duration, and makes them more difficult to resolve.[5]

Taken together, the rapid and substantial proliferation of terrorist governors and internationalized civil wars suggests we are in the midst of systemic transformation. New actors are contesting the basic norms of statehood, borders, and non-intervention at the local, state, regional, and global levels.

In this reality, "the nature of conflict is changing, becoming more intractable and less conducive to political settlement." [6] In the midst of this transformational moment, the ability to accurately predict the causes and nature of conflicts is at risk. It is a reality which the EU and its member states must quickly recognize and adapt to.

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Notes

[1] David Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," in *Attacking Terrorism*, ed. Audrey Kurth Cronin and James Ludes (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press) (2004).

[2] Michael Crawford and Jami Miscik, "The Rise of Mezzanine Rulers," *Foreign Affairs* 89 (2010), 123-132; Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspective on Terrorism* 9/4 (2015), 31-41; Benedetta Berti, "Violent and Criminal Non-State Actors," in *The Oxford Handbook of Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood*, ed. Thomas Risse, Tanja A. Borzel, and Anke Draube (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press), 272-290.

[3] Or Honig and Ido Yahel, "A Fifth Wave of Terrorism? The Emergence of Terrorist Semi-States," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017).

[4] Therese Pettersson and Kristine Eck, "Organized Violence, 1989-2017," *Journal of Peace Research* 55/4 (2017), 535-547.

[5] David Cunningham, "Blocking resolution: How external states can prolong civil wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 47/2 (2010), 115-127.

[6] Sebastian von Einsiedel, "Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict," UN University Center for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 10 (March 2017), 4.