

Learn more on Terrorist Groups as Organizations: Interview with Terrorism Scholar Jacob Shapiro, Princeton University (Optional)

I'm delighted today to have Jake Shapiro with us. Jake is a professor at Princeton University and a leading scholar of terrorism. Today he and I are going to be having a conversation about his work and in particular his book, *The Terrorist Dilemma*. I'm going to hold up a copy for the camera, so everyone can see it. And I hope you rush out to buy this. It's really a superb piece of work. Let me start off the conversation the way I'd like to which is, how did you get interested in studying terrorism?

So for me, Dan, this came out of my last work experience in the military, where we were looking at these organizations, and there was a lot of strife and disagreement and hate and discontent. This was in 2002, when everyone in the US government was viewing the problem as this monolithic enemy that was very coherent and cohesive and dangerous. And yet as we dug into trying to think about how to target different organizations, there's a ton of strife and disagreement going on.

So when I got off active duty, I went to grad school. I thought this that was something worth looking into. And I actually started by looking at some of the online training manuals that were available in 2003, and they were mostly redacted versions of US Army field manuals. And I noticed something which struck me as odd, which is that there was a ton of information about where to put explosives and how to fuse them, what to do if you want to take out a rail bridge, or attack a fixed site. There's very little information on how to actually make the explosives. And so I thought, gosh, why would they be doing this? What would the point of this be? If you're trying to foster a global jihad, it seemed like you would want everyone to know how to make bombs and explosives.

And I showed this to-- I sent this to a friend of mine, who was the OD officer, and he said yeah, that's really weird, right. They're not putting key information in there. And what I think was going on, and I wrote a little bit on this, was that they were basically doing what cartels do, which is one way if you want to maintain a cartel, is you withhold critical technical information. And so it seemed like maybe that was what Al-Qaeda was doing. They wanted lots of people to be able to carry out a task, but they wanted to maintain some control by withholding key information. And so that got me started writing about how they're organized and why they organize in particular ways, which led to the book.

Let me ask you about the book. It's called *The Terrorist Dilemma*, so begin with the softball.

What is the terrorist dilemma?

So the terrorist dilemma is that in order to achieve your political goals, you need to use violence in the right way. Doing too much is just as bad for the cause as doing too little. And you need to operate efficiently. You need to make the best of your scarce resources.

Because you have a diverse membership, and it's very hard to know what the best thing is to advance political goals in many circumstances because you need to bring in people who often have less than clean backgrounds and who have traits that make them hard to manage, like being willing to kill women and children in the pursuit of political goals, you have to do a lot of things to manage that. All the things that you do to make sure that they attack the targets you want when you want, where you want, and that they spend money how you want and on the things that you want to spend on, all the things that you can do as an organization to make sure that happens, they create information that can be used by counterterrorists. They throw off an intelligence signal. So the dilemma is how you balance the need for security, which means minimizing that intelligence signal, against the desire to control the organization and make sure it's financially efficient.

Give me an example. Tell me where a group has really had problems because of, say, their keeping records.

So, again, we can talk about Al-Qaeda in Iraq. So, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, as it grew, their financial structure involved some sending of money back to a central financial administrator from units. But then also, the central financial organization sending money out to units, so they could pay the salaries of fighters.

This sounds like a university or a business.

Yeah, absolutely. I'd say any large group of human beings has to do some of this stuff. So for Al-Qaeda in Iraq, of course, because they're sending lots of money around, they had to track it. And so they needed spreadsheets saying who was doing what, where, when, and how much they were being paid. A substantial number of those ended up in US government databases through various operations conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan. And you can imagine, without too much work, that some time after a spreadsheet was found with a bunch of names of people and their locations and where they were fighting and how long they've been fighting how much they were getting paid, that some of those people had folks come knocking on their door in the middle of the night.

So that's one example. A historical example is the Basque separatist group ETA. So I think it was in 1981, the French police raided a chair factory just across the border from Spain in the Pyrenees, and they found basically, ETA's ledger of all its financial expenditures and personnel changes for the last year. They handed that over to the Spanish police, who then used it to round up a huge number operatives in the organization.

Now, when you're saying this, it sounds kind of stupid, right. These are clandestine groups. They recognize people are trying to hunt them, so why have a massive spreadsheet with all these names? Why have a ledger? Why do they have to do this?

Well, I think there are two reasons. So one is the inherent cognitive limits of human beings. So Jerry Bradley, who for a short time in the early 1970s ran a Provisional Irish Republican Army unit in Belfast, writes in his memoir that when he first took over as the guy in charge of that unit, he tried to keep everything in his head. He tried to keep track in his head of where all his sub-units were every day and who was operating where. But he found very quickly that he couldn't do that. And so every day at the start of the day, he had each of his unit commanders give him what he called the chalk, which is basically a list of what they plan to do that day. And then he could lay them out in front of him and see it all in one place and realize quickly if there were any conflicting operations going on.

But for Bradley, it was just that he simply couldn't keep it all in his head because there's too much to keep track of. It's the same reason we keep spreadsheets of students or we make a to-do list, right. We can't keep it all in our heads at all times. The other thing, though, is if you want to know if someone is ripping you off, financially, you need to track how they're spending money. You need to be able to see why they're doing it in unreasonable ways.

Now, but these are groups of very dedicated people. Many of them are willing to die. So how much of a problem is being ripped off within a terrorist organization?

So, I think it varies a lot between groups, right. So what we know is that Fatah and the PLO had problems with it. We know that Russian Marxist terrorist organizations operating in the 1890s and 1900s had problems with it. We know that the Provisional IRA and loyalist paramilitaries had problems with it. We know that Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda in Iraq and a number other jihadi groups had problems with it.

One interesting example comes from a woman Baya Gacemi who wrote a memoir of being the wife of a fighter in the Algerian Islamic group, the group that started the civil war in Algeria after the government voided election results in 1992. And she writes about how her husband and some of his compatriots had to kill someone because that person was going to report to the leadership that her husband and his friends were ripping off the group.

Another example comes from Mohamed Sifaoui, a French journalist. He has a biography in which he tells the story of how he infiltrated a sale of fundraisers for the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, a splinter group from the Algerian Islamic group. And at one point, he goes with them, his first time going out to do collection in mosques around Paris, and he goes with them and they get a ton of money. It's right before Eid in 1994, I think, maybe 1995.

And they go back to the room, and they're splitting it up and counting it up. And the leader of their little cell hands him a wad, a wad of bills. And Sifaoui reports that he says, why are you giving me this? He says, oh, we don't send it all to Algeria. We keep most of it for ourselves

because we need to be compensated for our hard work, and we only send a little bit.

Now, if you think about the guy back in Algeria who's putting his life on the line and fighting what he thinks is the good fight, he wants every bit of that money sent back. And so even though the guys who are facilitating the organization, they're committed, they're risking jail time, they're risking their freedom for the cost, but they still want a little taste on the side. But the guy who's managing them doesn't want them to have any taste on the side. And so he has reasons to try and do things to control that process.

And so what sort of things does he do?

Well, so there are a couple things that they can do. One is you break financial reporting up into lots of small pieces. So if you get one financial reporting a year, it's very hard to know if there's anything untowards in that report. So you don't have a lot of information. Basically, you don't have a lot of signal of what's going on. If you break it up into a lot of small reports, you have multiple opportunities to spot that something's wrong.

Now, this comes with a security trade-off, right. Because if you talk six times, right, that's five more opportunities for the government to pick something up than if you talked just once. So that's one thing you do, is you record your periodic reporting.

Another thing you do is you periodically will require accounting procedures that can be checked for accuracy and that are difficult to do properly if you're faking things. So the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya did this, where they basically use double entry bookkeeping to make sure that the guys from the army in the forest, who are being sent out to get supplies from villages, brought back everything that they got. And the way they would do this is they would be required, when they got the stuff in the village, to fill out two receipts. And one would come back and go into a place where it was stored for a period of time, and one would stay with the village chief.

And so the village chief could do two things with it. He could show it to the British if they showed up to say, look, I'm not voluntarily contributing to Mau Mau, right. They forced me to. But the other thing is the next time the Mau Mau came through the village, they could check the receipt and compare it to the one that they had traveling around with the leadership group. So you do things like this, but all of these things create security risks.

Why not simply reward people if they do a successful attack? Why not just-- if someone's good, give them more-- resource success?

Well, so I think there are a couple challenges with that. One is success can be very hard, right. It could be that you're in an environment where you're just trying to do things that are almost certain to fail. And if that's the case, then rewarding success doesn't create much incentive for your operatives because they know, justifiably, that the probability of success is very low. So I think that's more reason--

So you're giving them an A for trying, in some ways.

Often you want to give people an A for trying. We do this with our students. We do this with our kids, right? You want them to-- there's some benefit in trying even if you don't succeed. So I think that's one problem.

The other is it can be very hard to tell a lucky success from a success that's earned. And what you want to do is you want to incentivize earned successes. And so to do that, just offering a bonus for successes isn't enough.

I think the other reason is you create some really wacky incentives if you start to do that. So think about the way the salesman who's paid purely on commission interacts with you as opposed to the one who's on mostly salary with a little commission for a kicker. The one who is pure commission is much more aggressive, much more willing to do anything to make the sale. And if you're a terrorist group that's concerned about violence being misused, that's exactly the wrong incentive to create.

But don't you-- if I'm a leader of a terrorist group, don't I want to encourage my followers to use violence? Isn't that the whole point?

It depends. So sometimes, the political goal is advanced by maximal violence. But often times it's not. So, Osama bin Laden in 2010, summer 2010-- we learned from the documents picked up after his house in Abbottabad was raided-- spent a lot of time writing letters to various leaders of different jihadi organizations around the world basically saying, you are using violence too indiscriminately. You're causing many civilian casualties. And that is hurting the cause because people are being turned off from the ideas that we're representing--

But we have this image--

--by how violent we are.

--of bin Laden as willing to kill every one, right? That he and his successors-- their goal is to slaughter and slaughter. Do you think that's wrong?

Yes, I think that's completely wrong. And you see it in their own internal writings. The letters they're writing back and forth are very concerned with how much violence should be used and with the fact that doing too much is a problem. And I think that for Al-Qaeda, a substantial portion of the group, at least early on, came from people who had been part of Egyptian Islamic jihad. And this is a group that had basically lost its prominence in Egypt after a number of attacks that killed civilians and one particular attack that killed a bunch of school girls and basically got the group ostracized from the Islamist community in Egypt.

So part of their formative experience as an organization was seeing that violence could turn against them. And so then they conduct the 9/11 attacks, and that turns out to be a disaster for

the group. And lots of people in 2002 are writing letters saying, we've set ourselves back by 10 years, this was a disaster, who knew the Americans would respond this way. And then they have the experience of Iraq, where they snatch defeat from what looked to them like the jaws of victory.

And in fact, in Iraq you have letters from senior leaders in Al-Qaeda in Iraq going down to units saying stop killing people in such gruesome ways. You're really angering the locals, and they're going to turn against us. And sure enough, they did. And that led to the organization's downfall, or at least the loss of the massive influence it had 2006.

Your book is as an organization theory book. It draws an organization theory and broadly tries to apply these concepts to terrorism. Why did you turn to organization theory? What it did offer that other approaches didn't?

Well, I think the key thing is when we're-- If we want to answer the question of why did this person or that person conduct a terrorist attack, that's a psychological question. That's about individual motivations. If we want to know why does this group conduct a series of attacks or run a campaign in a particular way, that's a question that requires understanding how they function as an organization.

And if you look at the groups that historically had big political influence, they're the ones that operated as coherent organizations. The kind of white nationalist movement in the United States hasn't had a big political impact because, in part, they've been operating as a set of lone individuals who can never accomplish that much. But groups like Hamas or the Provisional IRA, the groups that have had real political impact in their country, they're sizable organizations that coordinate the efforts of tens or hundreds or thousands of people. And so if you want to understand what those organizations do, what those entities do, and how you can bring them to the table or successfully degrade their capabilities, then you need to understand the organization is not the individual decision making. And for that task, I think, organizational theory is the right way to go.

How much does having organizational ties to nonviolent parts of the cause matter? So, in Hamas' case, for example, hospitals and schools or in the Provisional IRA's case, political movements. How does this shape the organization and its use of violence?

So I think it can have a couple of effects. I think one, Dan, is that it creates pressures for restraint because you have people who aren't living underground who can get out and talk to the community, who can take the people who are living underground aside and say, look, this is how your actions are being interpreted. And people are not responding to you in the way you think they are. And so that can have a moderating influence. And that clearly happened in the case of the IRA.

The other thing, though, that it does is it creates a venue for groups to screen out their members. So Hamas can vet someone by having them work in the social service organization

for many years and have much more confidence that they're not a government agent and not excessively violent and prone to ill disciplined activities by watching them in that setting. You can also require that. And so someone who wants to join just because they want to do violence or they want to hurt people-- they're probably not going to have the patience to work in a clinic for two or three years. So you can screen people out.

The other thing you do is you can wrap people's family and their community and other people they care about in a set of services that gets taken away if that person ever does something wrong or that you don't like. And so you basically make the cost's of violating the organization's trust much higher if you have those services, provision organizations than if you don't. And you can, therefore, expect that the people who have all that to lose, if they rat out the organization, are going to be a much harder target for government intelligence agencies. And so when we think about why is Hamas so effective compared to other Palestinian organizations. It's not necessarily that they've earned the goodwill of the people by doing this stuff. It's that by doing that stuff, they're able to make sure that the folks who come in are A, really committed, and B, have an awful lot to lose if they ever rat the group out.

One thing that I found fascinating in your book was your discussion of violence. And from an outside point of view, when you look at whether a terrorist group is winning or losing, what you often measure is dead bodies. And if they're killing more people, you think they're doing well. And if there haven't been attacks, you think they're doing poorly. You have a different take on this. What is it?

So my take is that the realized level of violence is a really poor indicator of how the group is doing both because of the problem we talked about earlier-- that doing too much violence can set back the political cause as much as doing too little-- but also because the level of violence you see is an interaction between what the group thinks is optimal, what their capabilities are, and how good the government is. And you can see changes in violence because of any of those things moving around. So it's ambiguous. If you see an increase in violence is it because the group got better, because the government got worse, or because they changed their theory of how much violence they should use, and so they chose to produce more at that particular moment in time?

Why might they change their theory?

So these groups-- when you read what the leaders of these organizations write, they're constantly calibrating how the population is going to react to what they're doing. And so maybe they see that the government does something which makes them realize it is more pliable than they had thought before. Or it can be the case that they take some action and the population responds in a particular way. And they learn something about their supporting population, which they didn't know about its tolerance for violence.

Because of the importance of these signals from the population and supporters, can you give me an example of a group that's changed its use of violence?

So I think one is the loyalist paramilitary of the Ulster volunteer force in Northern Ireland. So there's a famous example in 1975. And some operatives from the group pull over a bus carrying the Miami Showband, a Catholic band, and basically execute its members. And this is a political disaster for the organization, and causes several of their leaders, in prison at that point, to reconsider the use of violence as a way of advancing the loyalist cause. They ultimately continue using violence, but in a more targeted and reduced way.

So for that organization, the public reaction to the killing revealed to them how they were being seen, and that it wasn't advancing their goals. And so they eased up. I think often what often happens for these organizations is-- you think about the psychology here. You have a small group of people who spend a lot of their time together, a lot of their time trying to motivate each other for action.

And this is why J. Boyer Bell famously, years ago, called being in a terrorist group being in the dragon world because they start to develop these fantasies of how people will respond to their actions. And then they conduct attacks, and often people don't respond in the way that they expected. And that causes them to reconsider what they were doing.

You see a little bit of this with the Weathermen, an American terrorist group. They were shocked to see that the average people in Chicago did not respond to the riots between them and the SDS and the police in the Days of Rage around the 1968 Democratic Convention in anything like the manner they expected. And that was actually part of the motivation for them-- to get into terrorism in the first place. They thought, gosh, that clear demonstration of police brutality was not enough to stoke people to push back against the existing power structure. We must provoke them into something even more egregious.

Let me ask-- you offer a very different way of looking at terrorism and terrorist groups, and it's one that, I think, most people don't use as perspective. It's more common, I suspect, among counterterrorism professionals. But even so, this is quite distinct. How should counterterrorism reflect an organizational perspective?

I think counterterrorism can respect an organizational perspective in, really, two distinct ways. I think the first is to think not about just the immediate impact of our actions on the ability of groups to produce violence, but on whether they're moving us towards the political end state that we want. So if we are to look down the tree and into the future, and we think that this war is going to be won not by annihilating every last person who believes in the cause and who is willing to pick up a gun for it, but by getting those who are to the negotiating table.

Then you have this dilemma, which is you need to put them under pressure to get to the negotiating table. But once you get them there, you need them to be cohesive enough as a group that they can get the people who aren't at the table to abide by whatever deal is made. And so counterterrorist policymakers need to think about how far to push to create enough pressure without pushing so far that what you end up with is a bunch of small, splinter groups

doing independent attacks, instead of one group with which you can negotiate. So I think that's the first way.

I think the second is when you want to think about metrics for success, your metrics for success, or a metric for success, might be, how are these people that we're fighting organized? Because in most cases when groups have a choice and have space and the security to build hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, they do so. And so the extent to which you see those structures is a measure of success. If you see groups giving up control and giving up the tools that let them manage their people efficiently in favor of security and operating as looser network with fewer connections and less communication, that's a sign of counterterrorist success.

Jake Shapiro, thank you very much for coming to talk to us today. I'm excited that everyone who is going to be part of this course can hear what you have to say. And I encourage everyone to pick up a copy of his book. It's really first rate. Thank you, very much.