Terrorism—A Brief Explanation
By M. Merrick Yamamoto

Executive Summary

This information paper presents a simplified explanation of terrorism. The paper uses three methods to convey a basic understanding of terrorism. The paper first explains "victim-target differentiation," the primary method of operation used in terrorist attacks. Victim-target differentiation (the strategy of attacking people or property in order to get other people to take some kind of action) is a concept that is not always clearly understood, and is essential to the comprehension of terrorism. The use of victim-target differentiation makes terrorism more complex than most forms of political violence, and more difficult to counter. Second, the paper explains terrorism by following and analyzing the steps of the terrorist attack. Analyzing each step shows how terrorism operates, and establishes the basis for counterterrorism efforts. The paper uses the Turner-Yamamoto Terrorism Model to illustrate the steps of the terrorist attack and show how terrorism is intended to operate. The model can also serve as a guide to comprehending terrorism and how to combat it. The model can be used to identify ways to prevent terrorist attacks, respond effectively if they occur, and reduce the use of terrorism.

The paper then uses the analysis of the terrorist attack as a way to evaluate specific incidents to determine whether or not they are acts of terrorism. Using specific examples can help put the characteristics of terrorism into perspective, and can help individuals be better prepared to combat terrorism more effectively. This info paper was developed from the CISSM monograph, Terrorism Against Democracy, 2015. The monograph is based in part on Admiral Stansfield Turner's course, "Terrorism & Democracy," which he taught from 2002–2006 in response to the 9/11 attacks on September 11, 2001.
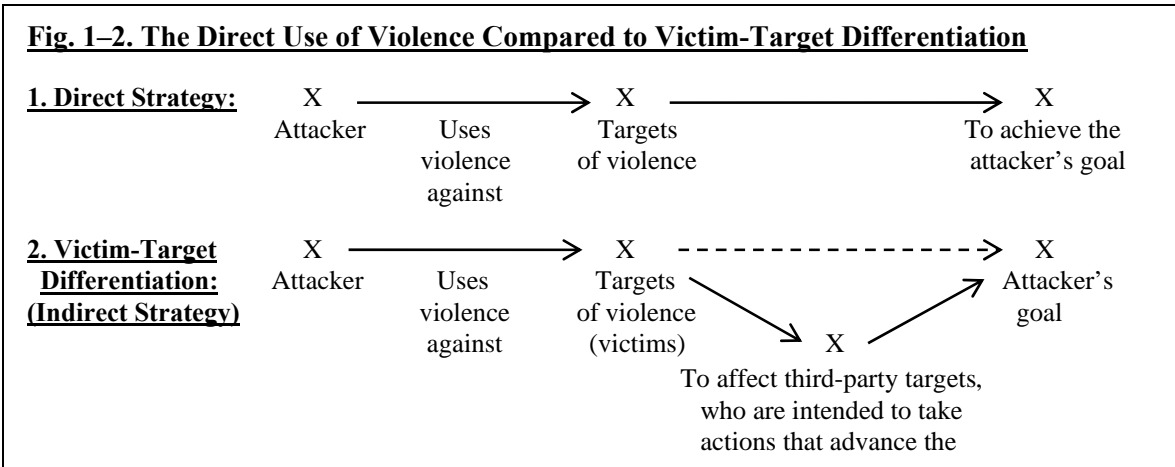
Introduction. How can we comprehend terrorism? Can we tell if an incident is an act of terrorism? Is terrorism really difficult to understand, or is there no better way than, "I know it when I see it"? There are a number of approaches that can be used to help understand terrorism. One is to see how terrorism operates as compared to other forms of violence, a second is to follow the steps of the terrorist attack, and a third is to look at specific incidents and evaluate whether or not they are acts of terrorism.

I. Victim-Target Differentiation: A Key to Terrorism

An important key to comprehending terrorism is to look at the differences between terrorism and other forms of violence. The most distinctive difference is in how terrorism "operates." In most forms of violence, the attacker uses violence against someone or something (the "targets of violence") to directly pursue a goal. A military attack is one example; a mugging can be another. The direct use of violence can be shown in the steps below:

Fig. 1–1. Steps in the Direct Use of Violence

Direct Strategy:　1. Attacker ⟶ 2. Uses violence against ⟶ 3. Targets of violence ⟶ 4. for a goal
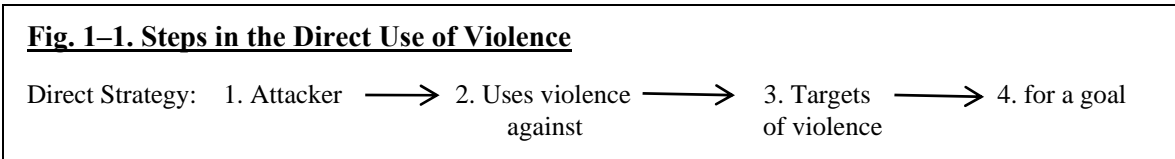
But terrorism is different. Terrorism does not use a direct strategy, but instead uses the indirect strategy of *victim-target differentiation*. In victim-target differentiation, an attacker uses violence against people or property in order to get *other people* to take some kind of action. In other words, the attacker uses violence against one set of targets—the victims or property attacked—as a means to get *other* targets—*third-party targets* such as groups, governments, organizations, and individuals—to take actions that will advance the attacker's goal. The extra step of victim-target differentiation can be shown as in Fig. 1–2, which compares a direct violence strategy with the indirect strategy involved in victim-target differentiation.

Fig. 1–2. The Direct Use of Violence Compared to Victim-Target Differentiation

1. Direct Strategy:　X ⟶ X ⟶ X
Attacker　Uses violence against　Targets of violence　To achieve the attacker's goal

2. Victim-Target Differentiation: (Indirect Strategy)　X ⟶ X ⤏ X
Attacker　Uses violence against　Targets of violence (victims)　Attacker's goal
X
To affect third-party targets, who are intended to take actions that advance the
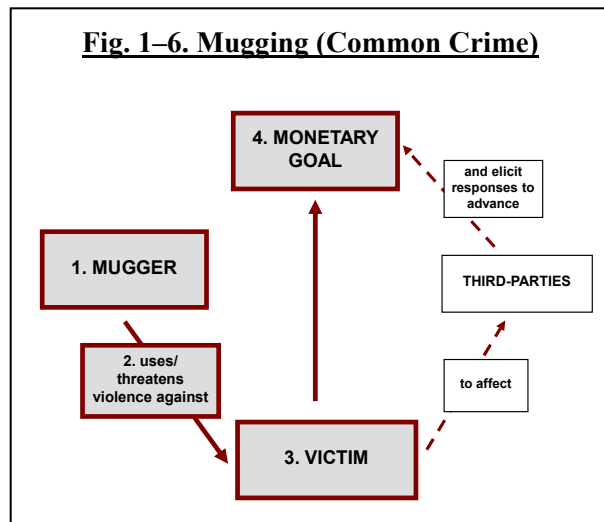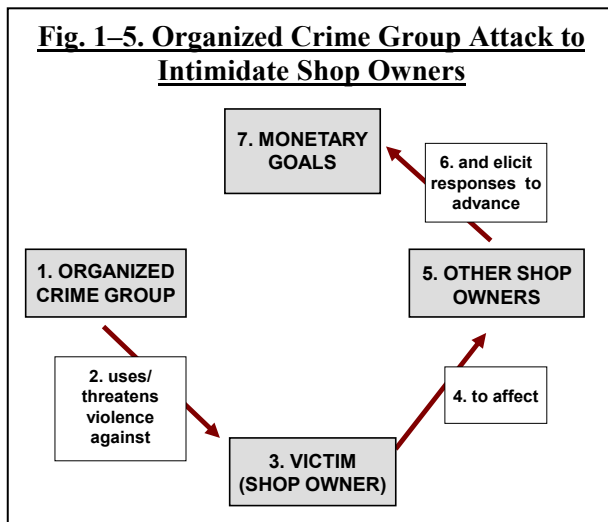
To illustrate, in a military strike, the attackers try to achieve or advance their goal directly through the use of military force. In contrast, a strategy that uses victim-target differentiation operates through third-party responses to violence. The purpose of attacking the victims is for the effect the attack has on third-parties, so that they will take actions that will advance the attacker's goal. The victims are being used as a means to elicit responses from these third-party targets.
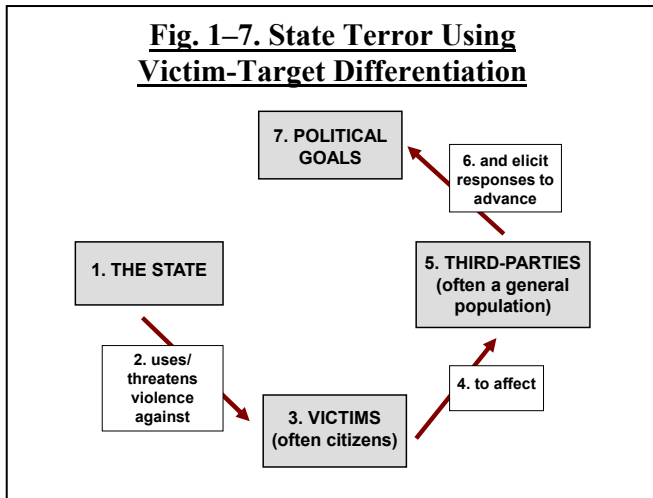
Victim-target differentiation can be shown in a model. Fig. 1–3 shows that in victim-target differentiation, an attacker uses or threatens violence against one set of targets (the people or property attacked) to affect third-parties and elicit responses from them to advance a goal. Fig. 1–4 shows that in victim-target differentiation, the true targets being aimed at are third-parties.

Fig. 1–3. Victim-Target Differentiation

7. GOALS

6. and elicit responses to advance

1. ATTACKER

5. THIRD-PARTIES

2. uses/ threatens violence against

4. to affect

3. PEOPLE/ PROPERTY

Fig. 1–4. Victim-Target Differentiation: Third-Parties Are the True Targets

GOALS

and elicit responses to advance

ATTACKER

THIRD-PARTIES

uses/ threatens violence against

to affect

PEOPLE/ PROPERTY
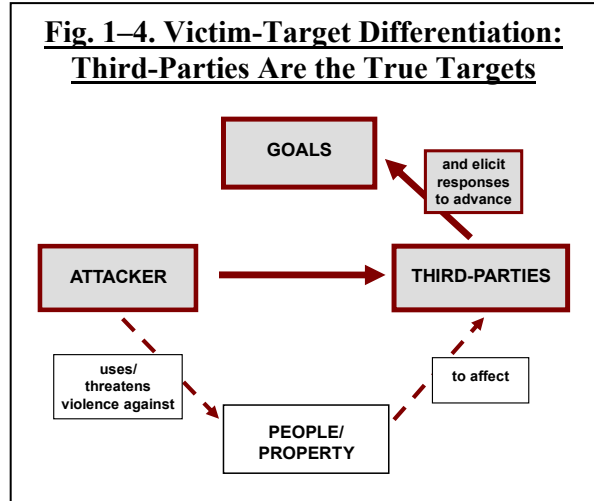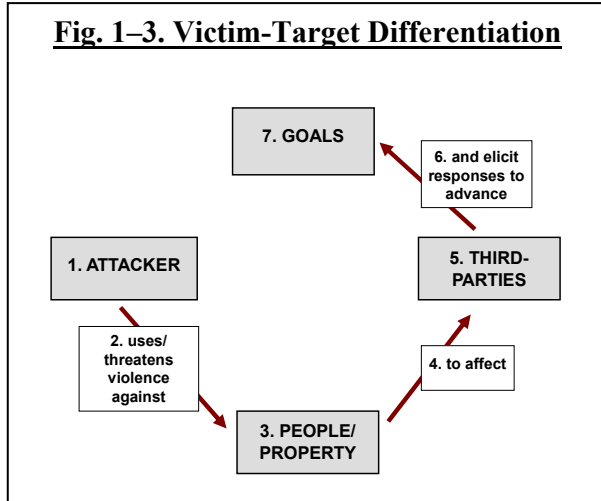
Victim-Target Differentiation and Forms of Violence. Victim-target differentiation can be seen by comparing forms of violence. Four examples are common crime, state terror, terrorism, and a military strike.

Some *common crimes* can involve victim-target differentiation. For example, if an organized crime group damages one shop as a warning to other shopkeepers to pay "protection money," this action involves victim-target differentiation (Fig. 1–5). The violence is aimed at third-parties (other shop owners) and is intended to elicit responses from them. But most common crimes do not involve victim-target differentiation—note its absence in an "ordinary" mugging (Fig. 1–6).
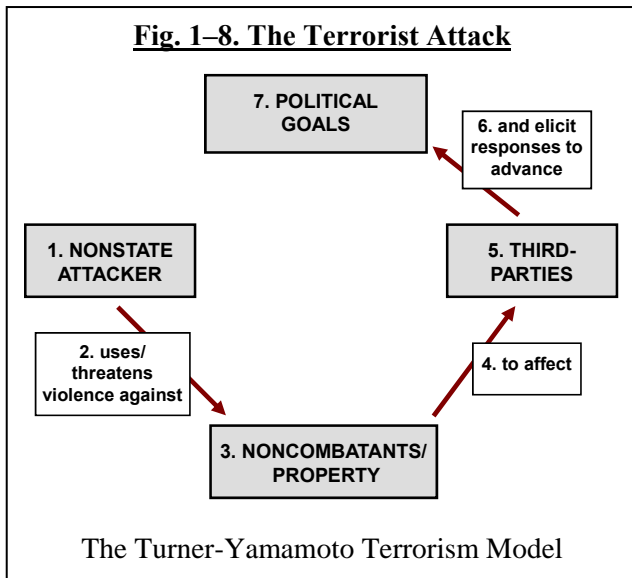
Fig. 1–5. Organized Crime Group Attack to Intimidate Shop Owners

7. MONETARY GOALS

6. and elicit responses to advance

1. ORGANIZED CRIME GROUP

5. OTHER SHOP OWNERS

2. uses/ threatens violence against

4. to affect

3. VICTIM (SHOP OWNER)

Fig. 1–6. Mugging (Common Crime)

4. MONETARY GOAL

and elicit responses to advance

1. MUGGER

THIRD-PARTIES

2. uses/ threatens violence against

to affect

3. VICTIM

Fig. 1–7. State Terror Using Victim-Target Differentiation


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7. POLITICAL
   GOALS
                        6. and elicit
                        responses to
                        advance

1. THE STATE            5. THIRD-PARTIES
                        (often a general
                        population)

2. uses/
threatens               4. to affect
violence
against      3. VICTIMS
             (often citizens)
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State terror can use victim-target differentiation (Fig. 1–7).[1] In state terror, the government generally perpetrates violence using state actors and official institutions such as the police and judiciary, and the violence can be aimed at third-parties. During Stalin's Great Terror, the Soviet government used such means as extra-judicial killings by the police, rigged show trials, and deportations to gulags to frighten the general population, and thereby suppress opposition to the government and coerce compliance.

Terrorism always uses victim-target differentiation. A terrorist attack can be described as below, and illustrated as in Fig. 1–8:

In a terrorist attack: a nonstate attacker uses violence and the threat of violence against noncombatants/property to affect third-parties, and elicit responses from them to advance political goals.[2]

Fig. 1–8. The Terrorist Attack


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7. POLITICAL
   GOALS
                        6. and elicit
                        responses to
                        advance

1. NONSTATE             5. THIRD-
   ATTACKER             PARTIES

2. uses/
threatens               4. to affect
violence against
             3. NONCOMBATANTS/
                PROPERTY
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The Turner-Yamamoto Terrorism Model

To clarify: In a terrorist attack:

1. The attack was done by a *nonstate actor*—that is, a private individual or group, or a clandestine state agent—not a person or group officially acting for a government.

2. The attack aimed or threatened physical *violence* at *noncombatant targets*—that is, civilians (in general), military personnel in noncombatant status, or property.

3. The attack was intended to *elicit responses* from *third-party targets*—that is, people, governments, groups, and organizations other than the victims/property attacked.

4. The attack had a *political* purpose—that is, the attack was intended to advance a political goal.

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[1] State terror can be described as the violence that governments use to intimidate, subjugate, and control their own populations (or the populations of occupied countries or territories), and suppress opposition and resistance.

[2] In general, "noncombatants" are civilians and certain categories of military personnel. The most precise term for the "targets of violence" is "noncombatant targets"; however, the Turner-Yamamoto Terrorism Model uses "noncombatants/property" to be more easily understood. The Turner-Yamamoto Terrorism Model includes clandestine state agents as nonstate actors, since these agents are not usually an openly acknowledged part of a government. The Turner-Yamamoto Terrorism Model was developed in conjunction with Stansfield Turner's "Terrorism & Democracy" course at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy.

A *military strike* does not use victim-target differentiation as the primary strategy. Fig. 1–9 shows the absence of victim-target differentiation in a military strike: the attackers use military force directly against targets for a political goal. The attackers are using a direct strategy.

In review, the use or nonuse of victim-target differentiation in common crime, a military strike, state terror, and terrorism is below:

Fig. 1–9. Military Strike

— Common crime: Usually does not use victim-target differentiation, but can.

— Military strike: Does not use victim-target differentiation as its primary strategy. (Military force in general does not use victim-target differentiation.)

— State terror: Can use victim-target differentiation.

— Terrorism: Always uses victim-target differentiation. Victim-target differentiation is the most distinctive characteristic of terrorism, and must be present for an incident to be an act of terrorism—if there is no victim-target differentiation, the incident is not terrorism but another kind of violence.

Victim-Target Differentiation: A Rare Strategy. Most kinds of violence do not use the strategy of victim-target differentiation. For example, such forms of *violent crime* as assault and armed robbery do not generally use victim-target differentiation. Forms of *political violence* such as war, insurrection, and ethnic conflict do not use victim-target differentiation as the primary strategy.[3] Of the forms of political violence shown in Fig. 1–10, only terrorism always uses victim-target differentiation.[4]

Fig. 1–10. Forms of Political Violence

Why is victim-target differentiation a relatively rare strategy? One reason is that victim-target differentiation is difficult to use "effectively," because the results depend on what other people do in response to the use of violence against the victims. The attacker is not trying to achieve the desired result himself through the use of violence, but is trying to get third-parties to help him achieve his goal, and cannot control what third-parties do in response to attacks. The attacker can only *try* to coerce or induce third-parties to do what he wants.

Other reasons are that the strategy of victim-target differentiation can be time-consuming, risky, and hard to manage, and many people pursuing a goal through violence would rather seize their objective directly through such means as military attack or armed robbery. To use armed robbery as an example, it can be more "efficient" to rob a person directly than to take a hostage for ransom—it can be quicker and involve less risk to just take the money and go.

Summary. *In summary,* victim-target differentiation can be somewhat difficult to comprehend, but once understood, many aspects of terrorism become clearer.

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[3] Political violence is a large category that includes such actions as war, civil war, military strikes, insurrection, ethnic conflict, genocide, state terror, and terrorism. All forms of political violence are methods of struggle that can be used alone or with other methods to pursue political goals.

[4] Note that state terror has often used victim-target differentiation.

II. The Steps of Terrorist Attack.

A second way to comprehend terrorism is to look at the model of the terrorist attack, and examine the steps involved. Each step of the terrorist attack involves certain characteristics, and analyzing these characteristics can help clarify terrorism.

The purpose of terrorism is to advance a political goal, and the strategy of terrorism is to attack people and property in order to "get" third-parties to respond in ways that will contribute to that goal. By victimizing people and property, terrorists can be trying to coerce, intimidate, inspire, influence, and provoke governments, groups, organizations, the public, the media, supporters, and opponents so that these third-party targets will *choose* to take the actions that terrorists intend. This intent to trick or induce people into *helping* terrorists pursue their goals is a strategy that must be seen clearly to be combated effectively.

Fig. 1–11. The Terrorist Attack

The Turner-Yamamoto Terrorism Model
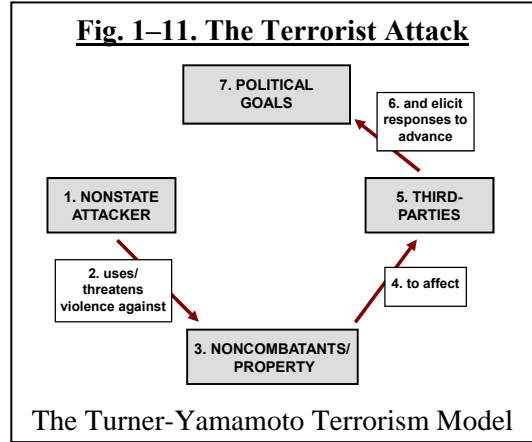
Following the steps of a terrorist attack can increase comprehension of terrorism. These steps are outlined in the following description of terrorism:

> In a terrorist attack: a <u>nonstate attacker</u> uses <u>violence</u> and the <u>threat of violence</u> against <u>noncombatants/property</u> to affect <u>third-parties</u>, and <u>elicit responses</u> from them to advance <u>political goals</u>.

The Attacker. In a terrorist attack, the attacker is a *nonstate actor*; that is, a private group or individual, or a clandestine state agent.[5] "Nonstate" generally means that the individuals and groups are nongovernmental—they are acting on their own as private individuals and groups, and are not officially acting for a government.[6] Nonstate actors are not official state actors such as government leaders or soldiers in the armed forces of a country. To compare nonstate actors with state actors, soldiers in a military unit controlled by a government are state actors—an example would be American soldiers in the Normandy invasion. In contrast, most people are likely to be nonstate actors.

Fig. 1–12. The Attacker
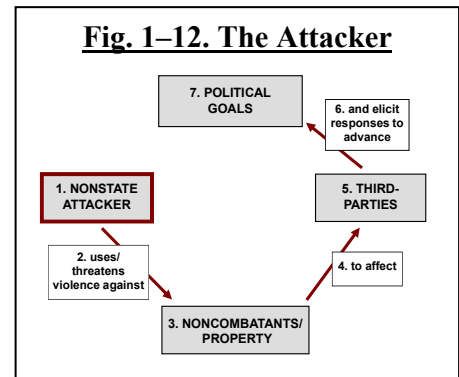
In the context of terrorism, nonstate actors can include *clandestine state agents* because they are not an official part of a government. Clandestine state agents may be an actual part of a government, but are not openly acknowledged in the way that employees in most government offices are. The government is trying to disguise its actions through the use of these agents, and when they perpetrate an attack, it is not usually known that a government directed the attack. Libya, for example, used clandestine state agents to bomb Pan Am Flight 103, an act that was widely considered to be a terrorist attack.

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[5] Most attackers have been part of a group, such as al Qaeda, but sometimes have operated alone. Eric Rudolph, who bombed the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta and perpetrated other attacks, was not part of a group.
[6] Similar terms for "nonstate" can include "subnational," "substate," and "nongovernmental."

In many attacks it is clear whether or not the attacker is a nonstate individual or group. The 9/11 hijackers were private individuals—nonstate actors. The 2013 Boston Marathon bombers were nonstate actors.

If other than nonstate actors perpetrate an attack, the act is not terrorism but another kind of violence. For example, if a government uses violence against its own people to suppress resistance, such as Stalin's Great Terror, that is "state terror." If a soldier in war deliberately attacks civilians (noncombatants), that is a war crime.[7]

Violence. A terrorist attack involves violence—the *use of violence*, and the *threat of violence*.[8] Many terrorist attacks use actual violence, such as setting off a bomb that damages a building. But terrorism also involves the threat of violence, and terrorists have used this threat in different ways. Terrorists have threatened violence without actually using it, such as by a bomb threat. Another way is by using violence, and then openly threatening more violence—an example would be bombing a building, and then issuing a statement threatening to attack another one. Sometimes the threat of more violence is unspoken—a terrorist bombs a building, and though he doesn't say anything about another bombing, people know (or fear) that there might be another one.

Fig. 1–13. Violence

The threat of future violence is a very important part of the terrorist attack. Terrorist attacks contain an inherent threat of further attacks: the attacker is openly (or silently) saying, "Give me what I want or I will attack again." The threat of future violence is particularly important because the threat of more attacks can have a greater impact on third-parties than an actual attack itself.

Terrorist violence has a number of characteristics, such as violence that is *illegal*, *random*, *symbolic*, and *deliberate*. To illustrate, terrorist attacks involve acts such as murder and arson, acts that are *illegal* in nearly all countries. Many terrorist attacks involve *random* violence, such as the effects from a bomb. Terrorists often attack targets that are *symbolic*, such as a national monument. Terrorist violence is *deliberate*—an accident is not a terrorist attack. This matters because sometimes there have been deliberate attempts to label accidents as terrorist attacks—for example, it can be politically advantageous to call an incident a terrorist attack to try to discredit a certain community. These and other characteristics of terrorist violence can increase the impact of terrorist attacks. To illustrate, attacks on children can arouse intense feelings in third-parties.

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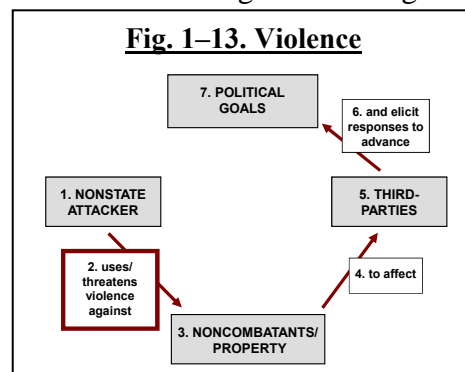
[7] Note that if a government provides resources or direction to a terrorist group, that is "state-sponsored terrorism" or "state-supported terrorism." States can be *involved* in nonstate terrorism in a number of ways, and to varying degrees, such as through tolerance or active support, but the actual attackers are still nonstate actors. Note too that "state-sponsored terrorism" is a type of nonstate terrorism, in the same way that "international terrorism" is a type of nonstate terrorism. These "subsets" of terrorism can pose different threats, operate in different ways, and require different methods and tools to combat.

[8] The difference between "violence" and "force" is significant in terms of terrorism. Force can be described as the use of physical power to *overcome, restrain, or physically coerce*, and violence as the use of that same physical power to *injure, damage, or abuse*. Violence involves the *intent* to injure or damage, whereas force may or may not be intended to injure. A policeman applying handcuffs is using force, not violence, to physically restrain a person—the handcuffs are not intended to injure. One reason the distinction between force and violence is relevant to terrorism is because of the legal aspects. Force, even lethal force, is lawful when properly used by authorized individuals such as police officers and soldiers (soldiers use military force). In contrast, the use of violence by nonstate actors is not lawful except in particular circumstances such as self-defense from attempted murder.

The Targets of Violence: Noncombatants and Property. A terrorist attack threatens, injures, or kills *noncombatants*, and threatens, damages, and destroys *property*. In the context of terrorism, the term "noncombatant" generally refers to two groups of people: *civilians,* and *military personnel in noncombatant status*.

Civilians are generally all persons who are not members of the armed forces of a country; however, in some circumstances civilians may not be noncombatants. For example, during war and armed conflicts, civilians who take a direct part in hostilities, such as by taking up arms, are no longer noncombatants.[9]

Fig. 1–14. The Targets of Violence

Military personnel in noncombatant status include military personnel who *do not* engage in combat such as medics and chaplains, or who *cannot* engage in combat because they are wounded, ill, captured, or shipwrecked. Military personnel who are outside of a war zone or warlike setting (whether or not armed or on duty), or not in combatant status at the time of an incident, may be considered noncombatants. The U.S. government considered the sailors on the USS *Cole* to be noncombatants when the ship was attacked by suicide bombers in 2000. The situation was peaceful—the ship was refueling when a boat blew a large hole in the side of the ship, killing and injuring many U.S. sailors.

It is important to note, however, that those who may be considered noncombatants can be subject to some interpretation, particularly during wartime. But in general, and particularly during peacetime, "noncombatant" means civilians and certain categories of military personnel.

The USS *Cole*, 2000

Property as the target of violence. Many terrorist attacks have targeted people and property, but other attacks have targeted only property. An example of an attack that targeted only property was the 1998 Vail ski resort attack. In that attack, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) destroyed several structures to try to prevent the expansion of a ski resort in Vail, Colorado, but did not harm any people physically. Note, though, that attacks that damage only property operate in the same way as attacks on people (and even when only property is attacked, there is always an implicit threat that future violence may not be confined to property).

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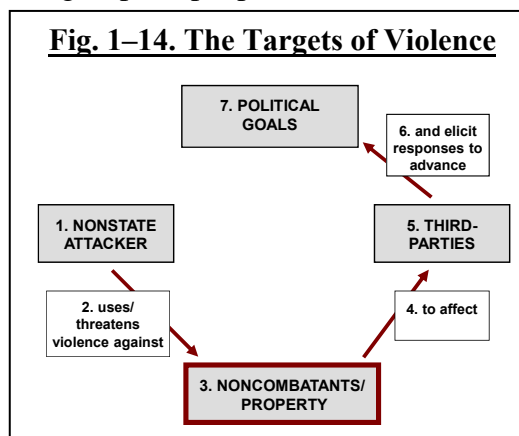
[9] The actions considered to be taking a "direct part in hostilities" during war may be subject to some interpretation. For example, during war, civilians providing command, administrative, or logistics support to military operations can be subject to attack while so engaged. However, in peacetime—during which the majority of terrorist attacks generally take place—most civilians are noncombatants. In addition, during *any* armed struggle, the intentional targeting of noncombatants is prohibited—a prohibition that terrorists frequently violate. Terrorists have claimed to be "at war" and therefore their attacks on civilians are justified, but this claim is false—terrorism is not "war." See, for example, U.S. Army, FM 27-10, *The Law of Land Warfare*, 1956, and U.S. Navy, *The Commander's Handbook on the Law of Naval Operations,* 1987.

Phase I: The Violent Attack. The first three steps of a terrorist attack—the attacker, the violence used, and the targets of violence (the victims)—form Phase I of a terrorist attack, as shown in Fig. 1–15. But a terrorist attack does not stop at the violence against the victims.


Fig. 1–15. Phase I: The Violent Attack
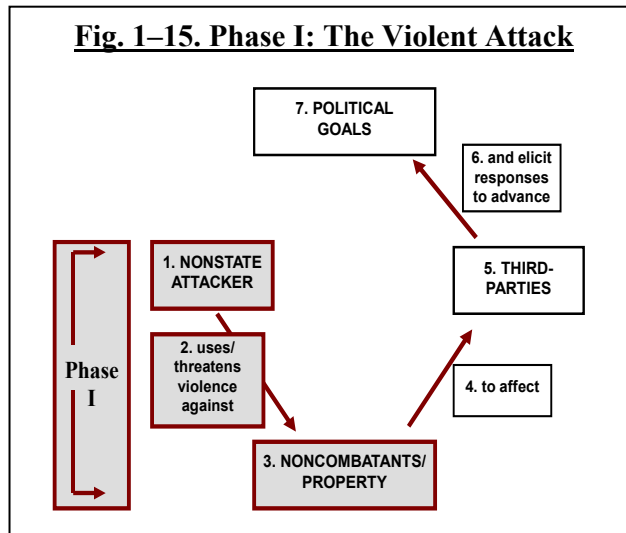
Phase II: The Involvement of Third-Parties. The next steps in a terrorist attack involve the true targets of the attack—that is, third-parties. These steps form Phase II of a terrorist attack: how third-parties are affected by the violence perpetrated on the victims, and how this violence is intended to elicit responses from third-parties. The key elements in Phase II are below:

— the effect the attack has on third-parties,
— how they respond to the attack,
— the "mechanisms" used to elicit these responses, and
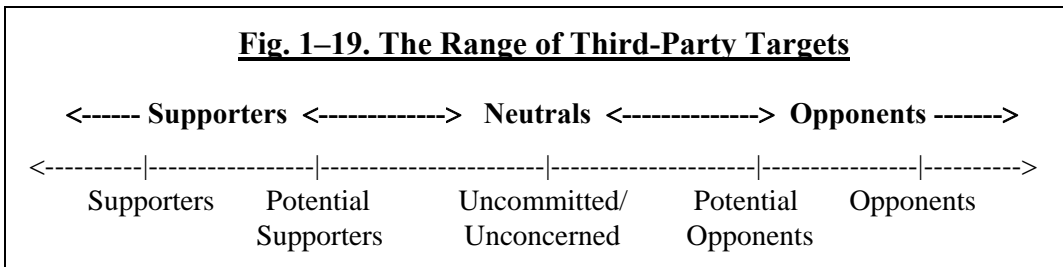— how these responses advance (or retard) progress toward the attackers' goals.

Phase II of a terrorist attack can be shown as in Fig. 1–16. Analysis of each element follows, beginning with the third-party targets, who are the key to Phase II—as can be seen in Fig. 1–17, third-parties are the true targets of a terrorist attack.


Fig. 1–16. Phase II: Third-Party Involvement

Fig. 1–17. Terrorism: Third-Parties Are the True Targets
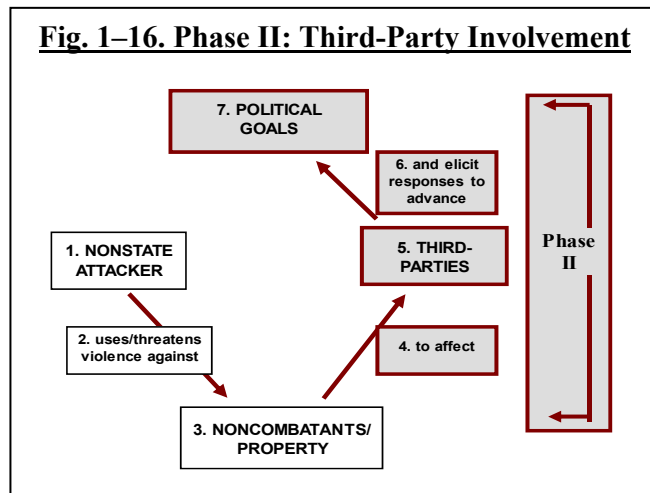
Third-Party Targets. Third-party targets are the governments, organizations, groups, and individuals that the attackers are trying to get to take certain actions in response to the use of violence against the victims. Third-party targets can include governments, organizations, members of the general public, companies, ethnic groups (or any kind of group), religious communities, and the media. Other third-parties may be rivals, diasporas, and the "constituent community" (the group that the terrorists claim to represent).

Fig. 1–18. Third-Party Targets
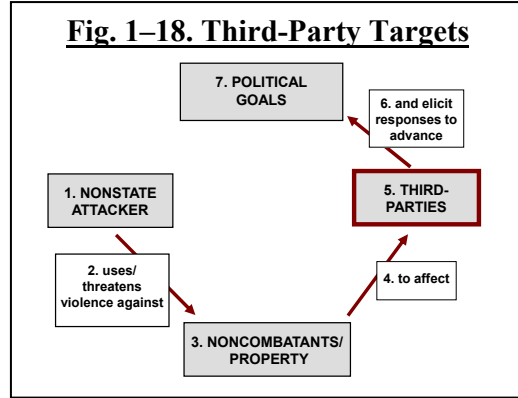
Third-party targets can be described in different ways, such as whether or not third-parties support or oppose the attackers' political goal. In this area, third-party targets can be categorized in a range including "supporters," "potential supporters," "neutrals," "potential opponents," and "opponents," as shown below:

Fig. 1–19. The Range of Third-Party Targets

<------ **Supporters** <-------------> **Neutrals** <--------------> **Opponents** ------->

<----------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------->
Supporters   Potential   Uncommitted/   Potential   Opponents
                Supporters   Unconcerned   Opponents

The media is in a special category because it is involved in a terrorist attack in two ways: the media is the primary means by which most people hear about an attack, but is also an important third-party target (Fig. 1–20). Terrorists aim at the media as a third-party target because how members of the media present news about attacks can affect how *other* third-parties view the terrorists and their goals. Therefore terrorists have made strong efforts to influence, intimidate, and even coerce members of the media. To illustrate, terrorists have tried to influence the media into presenting the terrorists' goals

Fig. 1–20. The Dual Role of the Media

sympathetically, and project how the terrorists want to be seen, such as Robin Hood battling for the oppressed. However, terrorists may also try to intimidate members of the media seen as "unfriendly."[10]
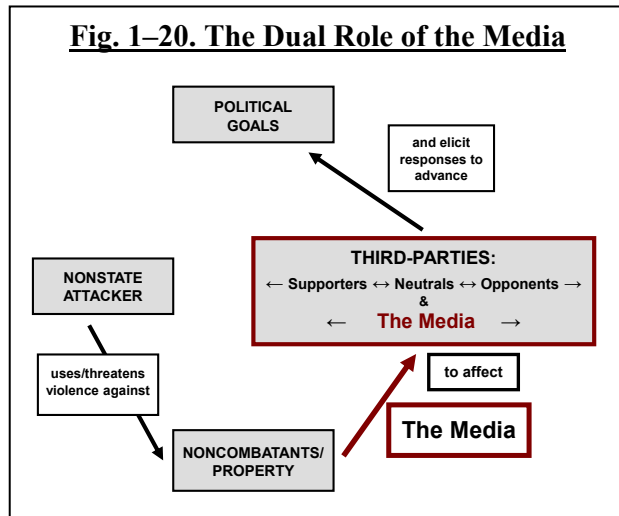
A terrorist attack is usually aimed at a primary third-party target, such as a government or a particular community, but in almost all attacks, terrorists are aiming at a number of third-party targets at the same time. For example, regardless of what group or government is the primary third-party target, terrorists almost always aim at the public, media, and supporters as well.

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[10] Terrorists have murdered many journalists.

Eliciting Responses. There are several steps in the process of trying to elicit the intended responses from third-parties. A five-step process follows.

In Step 1, third-parties *find out* about an attack, usually through the media, but also through other ways such as by being on the scene or by word of mouth. (But note that if potential third-party targets do not find out about an attack, the process of eliciting responses stops—the terrorist attack does not affect third-party targets, or elicit any responses.)

In Step 2, finding out about the attack has an effect on people and arouses *emotions* of some kind in many third-parties. These emotions can be wide-ranging and can include such emotions as shock, fear, confusion, outrage, anger, rage, vengefulness, interest, and glee. Different third-parties are likely to feel different emotions, and to varying degrees of intensity. Many third-party targets can be shocked and enraged by an attack, but other third-party targets, such as terrorist supporters, may be elated by the same attack.

In Step 3, the emotions aroused by the attack cause third-parties to feel *impulses* regarding how to respond. These impulses can vary based on how third-parties view the attack, the terrorist group, and the political goal being pursued. Gleeful supporters may feel the impulse to go out on the streets and fire weapons in the air to show support for the terrorists, their cause, or both. Enraged opponents may also feel the impulse to go out on the streets and fire weapons—but at members of the community they think the terrorists belong to.

Fig. 1–21. News & the Effect on 3rd-Parties

7. POLITICAL GOALS

6. and elicit responses to advance

1. NONSTATE ATTACKER

5. THIRD-PARTIES

2. uses/ threatens violence against

Media

4. News affects

3. NONCOMBATANTS/ PROPERTY

Fig. 1–22. Elicit Responses

7. POLITICAL GOALS

6. and elicit responses to advance

1. NONSTATE ATTACKER

5. THIRD-PARTIES

2. uses/ threatens violence against

4. to affect

3. NONCOMBATANTS/ PROPERTY

In Step 4, third-parties *decide* how they will respond to the attack—what they will actually do (if anything). Individuals, groups, organizations, and governments may make these decisions hastily and emotionally, or after careful deliberation. (Terrorists are often *trying* to elicit hasty and emotional responses.)

In Step 5, third-parties actually *do take action* (or no action at all as their response). This is a crucial step in a terrorist attack. People cannot always control how they *feel* after an attack, or their *impulses* regarding how to respond, but they *can* control what they *do*. Some responses fight terrorism effectively, but other responses strengthen terrorists and move them closer to achieving their goals—and these are the responses that terrorists are trying to elicit.

Note that terrorists cannot force responses. Terrorists can only set up conditions intended to elicit desired responses—to try to set the desired train of events in motion, and then manipulate third-party responses toward a political goal.
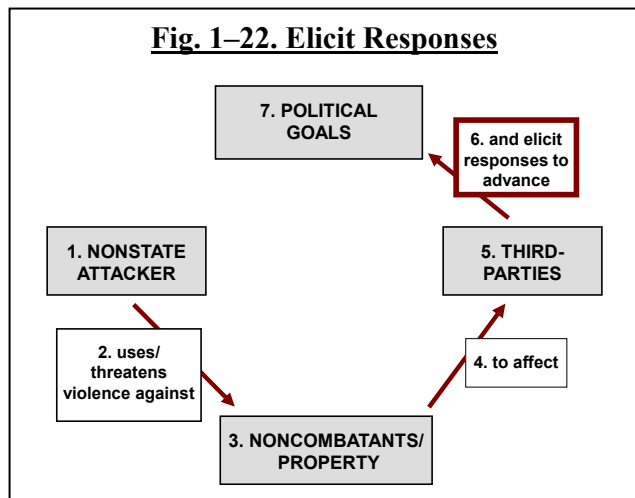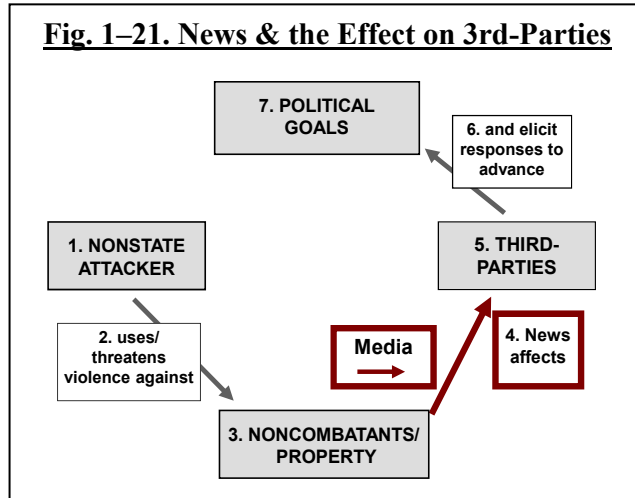
"Mechanisms" to elicit responses. To try to elicit the desired responses from different third-party targets, terrorists use a number of "mechanisms," such as to *coerce, intimidate*, *provoke*, *inspire*, *stimulate*, and *influence* third-parties. Some mechanisms involve pressure, such as attempts to coerce and intimidate third-parties, whereas other mechanisms are intended to elicit more voluntary responses, such as actions that are inspired by attacks. For example, through attacks, terrorists may be trying to elicit the following emotions and responses from third-parties:

— *Inspire* enthusiasm in supporters so that they will increase their donations and volunteer to join the group;

— *Stimulate* interest in the general public so that people will try to find out more about the group's goals, look sympathetically on these goals, and then translate that sympathy into political support;

— *Influence* the media to focus on the terrorists' goals rather than on the atrocities perpetrated on the victims;

— *Coerce* a government into granting concessions; and

Fig. 1–23. Third-Party Targets and Responses

— *Provoke* rage in a particular community so that members will take actions that drag that community closer to the terrorists' moral level.
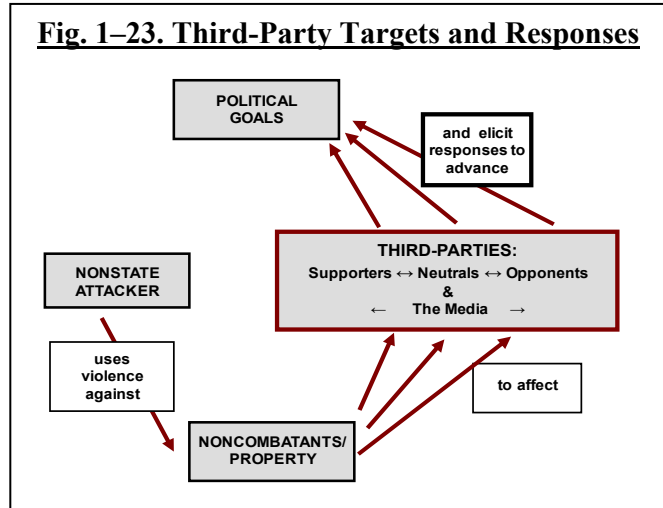
These kinds of responses can bring terrorists closer to their goals through such means as increasing their political support, strengthening them with resources, and weakening their opponents. Terrorists intend for the entire range of their third-party targets to respond with actions that advance the group's goals, but any "gain" helps them, as can be seen in Fig. 1–24.

Fig. 1–24. Selected Emotions and Responses That Terrorists Seek to Elicit
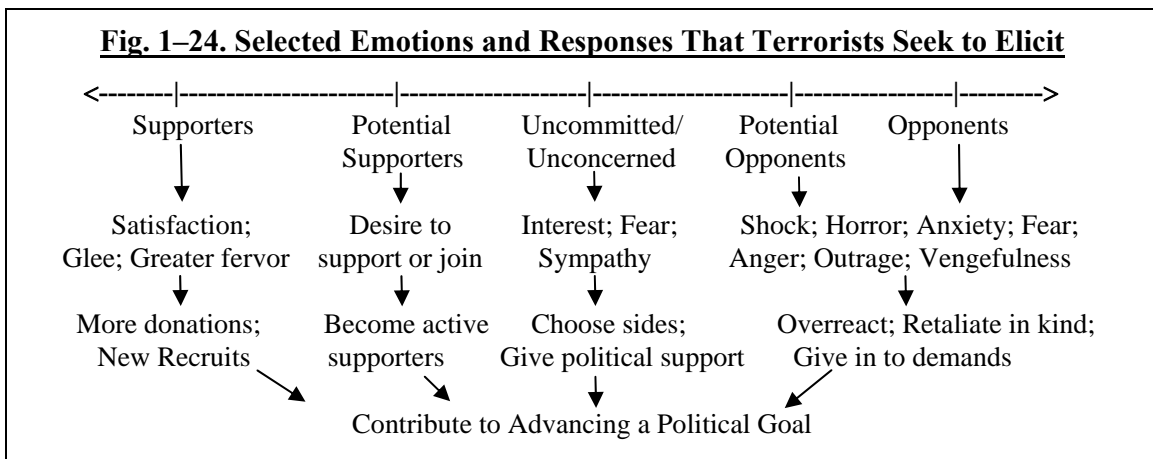
Terrorists also try to advance their goals by manipulating third-party responses, and the interplay among these responses, and thus mobilize and channel third-party actions. Terrorists intend for the combined and cumulative effect of third-party responses to advance a political goal.

A Political Goal. To be a terrorist attack, an incident must have a political goal. "Political" can be described as "concerned with government, the State, or politics," and terrorism has been used in the pursuit of many political goals. Some goals have been national liberation, replacing a government, repressing a specific group, and changing particular policies within a government (often single issues such as the environment).

The scope of these goals has varied widely. Some groups have sought goals as large as completely changing the political systems of many countries. Marxist groups in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s used terrorist attacks to try to change the political systems in the United States, Western Europe, and elsewhere to a communist model. In the 1990s and into the 21st century, the terrorist group al Qaeda sought to replace several governments with an Islamic caliphate.

Fig. 1–25. Political Goals

Other groups have used terrorist attacks to try to change the political system in one country. Some groups in the Middle East and Africa used terrorist attacks to try to change the political systems in their countries to their interpretation of an Islamic model. (Note that groups may state their goals in religious terms, but their goal is political: to replace a regime with their own preferred form of government.)

Some groups have used terrorist attacks to try to change specific policies. Terrorist attacks on behalf of the environment and animal rights are examples. Groups pursuing these goals did not seek to overthrow a government, but only for certain policies to be changed.

Some terrorist attacks have been intended to *prevent* political change. Many terrorist attacks against the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s were intended to preserve the existing political system—one goal was to intimidate African-Americans so that they would stop trying to get discriminatory policies and laws changed.

Groups may or may not think that they will *achieve* their goals through the use of terrorism, but they *do* think that that its use will *advance* those goals. In the 1970s and 1980s, Puerto Rican terrorists did not believe that their bombing campaigns in the United States would result in Puerto Rican independence, but rather that the attacks would draw attention to their cause.[11]

A group that uses terrorism has an overall political goal or cause, and terrorist attacks have specific objectives intended to contribute to that goal. For example, a particular attack may be intended to obtain the release of jailed terrorists, halt a peace process, or provoke repressive measures that will alienate a particular part of the population. The objectives being pursued in each specific terrorist attack need to be seen in the context of how each attack relates to the group's overall goals.

Summary. This analysis follows the steps of the terrorist attack, and addressed many aspects of terrorism. Note that there have been a number of disagreements about terrorism; however, regardless of any disagreements about particular aspects, the basic strategy that terrorism follows does not change.

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[11] FBI, *Terrorism in the United States 1999*, 19.

III. Incident Analysis.

A third way to comprehend terrorism is to look at specific incidents and evaluate whether or not they are acts of terrorism. To be a terrorist attack, an act must meet certain criteria. Some criteria are mandatory; others have more flexibility.[12] Table 1–1 lists the required conditions for an incident to be an act of terrorism, with the conditions restated as questions.

Table 1–1. Required Conditions for an Incident to Be a Terrorist Attack	
Required Conditions:	**Required Conditions as Questions:**
1. The attack was done by a *nonstate actor*—that is, a private individual or group, or a clandestine state agent—not a person or group officially acting for a government.	1. Was the attack done by a *nonstate actor*?
2. The attack aimed or threatened physical *violence* at *noncombatant targets*—that is, civilians (in general), military personnel in noncombatant status, or property.	2. Was the *violence* aimed at physically harming or threatening *noncombatant targets*?
3. The attack was intended to *elicit responses* from *third-party targets*—that is, people, governments, organizations, and groups other than the victims/property attacked.	3. Was the attack intended to *elicit responses* from *third-party targets*?
4. The attack had a *political* purpose—that is, the attack was intended to advance a political goal.	4. Did the attack have a *political* purpose?

From the required conditions for an incident to be a terrorist attack, and the conditions restated as questions, a table can be developed to aid in evaluating incidents and determine if they are acts of terrorism. The answer to each required condition must be "Yes" for the incident to be a terrorist attack.

Required Conditions to Be a Terrorist Attack	Incident
1. Was the attack done by a *nonstate actor*?	
2. Was the *violence* aimed at physically harming or threatening *noncombatant targets*?	
3. Was the attack intended to *elicit responses* from *third-party targets*?	
4. Did the attack have a *political* purpose?	
Was the incident a terrorist attack? (Were all required conditions met?)	

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[12] See CISSM working paper, *Terrorism Against Democracy*, 2015, Appendix B, for a detailed analysis of the characteristics of terrorism, and the required conditions for an incident to be a terrorist attack.

The 9/11 Attacks, September 11, 2001. **What happened?** The FBI described the incident as follows: *"On the morning of September 11, 2001, four U.S. commercial airliners were hijacked by four coordinated teams of terrorists. The 19 hijackers who carried out the operation were affiliated with Al-Qaeda, a worldwide terrorist network that had previously attacked U.S. military and diplomatic targets. The hijackers used knives, boxcutters, and possibly pepper spray to attack passengers and flight crews and to commandeer the aircraft. After taking control of the aircraft, the hijackers flew toward preselected targets on the U.S. East Coast. Three of the commandeered aircraft reached their destinations, destroying the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and badly damaging the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The fourth aircraft crashed into a remote field in Stony Creek Township, Pennsylvania, as passengers attempted to regain control of the airplane. All of the passengers on each of the aircraft were killed in the attack, as were more than 2,500 people in the twin towers and the Pentagon. In total, 2,783 people died in the September 11 attack."*[13]

World Trade Center, 2001

Was this incident a terrorist attack? Yes: all of the required conditions to be a terrorist attack were met.

1. The attackers were members of al Qaeda, a *nonstate* group.

2. The attackers used *violence* (hijacking), and the targets of violence were *noncombatants* and *property*. The people injured and killed in the World Trade Center were noncombatants (civilians), as were the passengers on all four planes. The military personnel injured and killed in the Pentagon were noncombatants at the time of the

Required Conditions to Be a Terrorist Attack	9/11 Attacks, 2001
1. Was the attack done by a *nonstate actor*?	Yes
2. Was the *violence* aimed at physically harming or threatening *noncombatant targets*?	Yes
3. Was the attack intended to *elicit responses* from *third-party targets*?	Yes
4. Did the attack have a *political* purpose?	Yes
Was the incident a terrorist attack? (Were all required conditions met?)	**Yes**

attacks—they were unarmed, and it was peacetime. The attacks destroyed a great deal of property.

The attacks involved the *threat of violence*: though the threat of future attacks was not openly stated after the attack, the threat was implicit, and clearly perceived (the US government, for example, instituted extensive protective measures, including the mobilization of military forces).

3. The attack was aimed at a wide range of *third-party targets,* and was intended to elicit responses from many groups, governments, organizations, communities, and individuals. Osama bin Laden, the head of Al Qaeda, later said that the responses to the 9/11 attacks had "exceeded all expectations."[14]

4. The attack had a *political* purpose. The attack was intended to advance Al Qaeda's political goals, such as the expulsion of foreign influences from Muslim countries, and the creation of an Islamic caliphate.

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[13] FBI, *Terrorism 2000/2001*, 14–15. (Note that the figure of 2,783 people who died in the September 11 attacks does not include the 19 hijackers who also died in the attack.)

[14] Osama bin Laden, "Full Transcript of bin Ladin's Speech," Oct. 30, 2004, aljazeera.net (July 4, 2005).

Vail Ski Resort Attack, 1998. **What happened?** *In October 1998, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), a nonstate actor, used arson to destroy a number of buildings and ski structures to try to stop the expansion of a ski resort in Vail, Colorado. A court case to stop the expansion had been lost and construction was scheduled to begin. The attack caused an estimated $12 million in damage, but no people were physically harmed. In an email sent to local universities, newspapers, and radio stations, ELF warned skiers to choose other destinations until the resort stopped its expansion efforts, and threatened further action: "This action is just a warning. We will be back if this greedy corporation continues to trespass into wild and unroaded areas."*


Vail Ski Resort Attack, 1998

Was this incident a terrorist attack? Yes: all of the required conditions were met.

1. The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) was a *nonstate* group.

2. ELF used *violence* (arson), and *threatened further violence*.

3. ELF was seeking to affect *third-parties* and *elicit responses* from them. Vail Resorts, the company planning the expansion, was a primary third-party target, but other third-party targets included skiers, the public, ski resort companies in general, environmental supporters, and local townspeople. The perpetrators desired to elicit different responses from different third-party targets, such as to intimidate companies into refraining from building more ski resorts; frighten potential investors into

Required Conditions to Be a Terrorist Attack	Vail Ski Resort Attack, 1998
1. Was the attack done by a *nonstate actor*?	Yes
2. Was the *violence* aimed at physically harming or threatening *noncombatant targets*?	Yes
3. Was the attack intended to *elicit responses* from *third-party targets*?	Yes
4. Did the attack have a *political* purpose?	Yes
Was the incident a terrorist attack? (Were all required conditions met?)	**Yes**

withholding investment funds; galvanize supporters and potential supporters into contributing funds; and polarize the local community by increasing dissension between those townspeople who opposed expansion, and those who supported it.

4. The goal was *political*. The group's overall cause was the environment, and the specific goal was to stop the resort expansion (and thereby protect the lynx habitat in Colorado).

Mugging in a Dark Alley (common crime—not a form of political violence). **Is a mugging a terrorist attack? No: an "ordinary" mugging does not meet all of the required conditions to be a terrorist attack.** In a common crime mugging, the attacker is a *nonstate* actor, and uses/threatens *violence*, but there is no victim-target differentiation, and no political goal—the goal is monetary gain.

Fig. 1–26. Mugging (Common Crime)
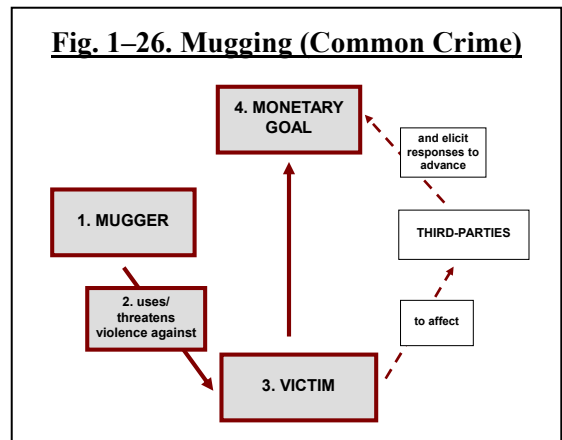
**Military Attack: The Battle of Gettysburg, 1863.** **The military attacks in the Battle of Gettysburg were not acts of terrorism.** The attackers were _state actors_ (soldiers) who used _military force_ against other _armed combatants_, and not against noncombatants (military property such as artillery pieces were also targeted).

There was no victim-target differentiation—the primary intent of the military force was not to elicit responses from third-parties. The immediate objectives of the use of force were to seize and defend territory (the terrain around the town of Gettysburg), and to render the opposing forces incapable of physically seizing, occupying, or defending territory.

The military force was used to serve a _political_ goal. Both sides used military force in pursuit of their goals, which were to change, or preserve, a political system.

Fig. 1–27. The Battle of Gettysburg

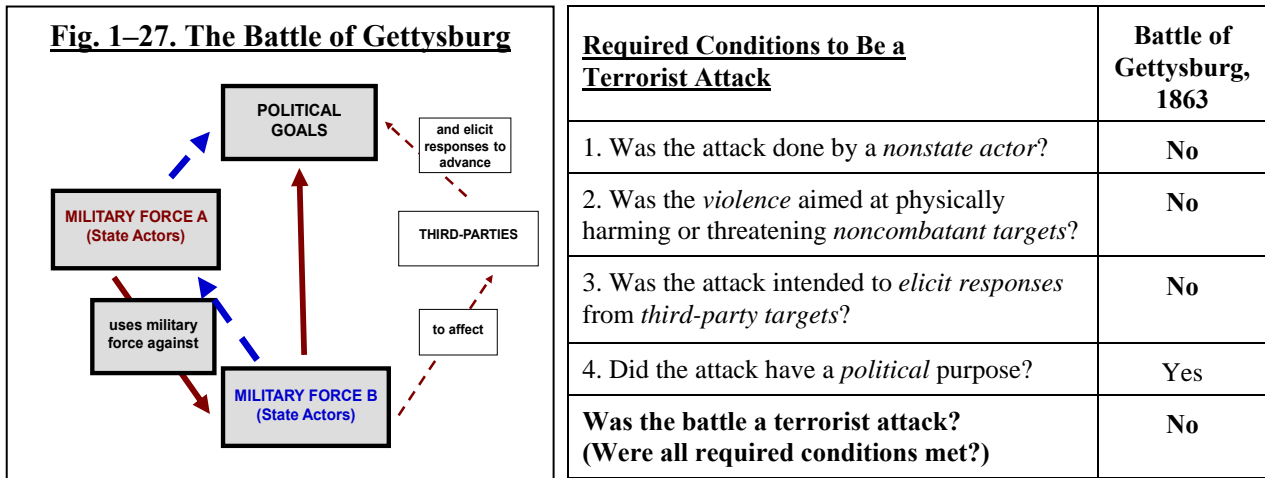| Required Conditions to Be a Terrorist Attack	Battle of Gettysburg, 1863
1. Was the attack done by a _nonstate actor_?	No
2. Was the _violence_ aimed at physically harming or threatening _noncombatant targets_?	No
3. Was the attack intended to _elicit responses_ from _third-party targets_?	No
4. Did the attack have a _political_ purpose?	Yes
Was the battle a terrorist attack? (Were all required conditions met?)	**No**

Table 1–2 compares the 9/11 attacks, the 1998 Vail ski resort attack, the act of "mugging" (to show the difference between terrorism and common crime), and the Battle of Gettysburg. Of the four examples, the 9/11 attacks and the Vail ski resort attack were acts of terrorism.

Table 1–2. Comparison of Incidents				
Required Conditions to Be a Terrorist Attack ↓	**9/11 Attacks, 2001**	**Vail Ski Resort Attack, 1998**	**Mugging (Common Crime)**	**Battle of Gettysburg, 1863**
1. Was the attack done by a _nonstate actor_?	Yes	Yes	Yes	**No**
2. Was the violence aimed at physically harming or threatening _noncombatant targets_?	Yes	Yes	Yes	**No**
3. Was the attack intended to _elicit responses_ from _third-party targets_?	Yes	Yes	**No**	**No**
4. Did the attack have a _political_ purpose?	Yes	Yes	**No**	Yes
Was the incident a terrorist attack? (Were all required conditions met?)	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**	**No**

***

IV. Summary.

A terrorist attack is an attack in which a nonstate actor uses violence and the threat of violence against noncombatant targets for the effect on third-parties, in order to get responses that will aid the attackers' political goal. Terrorism "operates" differently from most forms of violence because of the attacker's intent to involve third-parties through victim-target differentiation. Victim-target differentiation makes terrorism more complex than most other forms of political violence, more difficult to comprehend, and harder to counter. Terrorism poses particular dangers because third-party responses can cause more damage than was done by the attack itself.

By examining the strategy of terrorism, people can comprehend terrorism and how it operates, and identify the kinds of actions that terrorists are trying to get third-party targets to take. This understanding is essential to avoid falling into terrorist traps, and is a first step toward devising and carrying out effective counterterrorism measures.

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