## Democracy and Terrorism

**by James M. Lutz and Brenda J. Lutz**

*Abstract*

*It has been suggested that democratic political systems provide greater opportunities for terrorist groups and create permissive environments in which terrorist networks can operate more easily. While the argument has a solid logical grounding that has been widely accepted, empirical tests of the connection between democracy and terrorism have been few and not very comprehensive in scope. The analysis below will consider the relationship between the degree of openness (democracy) and international terrorist activity from 1972 to 1995 in approximately 100 countries. The results should shed light on whether democratic political systems actually contribute to the activities of terrorist groups.*

### Terrorism and Democratic Systems

Although there is no commonly accepted definition of terrorism, there has been widespread agreement on many of its key characteristics. Terrorism consists of the use of violence or the threat of violence by an organized group to attain political objectives. The victims of terrorism are important as a means for influencing a wider target audience. The victims are normally civilians because attacks on them increase the impact of the violence on the target audiences. Terrorism is also a weapon of the weak. Groups that are able to obtain their desired political objectives by other means such as victory in an election, intra-elite maneuverings, military coups, bribery, rebellion, or civil war, are much less likely to rely on terrorism as the primary means of trying to achieve their goals. The last characteristic is that terrorism involves non-governmental actors on at least one side. Either the targets, or the terrorists, and sometimes both are non-governmental actors. [1]

One indirect indication of democratic vulnerability to terrorism is the general absence of non-state terrorism in totalitarian societies. These most repressive systems have been relatively free of such terrorist activity. [2] Totalitarian governments have advantages in dealing with potential terrorist groups. They do not have to worry about collecting evidence for a trial or presenting credible or compelling evidence. They can also use more extreme methods of interrogation or even threaten family members as a means of gaining leverage with suspects. [3]

Totalitarian regimes have also been willing to track down dissidents abroad in order to eliminate them. The security services in Nazi Germany proved to be quite capable of dealing with opponents by using such techniques. The KGB in the Soviet Union was also notoriously effective in dealing with dissidents or presumed dissidents, and outbreaks of terrorism were noticeably absent in the Soviet Union before its collapse. Terrorist actions were also few in numbers in Saddam Hussein's Iraq under the Ba'ath regime. By contrast, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq have been accompanied by noticeable

increases in terrorist activity. However, the absence of terrorism in the totalitarian societies does not mean that democracies are uniquely vulnerable. Weaker states of all types have provided opportunities for terrorism, including weaker authoritarian states. [4]

It has also been suggested that political systems in transition may be more vulnerable. [5] When political systems are in transition, police and security forces are often in disarray and control mechanisms are weaker. The states formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the current Iraqi government qualify as weaker states compared to their predecessors and also as political systems currently in transition or at least in transition in the recent past. Societies in transition from a non-democratic regime to a democratic government may be particularly vulnerable since the grip of the old security forces on society is diminished while the new freedoms provide opportunities for violent dissidents. [6]

Democratic regimes, by contrast, are assumed to provide more tempting locations for terrorist activities than totalitarian states. Democracies are by definition more open politically, and there are protections that come with respect for civil liberties. Furthermore, restrictions on surveillance and investigations by the security forces and police agencies are in force. Weaker intelligence gathering capabilities mean that the ability to pre-empt terrorist groups before they strike is more limited. [7] Checkpoints, where identity papers need to be presented, are unusual and infrequent. Moreover, democracies also have relatively weaker control of their borders, thereby providing opportunities for in- and ex-filtration. [8]

Recent debates about immigration policies in the United States and Western Europe reflect some of the concerns that can exist with more open borders (notwithstanding recent practices in the US for dealing with enemy combatants). Moreover, even when terrorists are arrested, there are usually limits to the length of detention and clear limits on the mechanisms that can be used in the interrogation of suspects. In democracies, suspects are generally given fair trials and have the opportunity of gaining an acquittal if the evidence is insufficient or poorly presented. [9]

In general, judicial proceedings will be fair, although there are occasions in which there can be miscarriages of justice and rushes to judgment. [10] Such rushes to judgment may be more likely with terrorism suspects when compared to those tried for ordinary crimes. Democracies also provide opportunities for terrorist groups since the presence of a free press provides opportunities for greater publicity that permits groups to reach their target audiences more easily. [11] The presence of a free press also provides opportunities for terrorist groups during trials since it can provide another platform for the terrorist organization to publicize its views to the public. More disturbing for the authorities but useful to terrorist groups is the fact that the media have been quite important in carrying messages about terrorism that can encourage more political violence. [12]

There have been some indications that terrorism has been more likely in democratic societies. In his study, Engene concluded that political openness facilitated terrorism in Western Europe.[13]

Democracy made West Germany more vulnerable to outbreaks of terrorist incidents that occurred in that country.[14] It is perhaps most telling, however, that the violence by the Basque nationalists increased when a democratic system was created even though it was initially present under an authoritarian regime and that the violence continued into the twenty-first century after more than two decades of democracy. Sandler says that when analyses took into account the intensity of terrorist incidents, democracies appeared to suffer more from such political violence. [15]

Pape in his study of suicide terrorism has suggested that this particular form of violence has been virtually restricted to democratic states.  While suicide attacks have occurred in less open political systems such as Pakistan and Lebanon (when the country was in disarray), these kinds of attacks do appear to have been more prevalent in democracies. [16]

Other empirical studies have provided mixed results.  Eyerman found that democracies were less likely to experience terrorist acts than non-democracies between 1968 and 1986 unless they were new democracies. Such new democracies appeared to be especially vulnerable among all the states surveyed. [17]  Li assessed the effects of democracy on terrorism from 1975 to 1997 and concluded that it varied according to the characteristics of the democratic system. Some systems appeared to be more vulnerable as compared to others. [18]

Democratic states may be the scenes of terrorism for reasons unrelated to their domestic politics. Because of weaker security forces, concerns for civil liberties, and a free press, these countries may be chosen by dissidents for attacks against their home governments. [19] Security precautions may be too great in their homeland, while democratic states may be more vulnerable and at the same time offer better opportunities to gain greater publicity for terrorist attacks. Expatriate dissidents can target diplomatic personnel, trade centers, corporations or businesses, or even tourists from their home countries. Thus, there may be "transient attacks" against foreigners in democracies that are meant for audiences in the countries of origins rather than the host country. [20]

International attacks in third countries, in fact, may be quite frequent.  In the case of the US, for many years there were few attacks on the American soil. Instead, attacks against the US targets principally occurred aboard. [21] Palestinian groups and other Middle Eastern dissidents have often chosen to launch attacks in West European countries because Israel's defenses were too strong.  In addition, Western Europe was geographically close to their home countries and they were able to draw upon expatriate communities or locals who sympathized with them. [22]

Past experiences have not indicated that terrorism decreases because of democracy. Democratization in the 19th century, for example, led to increase in terrorism. [23] This finding also suggests that the spread of democracy will not be an immediate solution to the problem of terrorism. In fact, there may be a period in which democratization led to an increase in acts of terrorism.

Given these experiences and observations, it is not surprising that several studies have reached the general conclusion that democracies continue to be more prone to terrorist violence when compared to non-democratic states. [24] The above considerations have led to conclusions that democratic states are among the more vulnerable to terrorism. In the following, we shall try to test the hypothesis of greater vulnerability of democracies to international terrorism.

**Data**

 Data on international terrorist attacks and democracy were collected for countries for the years from 1972 to 1995.  The measure of political openness was based on the Freedom House rankings for civil and political liberties for each of those years. The first year for which the data were available was 1972. Rankings for countries ranged from 1  for countries that were politically completely free to 7 for states that were totally dictatorial with no freedoms with many countries being partially free. [25]

The use of such a scale for distinguishing among states is quite important. Both Eyerman and Li used dichotomous variables rather than ones based on a continuum. [26] The variation present is relevant since it would be possible that more democratic states could be more vulnerable than partially democratic ones. While other, more complex measures of democracy have been developed, the Freedom House rankings provide a consistent ranking available for virtually all countries for a relatively long period of time.

The data on terrorism were derived from information available from the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT). [27] These data are available from 1968, but they are incomplete for this year. From 1969 to 1997 reasonably complete data on occurrences of acts of international terrorism exist.  The data include the number of incidents, number of dead, and number of injured which in the analyses to follow was made proportional to population figures. From 1998 onward, data on both domestic and international terrorism are available, although the data for sub-Saharan Africa may not be accurate. There is a lack of any domestic terrorist incidents for places such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Zaire, notwithstanding the endemic nature of political violence there.  Information in the MIPT database was derived from media reports.  The press is weak in many parts of Africa, and the dangers involved in accurately reporting on such violence in near-anarchic societies would also explain the incompleteness of data.  Therefore, sub-Saharan African countries were not included in the data utilized here. The countries included were in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.  Only countries with populations of half a million people for at least part of the period were included.  In countries smaller than this, a few incidents or casualties from one attack would have a disproportionate impact on the dataset.  In addition, in states with small populations, terrorism may be less likely since there would be less anonymity possible, meaning that the terrorists would find it more difficult to operate. [28]

Even with the exclusion of the smaller countries, there was a great range in population. All other things being equal, larger countries could expect more terrorist violence than smaller ones. As a consequence, the numbers of incidents and wounded and dead people were divided by population. For a number of years for many countries, there were no international incidents or, while there were incidents, there where no casualties. Therefore zero entries were actually coded .01 to reflect the fact that no incidents or casualties in a country with a larger population (e.g. India) were more important than the absence in a smaller country (e.g. Singapore).

While only international incidents are used in the present analysis, we assume that these are sufficient for an initial test of the vulnerability of democracies thesis. The use of international incidents does provide an opportunity to detect one aspect of the potential vulnerability of democratic societies — the chance to serve as a location for attacks by groups targeting interests of their home countries or other transients. The following analysis should provide a preliminary step in the empirical study of connections between democracy and the occurrence of terrorist attacks.

**Results**

The results of our test for the whole range of countries were only mildly supportive of the basic hypothesis that democratic political systems are more prone to outbreaks of terrorism. While the correlations for levels of democracy with incidents of international terrorism, injuries, and fatalities were invariably negative, only about 30 per cent of the correlations achieved even a minimal level of significance (see Table 1). The overall number of incidents per capita was most frequently negatively associated with the level of political democracy at a significant level, while there were only a few indications that casualties were heavier in more democratic societies. Given the weaknesses of these results, the countries were analyzed by region to see if democracy facilitated terrorism once geographic area was considered as an intervening variable.

**Table 1: Pearson's Correlations for Terrorism and Democracy: All Countries**

| Year | $n$ | Incidents | Injuries | Deaths |
|------|-----|-----------|----------|--------|
| 1972 | 94 | -.102 | -.085 | -.139[+] |
| 1973 | 94 | -.104 | .076 | -.101 |
| 1974 | 94 | -.156[+] | -.076 | -.079 |
| 1975 | 97 | -.215[+] | -.091 | -.098 |
| 1976 | 97 | -.230[+] | .055 | .039 |
| 1977 | 97 | -.108 | -.107 | -.045 |
| 1978 | 97 | -.086 | -.112 | -.106 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1979 | 97 | -.112 | -.112 | -.125 |
| 1980 | 97 | -.112 | -.143[+] | .038 |
| 1981 | 97 | -.281[**] | -.206[*] | .044 |
| 1982 | 97 | -.323[**] | -.119 | -.039 |
| 1983 | 97 | -.146[+] | -.042 | -.003 |
| 1984 | 97 | -.151[+] | -.133 | -.175[*] |
| 1985 | 97 | -.186[*] | -.023 | -.150[+] |
| 1986 | 97 | -.166[+] | -.093 | .123 |
| 1987 | 97 | -.165[+] | -.117 | -.083 |
| 1988 | 97 | -.185[*] | -.165[+] | -.197[*] |
| 1989 | 95 | -.162[+] | -.094 | -.096 |
| 1990 | 96 | -.097 | -.124 | -.061 |
| 1991 | 95 | -.136[+] | -.133[+] | -.082 |
| 1992 | 111 | -.004 | .034 | -.035 |
| 1993 | 112 | -.071 | -.040 | .025 |
| 1994 | 113 | -.016 | -.043 | -.018 |
| 1995 | 113 | -.039 | -.132[+] | -.023 |

[+] $\alpha = .10$  [*] $\alpha = .05$  [**] $\alpha = .01$

In case of Asia and Latin America, there was very little evidence that the more democratic states were more likely to suffer terrorist attacks.  For the Asian countries there were only a handful of marginally significant associations and the same was true for Latin America.  The handful of significant associations were scattered throughout the time period used in the case of the Asian countries.  The few significant negative associations for Latin America were concentrated in the 1970s, indicating that perhaps there was something unique to this time period wherein democratic regimes were more prone to international terrorism. The overall results for these two regions, nevertheless, were even less supportive of the basic hypothesis than was the case when all of the countries were considered.

 The results for countries in the Middle East and North Africa were much more robust (see Table 2).  It should be noted that Lebanon was not included in the analysis.  The civil war and long period of unrest, as well as the fact that there was effectively no government for many years, made its exclusion necessary.  Lebanon actually serves as a better example of the links that can exist between a failed or weak state and the prevalence of terrorist violence.  For the rest of the Middle Eastern countries, the negative correlations between democracy and terrorism that were predicted were invariably present, and often at high levels of significance.  All three variables had the anticipated negative associations with levels of democracy and they were quite strong.

Thus, the higher prevalence of both incidents and casualties was linked with more open political systems. Clearly the more authoritarian states in the region had been much more effective in their ability to control international terrorism. These results support the conclusion reached by an analysis of the attempt to democratize Algeria in the 1990s.

 Democracy is not the panacea to political violence that many argue it is. Democracy does not ensure against terrorism and does not protect the country from domestic violent challenges. Thus, it would be mistaken to argue that the arrival of democracy in Algeria and elsewhere in the Arab world would lead to the immediate dismantling of terrorist networks. [29]

**Table 2: Pearson's Correlations for Terrorism and Democracy:  Middle East and North Africa**

| Year | *n* | Incidents | Injuries | Deaths |
|------|-----|-----------|----------|--------|
| 1972 | 20 | -.350[+] | -.426[*] | -.437[*] |
| 1973 | 20 | -.022 | 0.64 | .130 |
| 1974 | 21 | -.278 | -.296[+] | -.297[+] |
| 1975 | 21 | -.501[**] | -.412[*] | -.410[*] |
| 1976 | 21 | -.357[+] | -.020 | .073 |
| 1977 | 21 | -.381[*] | -.479[*] | -.382[*] |
| 1978 | 21 | -.495[*] | -.470[*] | -.450[*] |
| 1979 | 21 | -.462[*] | -.468[*] | -.476[*] |
| 1980 | 21 | -.521[**] | -.497[*] | -.472[*] |
| 1981 | 21 | -.483 | -.185 | .045 |
| 1982 | 21 | -.521[**] | -.516[**] | -.541[**] |
| 1983 | 21 | -.184 | -.345[+] | -.328[+] |
| 1984 | 21 | -.389[*] | -.486[*] | -.377[*] |
| 1985 | 21 | -.452[*] | -.037 | -.013 |
| 1986 | 21 | -.455[*] | -.366[*] | .092 |
| 1987 | 21 | -.437[*] | -.455[*] | -.416[*] |
| 1988 | 21 | -.408[*] | -.462[*] | -.397 |
| 1989 | 19 | -.439[*] | -.412[*] | -.426[*] |
| 1990 | 20 | -.431[*] | -.437[*] | -.449[*] |
| 1991 | 20 | -.535[**] | -.467[*] | -.515[**] |

| 1992 | 20 | -.306[+] | -.171 | -.420[*] |
| 1993 | 20 | -.586[**] | -.580[**] | -.528[**] |
| 1994 | 20 | -.525[**] | -.557[**] | -.513[*] |
| 1995 | 20 | -.366[+] | -.833[***] | -.488[*] |

[+] $\alpha = .10$   [*] $\alpha = .05$   [**] $\alpha = .01$   [***] $\alpha = .001$

The results for Europe were somewhat intriguing.  When the countries in the West European region (plus the culturally West European countries of Canada, the US, Australia, and New Zealand) were analyzed separately, there was no indication that there was any association between terrorism and political openness (see Table 3).

Except for Spain, Portugal, and Greece early in the period under analysis, all the countries were democratic and had open societies, therefore, there was relatively little variation in the Freedom House rankings. The rankings were invariably 1.0, 1.5, or 2.0 on the seven point scale that was used. Perhaps more importantly, even with the lack of variation, there were strong positive correlations between 1985 and 1994, which suggest that those countries that were slightly less democratic were the ones suffering more from terrorism.

What is perhaps the most logical explanation for this relationship is that the countries facing greater levels of international terrorist activity adopted slightly more stringent security procedures to deal with these threats as has been the case with the United Kingdom after the IRA bombings in 1974 and the US with the Patriot Act in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

**Table 3: Pearson's Correlations for Terrorism and Democracy:  West and East Europe**

| Year | n | West Europe | | | n | West and East Europe | | |
| | | Incidents | Injuries | Deaths | | Incidents | Injuries | Deaths |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1972 | 20 | .075 | -.123 | -.134 | 28 | -.353[*] | -.233 | -.196 |
| 1973 | 20 | .567 | .582 | .317 | 29 | .039 | .183 | -.043 |
| 1974 | 20 | -.028 | -.111 | .093 | 29 | -.318[*] | -.202 | -.100 |
| 1975 | 20 | -.058 | -.207 | -.186 | 29 | -.414[*] | -.340[*] | -.336[*] |
| 1976 | 20 | .265 | .194 | .186 | 29 | -.328[*] | -.250 | -.130 |
| 1977 | 20 | .332 | .363 | -.142 | 29 | -.304[+] | -.184 | -.142 |
| 1978 | 20 | .261 | .227 | -.040 | 29 | -.266[+] | -.171 | -.298[*] |
| 1979 | 20 | .064 | -.079 | -.163 | 29 | -.528[**] | -.239 | -.214 |
| 1980 | 20 | .087 | .113 | .266 | 29 | -.402[*] | -.240 | -.239 |
| 1981 | 20 | -.070 | -.124 | -.240 | 29 | -.378[*] | -.282[+] | -.298[+] |

| 1982 | 20 | .191 | .280 | .293 | 29 | -.302[+] | -.218 | -.246[+] |
| 1983 | 20 | .060 | .330 | .332 | 29 | -.369[*] | -.173 | -.154 |
| 1984 | 20 | .242 | .159 | .300 | 29 | -.310[+] | -.255[+] | -.269[+] |
| 1985 | 20 | .425 | .346 | .127 | 29 | -.335[*] | -.234 | -.170 |
| 1986 | 20 | .560 | .349 | .436 | 29 | -.332[*] | -.184 | -.258[+] |
| 1987 | 20 | .346 | .705 | .627 | 29 | -.276[+] | -.125 | -.316[*] |
| 1988 | 20 | .743 | .667 | .077 | 29 | -.225 | -.080 | -.164 |
| 1989 | 20 | .155 | .185 | -.139 | 29 | -.372[*] | -.166 | -.203 |
| 1990 | 20 | .371 | .233 | -.202 | 29 | -.057 | -.168 | -.251[+] |
| 1991 | 20 | .497 | .525 | .515 | 34 | -.098 | .264 | -.042 |
| 1992 | 20 | .500 | .194 | .469 | 36 | -.113 | -.132 | -.099 |
| 1993 | 20 | -.080 | -.164 | -.005 | 37 | -.147 | -.201 | -.253[+] |
| 1994 | 20 | .657 | .605 | .528 | 38 | .020 | .085 | .148 |
| 1995 | 20 | .178 | .169 | -.054 | 38 | -.231[+] | .147 | -.094 |

[+] $\alpha = .10$   [*] $\alpha = .05$   [**] $\alpha = .01$

The second part of Table 3 combines the data from the West European subset with the data for the East European countries and the Soviet Union (and then the European successor states to the Soviet Union, as well as the successor states to Yugoslavia). As expected, the combination of the closed Communist systems with the very open Western systems yielded many significant negative correlations for the data set in the years before 1990. The conventional wisdom that the advanced Communist countries with effective means of control were much better able to deter terrorist activities was well demonstrated in this comparison. In the initial years of democratization (or lack thereof in countries such as Belarus) the expected negative relationships were still present, although not nearly as often or at the same levels as had been the case in the earlier years.

**Conclusions**

Overall, the above analysis did not provide strong support for the idea that democracies have been more prone to terrorist violence — or at least international terrorism. The conventional wisdom of such a connection, however, cannot be discounted. Globally, the presence of democratic systems was at least at times negatively associated with more terrorism at marginal levels. The regional analysis indicated that in the Middle East the connection was very much stronger indeed. In addition, it was also obvious that the communist systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were much more effective in preventing these kinds of attacks than the democracies of West Europe as was expected.

A number of factors may help to explain these mixed results. Somewhat limited number of international incidents, compared to domestic attacks (which outnumber international incidents by a factor of seven or more), has meant that singular events with high casualties are statistical outliers that could have affected the results. In addition, if regimes in transition are actually more vulnerable, the presence of changes in the political system could be a confounding factor. A transition from one authoritarian regime to another (military regime to a one-party system or vice versa) could increase opportunities for terrorism that would not necessarily be associated with democratization.  Iran, for example, underwent a period of terrorism initiated by secular and leftist groups that lasted for 18 months. The clerical regime of the new Islamic Republic was vulnerable since it was making the transition from the partial authoritarianism of the old monarchy to the totalitarianism of the new theocracy. [30]

Similarly, if new democracies are indeed more prone to terrorism, the association between terrorism and democracy could be more variable since not all democracies are equally vulnerable.

Clearly, additional analysis will be necessary to further explore the extent and the nature of the linkages between political openness and terrorism. An extension of the analysis to include both international and domestic terrorist acts between 1998 and later years is one obvious step, although this extension does not solve the problem that there will remain inadequacies of data for the earlier years.

Another option would be selected comparisons of countries, before, during and after transitions to more democratic systems.  It might also be possible to compare the vulnerability of countries dealing with democratic transitions to countries facing transitions from one type of authoritarian regime to another. Since it would appear that democracies do indeed suffer somewhat more from international terrorism, such further analysis would help to clarify how much more vulnerable democracies really are to this particular form of political violence.

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