
The Radical Milieu: The Under-Investigated Relationship between Terrorists and Sympathetic Communities

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One of the most under-investigated topics in terrorism studies is what could be termed the “radical milieu”. By this term I am referring to the segment of a population which sympathizes with terrorists and supports them morally and logistically. Depending on the type of terrorism, the radical milieu can be a religious or ethnic community (ETA, IRA, Hizbollah), a subculture as outcome of a protest movement (Italy’s Brigade Rosse, West Germany’s RAF, or the Montoneros of Argentina, etc.), or a social network (transnational Islamic terrorism). What distinguishes the milieu from simple sympathizers is that within the former, there exists a form of social structure responsible for the observed in-group cohesion. It is not merely a sum of individuals holding similar political/cultural attitudes.

Mao taught that a guerrilla war can only be successful if waged by a guerillero moving in the population as a “fish in water”. Many scholars, however, seem to believe that terrorism is not dependent on this kind of support. But this is only half true. In reality, terrorists, like guerrillas, can only subsist in the long run if they are backed by a sympathetic population. Without this base of support and recruitment they will, over the course of time, become weak and insignificant—even though they may not disappear at once. The IRA and ETA stand as examples of how important a radical community can be to a terrorist movement. At the climax of their popularity, each was endorsed by a considerable percentage of the northern Irish Republicans and the Spanish Basques, respectively. Only when this support dwindled did peace talks become possible.

Why do we know so little about the “radical milieu”? First, it should be noted that our knowledge about contemporary terrorists in general was limited for some time as well. This has changed only in the last years because of, among other studies,

the excellent monographs of Marc Sageman. Complimenting these studies are court reports and a growing body of primary documents collected by security agencies regarding real or suspected terrorists. All of these new resources have proven useful for analyzing of the social background of terrorists as well as the processes of radicalization. Unfortunately, no comparable resources have yet been made available for researchers to obtain information about people belonging to the radical milieu. Since the activities of the radical milieu remain legal they are not registered by state agencies or charged with the prosecution of terrorism. At the same time, their radical attitudes make them distrust any person approaching them for information. The more the state authorities extend their notion of “suspicious groups” or “preparing ground for terrorist acts” the more difficult it becomes for an external observer to have access to these communities.

Promises of Future Research

Nevertheless, this kind of research could help answer questions about the nature of the relationship between violent groups and the radical milieu that stand behind them. Evidently there is some bond of sympathy and solidarity between them, but the nature and meaning that bond remains outside the scope of current scholarship. For example, what mutual expectations underpin this solidarity? Further, what type of support is provided by radical milieu communities? Does the radical community hide persecuted members of the terrorist band or perhaps even help them escape to a foreign country? Do members of the radical milieu accept material sacrifices? And finally, are young males of this milieu eventually ready to enter into the violent organization, substituting the personnel losses suffered from repression or other forms of violent death? In turn, what can the terrorists offer to their constituent populations? Does this solidarity have its limits in terms of time and scope, under which conditions tensions may rise between both parties? If so, how can their alliance be broken up?

The answer to these questions depends largely upon the type of terrorist movement we are confronted with. In cases which the terrorists constitute the spearhead of a movement and defend certain territorial claims (for example Hamas and Hezbollah) the bond between the radicalized segment of the respective population and its armed avant-garde is usually very strong. If the radical subculture is the offspring of some ideological protest and reform movement (be it religious as in the case of the Egyptian Islamic Group or Marxist as that of the Red Brigades) the solidarity pact usually is much looser. Even radicals, who in the beginning of the protest-demonstrations were firmly committed to bringing about some change, may come to a point where, under the stress of the high “costs”, imposed by state repression or public repudiation, decide to abandon

the movement. Still more open is the question of how close transnational radical religious networks and their followers are linked together or what kind of radical milieu is supporting the “home-grown” terrorists of western diasporas? Pursuant to this, can the Internet and its chat forums offer a substitute to face-to-face contacts as a base of mutual support?

A central issue in the relationship between the radical milieu (community, subculture, and network) and the terrorist group is the question of who controls whom. Generally it is assumed that the armed avant-garde has a hegemonic position toward the radical circles supporting it, but this is a too simple vision. Even if the terrorists can force their followers by violent means to respect their wishes and orders, there remain many ways for the supporters to demonstrate that they are no longer willing to accept the burden of the armed struggle. Their mere passive resistance may suffice to oblige the terrorists to make substantial concessions. One of the main reasons to study radical milieus is that in so doing new ways might be found to help control and moderate terrorist organizations, whether directly or indirectly.

Conclusion: a Model for Analysis

A current model to explain the development of terrorism consists of three main variables: the terrorist organization, state agencies, and society. The idea of focusing on society as a whole is that theoretically everybody could be tempted to sympathize with the terrorists or join them. But this is a mistake. In fact, in all cases we know only a limited part of the population is open to the terrorists’ goals and methods, with the vast majority rejecting both. Generally, the terrorists are well aware of this. The bulk of their messages and acts neglect the broad population and only address the small minority whose support is absolutely indispensable for them. For this very reason, I would propose that “society” in the triangular model [1] should be replaced by “the radical segment of society” as the third relevant variable to explain terrorist behaviour.

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NOTES:

[1] Of course, there can be and often is fluctuation between the general population and the radical milieu, but this depends on the type of radical milieu. As a point of illustration, the frontier between the radical segment of ethnic or religious minorities and the more moderate parts of these minorities or the general population is usually quite rigid while protest movements tend to have a much more fluid following.