Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Geographic Research Questions and Agendas*

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The analysis of contemporary terrorism and related policy prescriptions both suffer from a lack of geographical understanding. This short article engages terrorist studies by outlining: (1) the importance of geohistorical context in understanding the causes of contemporary terrorism, especially the role of the United States as hegemonic power; (2) the spatiality of terrorist networks; and (3) the potentially negative efficacy of existing counterterrorist policies given the interaction of terrorist networks and state sovereignty. Finally, a call is made for comparative studies of terrorism and greater interaction between political geography and peace and conflict studies. Key Words: counterterrorism, political geography, terrorism.

The United States is far from being the primary target of terrorism across the globe (Deutch 1997; U.S. Department of State 2001). Though this article was catalyzed by attacks upon U.S. citizens within the country by non-Americans, other acts of terrorism should not be ignored (attacks in India and Afghanistan or Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, for example). However, the motivations, means, and responses to the attacks of 11 September 2001 illuminate broader trends. Hence using the attacks of September 2001 as the primary exemplifier still allows for the identification of processes and definition of research questions applicable to all contemporary terrorist activity.

Terrorism is not a simple or blind matter of hatred (Thomson 2001), but an act of politics by those who declare that no other channels of political engagement exist (Rapoport 1984; Hoffman 1998). A political-geography approach to terrorism explores the spatial manifestations of power that intertwine to cause contexts of action and reaction, and the means to commit terrorism and enact counterterrorism. A geopolitical perspective would emphasize the territorial and strategic needs of one particular country and offer theoretical frameworks or justifications for foreign policy (O'Loughlin and Heske 1991; Mamadouh 1999). Instead, what is offered here is a political-geographic perspective—involving the interaction of power politics and geographic processes—upon the causes and consequences of terrorism and counterterrorism. Note that I do not claim to define the sole and total vision of political-geographic inquiries into terrorism; there are others more qualified than me to discuss, for example, the intersections of feminism and terrorism (Dowler and Sharp 2001).

Geographers have been relatively silent on the issue of war and peace, with some notable exceptions. The last edited volumes on the topics appeared over ten years ago (Pepper and Jenkins 1985; Kliot and Waterman 1991), although there have been some useful surveys since then (O'Loughlin and van der Wusten 1993; O'Sullivan 2001). Spatial statistical analysis of war, introduced by geographers (O'Loughlin and Anselin 1992), has been adopted recently by political scientists (Ward and Gleditsch 2002). However, much of this work is based upon simple notions of space. One notable exception in the geographic literature has been Le Billon's (2001) work on resource wars, which reflects cross-disciplinary recognition of “new” or “postmodern” wars (Kaldor 1999). And there is increasing momentum in the discipline towards a re-engagement

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with inter- and subnational warfare, as witnessed by the content and growing stature of the journal *Geopolitics*. Of course, this trend has much to do with the valuable contribution of "critical geopolitics" and its ability to deconstruct the power relations within dominant discourses, including those addressing terrorism (ÓTuathail 1996).

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, geographers have begun to focus upon terrorism as a particular form of politics and conflict (Cutter, Richardson, and Wilbanks 2003). The initial contributions were designed to act as an emotional release mechanism and the first steps towards theoretically informed empirical work (Flint 2001). Savitch and Ardashev's (2001) analysis of the urban geography of terrorism shows the potential of a geographic perspective, but suffers from no critical engagement with the concept of terrorism.

In this article, I hope to offer one particular pathway into the transition towards sustained and in-depth research projects on the subject of terrorism. Of course, this agenda is partial. But I have selected the three particular themes as means to connect new studies of terrorism with the growing geographic and nongeographic literature on geopolitics and warfare. With this goal in mind, I concentrate upon global processes and structures that mediate the actions of state and nonstate terrorist and counterterrorist agencies. A full geographic perspective on terrorism requires other agendas, stemming, for example, from economic geography and cultural geography. I strongly encourage and hope for the emergence of such agendas.

I offer a discussion of some broad theoretical perspectives that provide frameworks for an informed and nonstate centric analysis of terrorism. Three main topics are addressed in this article. First, I identify the geohistorical context of the recent attacks on the United States. A political-geographic approach requires consideration of the milieu in which the United States is deemed a legitimate target of terrorist activity (Lesser 2001), and also a sense of the audience or constituency that terrorists are addressing. Second, I discuss the geographic components of terrorist organizations, theorized as Netwar (Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2001). Third, I define the geopolitical challenges facing territorial states as they engage terrorist networks. Throughout, I identify intersections between the geographic perspective and studies of terrorism. With this particular agenda for geographic research upon terrorism, I aim to investigate the role of global, or metageographic (Agnew 1999; Taylor 2000), contexts in limiting, enabling, and motivating terrorism.

Why Here, Why Now? The Geohistorical Context of September 11

The first intersection of geography and terrorism studies lies in locating terrorist groups and attacks in a geohistorical context (Wallerstein 1998). The goal of this theme is to address the causes of terrorism, often absent from definitions and explanations (see Hoffman 1998, 43), with the belief that only by addressing grievances can the long-term amelioration of terrorism be achieved.

The source of the United States's role as target (Hoffman 2001b, 4; Jenkins 2001) lies in its twentieth-century position as world leader (Modelski 1987) or hegemonic power (Wallerstein 1984). The grievances associated with the United States's contemporary global role are a precondition of terrorist activity (Crenshaw 1981). The U.S. assumed this role after World War II, following a period of global chaos during which stability under the rule of one country was largely welcomed. But that desire for world leadership was not stable and, over time, the U.S. lost its legitimacy as world leader, ultimately provoking violent challenges. Hence, the U.S. can no longer bask in its welcomed leadership of fifty or sixty years ago, but must address the contemporary challenges to its role. These challenges are manifest in both trans-state terrorist networks (Rapoport 2001) and state-sponsored terrorism (Klare 1995).

Though it may appear odd to discuss the relative decline of American hegemony at a time when U.S. military might is overwhelming, it is sage to consider that power has three "faces": economic, military, and integrative (Boulding 1990). The economic strength of the U.S. is debatable; its military might is unquestioned, but its integrative power seems to be slipping. Boulding (1990) claims that
without integrative power, the other two aspects are not sustainable. Hence, the important role of modernity as an integrative tool for the hegemonic power requires consideration with regard to the motivation for anti-U.S. terrorism and the rhetoric used to legitimize the counterterrorist response.

In addition to the United States's twentieth-century geopolitical role, the hegemonic power also defines the prime modernity—the way of life that is envied and emulated by the rest of the world (Taylor 1998). This vision of modern life also provokes reactions, including violence. For Osama bin Laden, it is not just the geopolitical presence of the U.S. in the Arabian Peninsula that warrants terrorism; this is compounded by—and interdependent with—the status of the U.S. as "infidels" (Ranstorp 1998). In other words, competing religious values are an important component of geopolitical conflicts, along with the more established "security" concerns. However, religion should not be reduced to a mere means of mobilizing people for underlying geostrategic reasons. Fundamental attachment to beliefs that are deemed to be under threat comprises an element of global geopolitics in itself (Stump 2000; Juergensmeyer 2001).

Geographies of disparities of wealth, as well as geographies of exclusion and inclusion (Guelke 1995), are manifestations of the geo-historical setting defined by prime modernity. The politics of terrorism are nurtured in contexts in which people do not perceive a voice through nonviolent channels. The erosion of public political spaces (Bauman 1999) at various scales and the related growth of a variety of subpolitics (Beck 1997) is the backdrop for violent alternatives. The increased linkages created by globalism catalyze terrorism, not just through increased contacts and the interaction of cultures and economies (Black 2001), but also by shattering established forms of governance and replacing them with increasing forms of governmentality (Hardt and Negri 2000). In other words, terrorists thrive in contexts of perceived powerlessness, manifested in the dearth of democratic political channels through to voice grievances (O'Loughlin et al. 1998; Bell and Staeheli 2001; Green 2001). The inability to create one's own identity—while, instead, being the victim of mechanisms that create "refugee problems," "extremists," "rebels," "fundamentalists," "Arabs," and so on and of their orientalist implications—is additionally disempowering. The diffusion of economic, political, and cultural globalizations (Santos 1999), the way they are resisted (Escobar 2001), and the choices that must be made to be included or excluded comprise the overarching geographic process that is creating new terrorist grievances (Talbott 2001).

Specific research questions addressing global geographies of inclusion/exclusion and homogenization/differentiation include:

- geographies of democratization, governance, and governmentality;
- geographies of the diffusion of the social practices of prime modernity and resistance to them; and
- geographies of the diffusion of hegemonic cultural practices (including identity) and resistance to them.

The second intersection of geography and terrorism studies lies in linking changes in terrorist motivations to a changing scale of analysis. The goal of this theme is to challenge the dominance of the world political map of nation-states that is the general cognitive basis for foreign policy (Oas 2002). Challenges to the prime modernity of the United States manifest themselves in the increasing activity of religious terrorism (Medd and Goldstein 1997; Hoffman 1993, 1999; Juergensmeyer 2001), as well as the state sponsorship of terrorism (Hoffman 1994, 1998). The goals of secular terrorists are more understandable, as they relate to control of the state apparatus. By comparison, religious terrorists seem more "aimless" (Pillar 2001). However, their motivations can be understood if seen as political-cultural conflicts over the global diffusion of—and resistance towards—a prime modernity. Hence, a vitally important new research agenda for geographers lies in the field of religion (Stump 2000; Kong 2001).

Geography is well suited to an analysis of religious terrorism by using the theoretical framework of mutually constructed scales, especially the local and the global. An understanding of place as a local setting for everyday life in which problems are experienced, made sense of, and acted upon is a key concept. The role of religious institutions in creating a particular sense of place will determine the worldview and agency of individuals, including
the decision to engage in or support terrorist activities. But the place-specific context is not simply local; it is a product of linkages to regional, national, and global scales. This mutual interaction is reflected in the transformation of identities into geopolitical projects, whether they are national or global in scope (Dijikink 1996). Specifically, religious identity may be linked to issues of competing modernities, with an understanding of how they are linked to a perception of the United States's presence across the globe. We should follow Black's (2001, viii) charge that Western scholars and policymakers must "get" religion, but we should take the additional step to link religion to geopolitics. Specific research areas include:

- investigation of the growth of religious fundamentalism within specific political contexts; and
- the role of religious identities in creating geopolitical visions.

The third intersection of geography and terrorism studies lies in locating scholars of terrorism within the context of the American hegemonic experience. Contextualizing terrorism (Crenshaw 1981) also requires considering the hegemonic context of U.S. scholars. Often, position within the U.S. can produce blindness to those experiencing American hegemony in other places (U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College 2001) while creating a counterproductive climate of fear (Sprinzak 1998). Blindness to the pervasiveness of American ideals (Tucker 1997) or the invasiveness of American forces abroad (Pumphrey 2000) reflects the fact that American scholars have a restricted view of the processes and impacts of American hegemony. Geographers have a special burden: to consider the manifestations of hegemony and the implications of counterterrorism from geographical settings other than the haven of the United States. Hence,

- a global research project tracking popular, religious, and government opinions of American hegemony is required.

The Geography of Netwar

The fourth intersection of geography and terrorism studies is the definition of the spatial organization of terrorist networks. Contemporary terrorism is one form of netwar, the other important one being cyberwarfare (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1997). Netwar is the use of network forms of organization, doctrine, strategy, and technology to engage in conflict (Arquilla, Ronfeldt, and Zanini 1999; Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001; Hoffman 2001a; Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2001). However, "there is still much work to be done to clarify the meaning of 'network' and come up with better, easier methods of analysis and strategists" (Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2001, 5). Geography's role is to prevent geographic simplifications that will create negative security implications when trying to counter terrorist netwar.

As much emphasis must be placed upon the nodes of the net as has been placed upon the connections and flows (O'Tuathail 2000). The nodes are located within established sovereign territories, though their permanence varies dramatically. It is from these nodes that "swarming"—the pulsing attacks structured by networks (Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2001)—emanates, and the targets tend to be important nodes, too—world cities (Savitch and Ardashev 2001; Veness 2001). Analysis of the types, interaction, and contextual setting of nodes is required. Previous researchers experienced difficulties in relating terrorist organization to geographic setting (Crenshaw 1981). A more sophisticated approach is required, one that identifies places as multifaceted sites for particular types of nodes.

The different types of nodes are a function of the different levels of the networks: organizational, narrative, doctrinal, technological, and social (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001). Further categorization is based upon the expected degree of permanence of the node and on its level of connectivity. In fact, it is hypothesized that more-connected nodes would require greater permanence. The node that is a cell of suicide bombers is connected to a limited amount of the network for security reasons and is, by definition, temporary. On the other hand, key decision makers in terrorist networks would be connected to lieutenants, and these connections would require a level of consistency to maintain efficiency. In summary, the geographic contribution in this area lies in identifying the contextual setting and connectivity of the various nodes in a terrorist network.
Talking of the relative permanence of nodes is not anachronistic, even in a postmodern world, precisely because of one feature of the territorality of the world political map: borders. Borders, as the outpost of nation-states, are key locations of control and governance in the modern world (Newman and Paasi 1998; Donnan and Wilson 1999). Hence, terrorists are wary of crossing them, and the most likely settings for control nodes are areas that allow movement with minimal state observation—frontier areas where the level of state control is weak, such as that between Afghanistan and Pakistan (House Committee on Armed Services 2001). The need is for geographies of state power investigating the dynamic spatial scope of sovereign states and their ability to either harbor or counter terrorist groups. Hence,

- research on the geographies of the connectivity of political networks, the contextual setting of nodes, and their relationship to political borders is required.

The Geopolitics of Countering Netwar

The fifth intersection of geography and terrorism studies is found in the analysis of the layering of political spaces, or the intersection of political networks and nation-states. Netwar takes place over the existing terrain of territorial nation-states (Agnew and Corbridge 1995; ÓTuathail 2000), as terrorists become more "amateur," or uncontrolled, within a context of state sponsorship (Hoffman 1994). An understanding of the coexistence of different spatialities of power, states, and networks allows for an evaluation of the efficacy—if not the dangers—of existing counterterrorist policies. For example, Pillar's (2001) timely discussion of U.S. foreign policy and terrorism makes some wise and sober recommendations, but is contradictory because of its lack of geographical understanding. Counterterrorist activities can compromise other national and diplomatic interests, especially when portrayed as a war (Eppright 1997; Bowen 2000; Pillar 2001, 219). Counterterrorism is seen "as a thing apart, not as something that bumps up against other important U.S. interests and programs" (Pillar 2001, 6). Though Pillar recommends a counterterrorist policy that complements other foreign policies, he does not discuss the geographical implications of his policy to "disrupt terrorist infrastructures worldwide" (Pillar 2001, 222). Such a policy requires varying degrees of usurpation of other people's sovereignty. Even if this is done through diplomatic channels with the agreement of other governments, it is likely to be seen as a provoking manifestation of the hegemonic power's global presence.

Security forces are still organized within the sovereign territorial jurisdictions of nation-states. To counter nets, nation-states must enter sovereign realms other than their own. As has been seen in Afghanistan, the United States will endeavor to undertake these military acts with minimal risk to U.S. military personnel by using their air superiority, on the one hand, and surrogate forces, on the other (Byman 2001). But let us not forget the geographic nature of the target—a network that initiates swarms of attacks. To counter such a threat, the United States must be willing and able to project its force quickly into any sovereign territory. This geopolitical issue is still being negotiated by the United States.

While this geographic strategy may have pressing short-term security goals in mind, the long-term implications are less than rosy, especially when targeting leaders is seen as being an ineffectual antinetwork strategy (Lesser 1999; see Sprinzak 2001 for a different view). First, such a technique requires being cavalier with other peoples' sovereignty. Second, it requires a blanket use of force. Third, it is based upon a strategy of selectivity of allies and "concerns" that will be transparently hypocritical to many outside of the United States. In combination, these things ensure that such a strategy is most likely to create further resentment of the United States and, probably, violent reaction.

The geopolitics of the Bush doctrine—intervention in sovereign states is acceptable if they are deemed to be supporters of terrorist activities—has potentially catastrophic consequences. It has set a precedent that can be followed by any country with the ability and desire, increasing the possibility of warfare. The definitions of "freedom fighter" and "terrorist" are not controlled totally by Washington, which is why nuclear powers are staring at each other over Kashmiri territory that some argue is waiting to be "freed." Is it cynical to expect that in Washington, the "freedom fighter"
versus “terrorist” distinction will be made depending upon the perceived threat to United States citizens? Again, hypocrisy coupled with military power will be perceived with disdain outside the borders of the U.S.

To restate, the geographic conundrum that must be faced is that networks are based on a territorially of nodes, a territoriality intersecting established sovereign states. Countering networks by force requires the desire and ability to enter sovereign spaces quickly and militarily. Or, from a different perspective, invasion is the other side of “global reach,” and the speed of the mission precludes multilateralism, debate, and participation. Bluntly, countering terrorism is a manifestation of the force and power to which terrorists and their supporters are reacting in the first place. More counterterrorist missions across more parts of the globe are likely to produce more terrorists and sympathizers.

The intersection of inter-state geopolitics and network provokes the following needs:

- a geopolitical understanding of hegemonic decline and the instabilities it creates; and
- a geographical understanding of the intersection of state sovereignty and networks of antistate politics.

**Comparative Analyses of Terrorism**

Though this article has primarily focused on the analysis of anti–United States terrorism, other incidents of terrorism should not be ignored. In fact, comparative analysis of terrorism in different geographic settings would be useful in isolating the causes, means, and outcomes of terrorism. Such understanding has been gained from historical comparisons (Crenshaw 1981; Laqueur 1987); the same insight can be offered by focus on spatiality. The location of conflicts in particular regions of the world can be used to explain the presence of terrorism, whether it be the legacies of colonial spaces, such as in Ireland, or different peoples demanding control over disputed territory, such as in Palestine/Israel. In this way, research can compare how different geopolitical contexts produce a variation in responses.

The examples of Ireland and Palestine are also noteworthy for their illustration of how acts of terrorism create spaces of resistance (Pile 1997). Pile uses the example of Algerian terrorism or resistance to show how circumscribed spaces of power are challenged by acts of terrorism. An additional geographic issue resides in the process by which terrorist organizations change their geographic tactics to become “circumscribed” themselves. For example (and to use Pile’s 1997 terminology), Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization has switched from being an organization insinuating itself into circumscribed spaces of power into being an “authority” the legitimacy of which is based upon its ability to police national spaces of power. A similar process is challenging Gerry Adams and the Irish Republican Army.

Another fruitful topic of comparative analysis is the issue of state-sponsored terrorism. Hoffman’s (1998) history of terrorism is replete with examples of states supporting and committing acts of terrorism. But, his subsequent definition elides the role of states. Again, we may return to the issue of how scholars in the U.S. are likely to have a very different perception of terrorism than those in other parts of the world. State-sponsored terrorism implies an inter-state geopolitics that results in some states creating or aiding trans-state networks of terrorists. The geographies of state sovereignty and trans-state networks intertwine in a geo-historical context of inter-state competition. Both relatively strong states (such as the U.S.) and weak ones (such as Syria) employ this tactic at different times. Study of these intersecting geographies would be an important contribution to the literature on “new” wars (Kaldor 1999).

**The Big Picture**

Geographers need a closer engagement with issues of war and peace, and with conflict studies in general. The vitality of our discipline is sustained by engaging relevant topics and other disciplines: the key, real world issue is war and peace, and peace studies is the relevant body of literature (Galtung 1996; Lederach 2001; Wallensteen 2001, 2002). Knowledge of regional geographies, territoriality and borders, and geographic scale are the comparative advantages that we have with regard to further understanding the causes of war and the mechanisms of creating and sustaining peace. No other discipline is better suited to synthesize the multiple causes of conflict, understand and give voice to place-based perceptions that both lead to confrontation and define the
path towards peace, and show how peace at the local scale and global structures are linked. It is the responsibility of political geographers to “give voice to a peace perspective [that] can shape the spectrum of political options” (Wallensteen 2001, 22). Political geographers have the responsibility to offer “geographical imaginations” (Gregory 1994) that investigate not only the specificities of place that can provoke terrorism, but also the vertical and horizontal linkages that implicate us all in the causes and consequences of terrorism. Differential understandings of terrorism between policymakers and academics (Hoffman 2001a) can be ameliorated by noting how geography is implicated in the causes, manifestations, and responses to terrorism, noting that excluding geography produces counterproductive counterterrorism.

Note

1 See Hoffman (1998) for the problems with such definitions.

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