

Strategies: Are Terrorists Strategic?

In this session we're going to talk about terrorists as strategic actors. And by strategy I mean, how do terrorists try to use violence to achieve their goals in a coherent way?

Now, the first question to ask is, are terrorists actually strategic? And that's a fair question, because many of them are not. There are some thinkers who have embraced terrorism who really regard violence as liberating for individuals. It's a way of their shaking off a colonial mindset, for example. And in those cases, the act of terrorism isn't really linked to a strategic plan.

There's also a sense of terrorism as a theory of history. The great scholar of terrorism J. Bowyer Bell talks about many terrorists just believe that events will happen in their favor. So Marxist groups, for example, might say that eventually there'll be a class struggle and the worker state will be established. And they don't really link their particular actions to a broader strategy.

And then there are some groups that might talk strategy, but what they're really about is a rivalry with other groups. They're about an attempt to assert leadership over a particular community, and they're not really concerned with the adversary in general.

Now, because of these strategic weaknesses, the vast majority of terrorist groups fail. But we do see some terrorist groups act in a strategic manner, and these are the ones that are more likely to succeed. A member of the Irish Republican Army, in a very crass way, put this quite well. He said, "You don't bloody well kill people for the sake of killing them." And what he meant was, violence is supposed to serve a purpose. It's not simply for the sake of getting your anger out. It's meant to be tied to a broader objective.

In the remainder of my talk, I'm going to discuss the different strategies terrorist groups use, and the relative advantages, and then some of the limits of each strategy.