

Strategies: Strategic Advantages of Terrorism

The first question to ask when you're thinking about strategy though is why would a group use terrorism at all. For the most part, terrorism is a very ineffective strategy. The vast majority of terrorist groups fail to achieve any objectives. And even when they do, the cost is often tremendous.

Many terrorist groups do try alternatives before they embrace terrorism. So some groups try peaceful protest or, at times, more violent demonstrations, but are trying to get political and social change through mass organization, and this may fail. Now, it may fail due to simple government repression. The government may arrest or beat up those involved. Or, it may fail because the people themselves don't want to follow where the terrorists want to lead. They don't believe in the goals of the terrorist group.

And as a result, you have a number of groups that emerge after a series of peaceful and then increasingly contentious, violent movements. Now, some terrorist groups also want to do guerrilla warfare. And as such, they'd rather be like Mao. They'd rather be like Che Guevara and wage a struggle. And often, this means primarily targeting military targets to soldiers, policemen. And this too usually is very hard for terrorist groups.

As Professor Hoffman's section indicates, terrorist groups start out small, and they don't have the size, they don't have the power to wage a protracted guerrilla struggle. These terrorist groups also face a problem when they're trying to target soldiers and policemen, which is soldiers and policemen have a nasty tendency to shoot back.

They're actually much more difficult targets than going after peaceful civilians. And in addition, going after soldiers and policemen may generate less media coverage, which the terrorists want to publicize their cause.

Now, what we often see is coexistence of different groups and different strategies where you'll see a largely peaceful political movement. You may see some groups embracing guerrilla warfare and other groups very focused on terrorist targets simultaneously.

And so what we're going to see as we discuss the different strategies, we're going to see ideal types. We're to see each strategy considered in isolation. But it's important to remember that these strategies can coexist with one another and that these strategies are often part of a broader political struggle and a group is only one actor among many.