9 Terrorism and Protean Power: How Terrorists Navigate Uncertainty

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Terrorism is commonly understood as a coercive strategy of armed non-state actors operating under conditions of asymmetry in capabilities.[2] This perspective is grounded in the understanding of power as control; even scholars who advocate complex and more nuanced conceptions of power view terrorists' application of force as a variant of control power.[3] Yet control power tells only a part of the story when considering policy-makers' failure to foresee the emergence of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (referred to here also as ISIS) as consequential actors on the global scene with tremendous capacities to disrupt the international order. If we only consider one dimension, control power will be a poor explanatory factor.

This chapter argues that in order to understand the interaction between terrorist groups and their state enemies we must view the world as an open system in which actors experience both risk and uncertainty. It demonstrates that protean power – defined by Seybert and Katzenstein (Chapter 1, p. 4) as the effect of improvisational and innovative responses to uncertainty that arise from actors' creativity and agility – does not appear as the result of external shocks only, but also as endogenous and central to state–terrorist dynamics. It shows that protean power could be the effect of actions taken not only by the weak (terrorists), but also by strong actors (states), and that agility and creativity are not the attributes of benign peaceful actors only, but also characterize predatory terrorist entities.

Terrorists try to harness uncertainty to advance their goals. They take advantage of the radical uncertainty of both the international system and its state components to undermine state legitimacy, and of operational

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uncertainty to expose the limits of states' control power. And yet, the agility that allows terrorist groups to effectively navigate under conditions of uncertainty does not eliminate the constraints deriving from terrorists' ultimate goal of control. As the experiences of both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Yemen branch indicate, the more successful terrorists become, acquiring territorial possessions and the trappings of states, the more vulnerable they become to their enemies' control power. Thus, by moving toward attaining their goals, terrorist groups lose many of the benefits that come from their manipulation of uncertainty: states' resource advantage regains importance, while terrorists' own ability to negotiate protean power weakens.

In contrast, states experience the world as predominantly risky, relying on control power to attain their objectives and fend off threats. When facing agile terrorist actors who improvise and innovate, states are slow to adjust, often failing to understand the threat in terms of uncertainty, to acknowledge the limitations of control power, and to design appropriate responses to power that circulates in unanticipated ways. Yet despite these difficulties, states are not impotent in the face of protean power. Slow as they are, states too can innovate and improvise to amplify their terrorist opponents' uncertainty, thus undercutting the operation and message of terrorist groups.

Interestingly, all actors, even those that are highly adaptable when operating under uncertainty and intentionally seek to magnify the uncertainty of their foes, yearn to reduce their own sense of uncertainty. States often do so by translating uncertainty into risk. Decision-making is complicated and leaders are more comfortable basing their policy choices on probabilities to help simplify it – even if the prevalence of uncertainty means that these probabilities are often a fiction. Terrorists have a similar need to address their own sense of uncertainty. But as disparities in material capabilities turn the odds against them, translating uncertainty into risk is not enough. Instead, terrorists wish to create a sense of certainty and promote the belief that victory is inevitable. Religion can be very effective in producing such certainty and jihadis regularly employ Islam for this purpose, but other ideologies can provide a similar psychological relief in the face of forbidding odds.[4] The need of both states and terrorist groups to reduce their own sense of uncertainty comes with a price. It can easily lead them to misinterpret the underlying context, adopt failed policies, and then to misidentify the causes behind their failures.

Even as my analysis below emphasizes states and terrorist groups, it is important to note that they are not the only relevant actors: terrorist

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[4] Kennan 1947.

groups articulate a narrative of inevitable positive outcomes – victory or martyrdom – to assuage the fear of supporters and operatives. At times, their plans require inspiring unknown and uncontrollable individuals to take uncoordinated action that would increase states' uncertainty. Yet reliance on such lone wolves also enhances terrorist groups' own uncertainty because they do not know if and to what extent their calls will be answered, and whether such attacks will promote the groups' objectives or backfire. Similarly, states are not the only actors to engage in counter-terrorism. A vast infrastructure to combat terrorism depends on the functioning and knowledge of street-level bureaucrats in airports, local FBI offices, street corners, and elsewhere. Moreover, to confront amorphous threats, states empower a long list of societal actors – including civilians, high-tech companies, and banks – turning them into counter-terrorists. Yet when protean power resulting from societal responses manifests in deepening social cleavages, Islamophobia, and hatred of refugees, it could undercut governments' efforts.

The remainder of the chapter is organized around the two facets of uncertainty that Seybert and Katzenstein present in Chapters 1 and 2. I first discuss how terrorist groups, particularly those that seek to overthrow the Westphalian state system, respond to its radical uncertainty by innovating within cracks and contradictions of institutional complexes. The following section examines the role of religion in mitigating the psychological effects of uncertainty. Although Jihadis find religion a useful tool for replacing uncertainty with certainty, such efforts come with a price. At the same time, states' attempts to respond to the religious messages are complicated by their amorphous audience and the decentralized nature of authority in Islam. The final section analyzes the links between lone wolves, suicide bombing, social media, and operational uncertainty, emphasizing not only terrorists' efforts to increase operational uncertainty, but also the way states' responses to terrorism mirror these efforts.

Terrorism and Radical Uncertainty

Radical uncertainty concerns those unknown unknowns that inherently defy calculation. As both the state and international society – the main targets of terrorism – depend on legitimacy, the resulting meaning indeterminacy creates a space for agile terrorist groups to leverage this uncertainty: they identify cracks and contradictions within these institutions and seek to amplify them. Terrorists chip away at states' control power, challenging their legitimacy, and forcing them to search for effective responses to protean power.

In their quest for security, states are accustomed to looking at rival states – traditionally, the only threat to state survival. They build militaries to address threats emanating from other states, and design rules to manage interstate conflict. But measures designed to enhance predictability and stability in interstate relations present terrorist groups with opportunities to challenge states and erode their legitimacy. They take advantage of the tension between the anchoring of states' legitimacy in the goods it provides – primarily security – and states' inability to deploy the full extent of their control power when facing actors who seek to influence state calculations *indirectly*. They seek to force states to choose between unappealing options: appearing incompetent or controverting their own rules. From the terrorists' perspective, either choice weakens the state's legitimacy.

By using violence against innocent civilians, terrorists seek to shock their enemies, persuade them that the conventional dynamics of control power no longer apply, and intimidate them into submission. Turning all locations into a potential arena for violence, terrorists force states into a struggle in which the traditional deployment of forces to the front does not provide a viable solution: when every crowded street and shopping mall is a potential front, traditional defense becomes obsolete.

Twisting convention to their own ends, terrorists harness ideational developments such as the spread of the norm against the killing of civilians (primarily among democracies) to advance their cause. This norm, perceived as advancing human security by limiting the scope of legitimate violence, led to an unanticipated increase in the shock value of targeting innocents, inadvertently giving terrorists an effective tool to shape public opinion and pressure states into submission. Terrorist actors can engage in ever more gruesome violence, capture it on camera, and distribute it widely, multiplying the impact. Citizens' fear of terrorism and states' emphasis on this threat leads to disproportionate responses, such as the lockdown on Boston after the 2013 marathon bombing. Indeed, one of the most astonishing aspects of protean power is how the actions of terrorists, states, and ordinary people are mutually reinforcing, creating disconnects between the experience and actual threat of terrorism.[5] That states and individuals emphasize terrorism while accepting much more lethal threats – such as mass shootings, car accidents, and even accidental gun deaths at the hands of toddlers[6] – as unfortunate yet inevitable facts of life stands as a testament to terrorists' ability to stoke fear.

Since states are constrained by norms regarding the application of force, responding to terrorism in kind, by violating rules of appropriate

[5] Mueller and Stewart 2016.   [6] Ingraham 2016.

behavior, is likely to come at a stiff price. The flexing of a state's control power only weakens its impact, as observers respond to the state's over-reaction by reconsidering both the competence and legitimacy of the state. Indeed, in fighting terrorism, the state can easily lose the moral high ground. The reliance on drone strikes to target terrorists has undermined users' claims of moral superiority, because of the collateral damage and portrayals of it as extrajudicial killing that weakens the rule of law. The legitimacy of the state's fight against jihadi terrorism has been further challenged by the very limited legal protections for detainees in US-run black sites and Guantanamo Bay, the torture of suspects, and the abuse of detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison.

The limitations on a state's coercive power are particularly pronounced in Western countries that came to redefine their security obligations as encompassing the personal security of their inhabitants.[7] A state expected to protect the safety of its citizens and their property, not just of the state itself, is highly vulnerable to terrorist acts. Rising expectations regarding states' responsibilities coincide with their declining ability to protect individuals. Thus, terrorists demonstrate agility by leveraging these normative changes. Protean power exposes the state's inadequacy in providing an expansive security blanket and results in the erosion of people's trust in their government. Terrorists expect states to ultimately understand the futility of their counterterrorism efforts and comply with terrorists' demands.[8]

The impact of states' control power is further weakened when terrorist groups manage to shift the public discourse from the illegitimacy of their actions to a comparison between states' morality and terrorist practices. Such efforts are aided – unintentionally rather than by terrorist groups' design – by self-interested state leaders who exploit the illegitimacy associated with the term *terrorists* to label their opponents (including human-rights activists) as such. When accusations of terrorism are bandied about freely, they become less credible and may even normalize terrorism.

States are trying to readjust domestic and international law to revitalize their control power and open a new space for anti-terrorist action. This process is slow and difficult. In many countries, especially in the West, it involves contesting established norms regarding the relations between states and their citizenry, as well as the balance between security and personal freedoms. States' responses to terrorism raise serious questions about the nature of the social contract that delineates what states owe their

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[7] Fingar 2011: 29.
[8] On the futility of state control efforts to stem unauthorized migration, see Brigden and Andreas (Chapter 5).

people, and the limits of legitimate state rights to reduce personal free-
doms. Terrorists exploit the ambiguity and uncertainty that characterize
states' scramble to find an answer to terrorism, as well as the time it takes
for new norms to take hold. American overreach following 9/11 proved to
be particularly useful for recruiting individuals to join the jihadi cause.[9]
Although the United States and the international community have been
trying to recalibrate their response to jihadi terrorism and make more
measured adjustments of international law to allow for fighting terrorism
while preserving personal freedoms, the damage done by the initial over-
reaction – in particular, the launching of expansive, costly, and unwinnable
wars based on shaky legal foundations – has not been easily undone.

And yet terrorists are hardly the masterminds that the media portrays.
They tend to exaggerate both states' weakness and their own prowess (or
the appeal of their cause). While demonstrating agility in turning rules of
international society against its members, terrorists are confronted with
the uncomfortable reality that the working of protean power is unpredict-
able and often results in changes that could undermine their own objec-
tives. Indeed, rather than the high level of interstate tensions al-Qaeda
expected, post-9/11 counterterrorism featured greater cooperation and
even a revolutionary attempt to revamp the state-based order, including
the start or acceleration of regulating spheres of activity that they had
largely avoided.[10]

Despite the task's broad scope, in the financial sphere, for example,
cooperation among states managed to cut down terrorist funds. Agile
groups, however, still find ways to subvert the rules. Kidnapping for
ransom is a particularly effective terrorist response, with Western states
facing a difficult dilemma: when they pay millions of dollars for the release
of their citizens, they finance the same groups they fight and subvert their
own rules. But when states refuse and the terrorists gruesomely execute
the hostages, often in front of cameras, these states face accusations that
they have abandoned their people. Moreover, as states pursue different
policies – the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom refuse to
pay ransoms, whereas most European countries pay them – terrorists
increase friction between allies.

The structural advantage of states is perhaps the greatest detriment
with which terrorist groups must contend. States' control power does not
stem merely from their superior capabilities, but also from their primacy
among the various political entities populating the international system.
By defining international order as state-based and assuming the role of
international society's gatekeepers, states assume exclusive rights that

[9] ODNI 2006.   [10] Mendelsohn 2009.

non-state actors lack, thus weakening the ability of the latter to attain authority on their own terms.

States' ideational hegemony extends to the question of legitimate use of force. Through law and discourse, states reserve the right to use coercive means while denying it to non-state actors, consequently crippling non-state actors' ability to confront states on an equal footing. International law narrows legitimate non-state violence to resistance against occupation. Meanwhile, states delegitimize non-state violence by largely exempting themselves from the term *terrorism* and by labeling armed non-state actors as terrorists even though many – including Jabhat Fath al-Sham (previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra) in Syria and al-Qaeda's branches in Yemen and Somalia – are primarily insurgent groups, a term with more positive connotations. Even when armed non-state actors manage to gain control over a territory and govern it (e.g., the Taliban in Afghanistan 1996–2001 and Islamic State since 2014), their viability often depends on international acceptance, which in turn requires these actors to submit to the norms guiding the Westphalian order.

The combined effect of states' material advantage and ideational hegemony over non-state violence is that even when non-state actors decide to challenge states, they usually accept the dominance of the state-based order and ultimately seek to become states and join the international society. A byproduct of these limited aspirations is self-imposed limitations on terrorist groups' violence as they balance conflicting needs: unauthorized violence advances coercion, but respect for norms – such as the prohibition on using WMDs – is necessary to gain international legitimacy.[11]

Thus, although terrorist groups aptly expose the tensions inherent to the operation of states when facing terrorists, utilizing radical uncertainty to undermine states' legitimacy, they often succumb to the structural strengths of international society and its state components; as they get closer to attaining their most common objectives – independence or capturing state power – they become increasingly vulnerable to the socializing power of international society and pressured to accommodate states' demands. Indeed, protean power has its limits; legitimate and viable membership of international society means a greater need to experience the world as one of risk, and greater susceptibility to the coercive power of other states.

Religion and the Production of Certainty

Uncertainty also has an emotive element. Actors design plans to advance their interests in a highly complex social environment, but they also look

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[11] Mendelsohn 2005.

to satisfy psychological needs for some control over their environment. To overcome "fundamental uncertainty," and a threat to one's ontological security, actors might respond with exaggerated certainty.[12] Terrorist groups try to mitigate uncertainty's negative psychological effects. The coping mechanisms they develop to allow them to operate despite forbidding odds simultaneously amplify the anxiety of their enemies' populations. The language of religion is particularly effective for such a dual use, boosting members' and potential recruits' confidence while reinforcing an image of uncompromising zeal that terrifies their foes. Religious discourse uniquely challenges states: limited in their ability to control the message or identify those likely to succumb to it, states utilize multiple channels without ever knowing to what extent their efforts were successful. The decentralized nature of religious authority in Islam further weakens states' control efforts.

Terrorists, Religion, and Certainty

Terrorists seek to magnify their foes' radical and operational uncertainty, but the effectiveness of their actions depends on the ways in which states and individuals experience uncertainty psychologically. The same is true for the terrorists themselves; already disadvantaged in a world of risk, they experience the adverse effects of uncertainty as well. To facilitate their continued operation – attract and retain members – they must resolve the challenge. Given that the odds are against them, fictitious translation of uncertainty to risk is insufficient. Instead, they aspire to a sense of certainty. Ideological beliefs are a common means for reducing uncertainty, but religion, with its appeal to a higher all-knowing authority, is uniquely suited to overcoming the psychological effects of uncertainty[13] by replacing it with certainty.[14]

Religious beliefs address psychological needs by mitigating the fear of death.[15] They also reassure terrorists – the group and its members – that their cause is just and that eventual success is guaranteed. In this way, religion strengthens terrorists' resilience: they can accept distant time horizons and escape the demoralizing effects of defeats. Meanwhile,

[12] Mitzen and Schweller 2011.
[13] For how religion helps to reduce uncertainty for migrants, see the contribution of Brigden and Andreas (Chapter 5).
[14] Contrast the way in which actors attempt to transform inherent uncertainty to a calculable risk through legal fictions in finance, and mutual understanding by negotiating sides in energy deals that the terms of their agreements will have to be renegotiated in the future. See the contributions of Abdelal (Chapter 7) and Lockwood and Nelson (Chapter 8).
[15] Vail III et al. 2010.

they send enemies the message that because jihadis love death more than their rivals love life, resistance is futile, as the dead are quickly replaced by others who long for the afterlife. Religion is particularly important for those jihadi groups seeking to re-make the world order, by casting the division of the world into states as illegitimate in the eyes of God and, perhaps more importantly, by providing ways to reconcile the ambitious agendas of these groups with their meager capabilities.

The role of religion encapsulates the complex interaction between the worlds of risk and uncertainty. Terrorist leaders can use religion strategically to enhance their control power. They rely on religion to mobilize followers and to create a focal point guiding and controlling members' actions. Because protean power can take one only so far, both al-Qaeda and ISIS believed that they need the masses to realize their plans to fully restore the caliphate – an objective associated with control power.

Jihadi groups turn to the Quran and oral traditions to persuade their constituency that they are fulfilling a religious duty, countering the risk of one's life and the unattractiveness of joining a group weaker than its foe. Muslims are not called to fight for mundane purposes such as material gains, rather, their fight is jihad and as such a form of great worship. Because jihad is not recognized among the five pillars of Islam (Shahada, prayer, charity, fasting, and Hajj), jihadis have long sought to elevate its status to attract more volunteers.[16] Some have even portrayed jihad as a sixth pillar,[17] and ISIS has taken the additional step of claiming that there is no act of worship equal to jihad.[18]

Yet religion serves as more than a cause for mobilization. It enables jihadi terrorist groups to shape followers' experience as one of certainty, promising inevitable personal gains. The fighter is assured that there is no risk in jihad, only positive outcomes: victory or martyrdom. Jihadis try to persuade potential volunteers that fighting is desirable even if they will lose their lives. Death is presented not as a price one pays but, rather, as an event that comes with great rewards.[19] Jihad death is not the prosaic act of passing from this world but the heroic act of expressing one's devotion to God. Biological death is thus transfigured into divine martyrdom; it erases past sins and guarantees a place in paradise and the ability to intercede before God on behalf of family members. Jihadis also repeatedly remind Muslims that the afterlife is eternal, whereas life on earth is only momentary.[20]

The conviction that they are fulfilling God's wishes also helps all ranks of religious terrorist groups to confront the demoralizing condition of

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[16] Al-Sahab 2007a.   [17] Jansen 1986.   [18] Al-Adnani 2015.   [19] Al-Sahab 2007a.
[20] Al-Sahab 2007b.

isolation. Operatives are assured that they should not worry about popular negative responses. Following divine orders is important; pleasing people who fail to follow God's way is not.[21] Members of jihadi groups who see how even fellow Muslims strongly oppose them are told that popular opinion should not bother them. Because Islamic traditions claim that one small sect from God's believers will remain loyal when all others turn from his commands, the small number of jihadis transforms from a sign of weakness to confirmation that they are the righteous ones who will emerge victorious.[22]

However, attempts to produce certainty also have downsides. As they praise the virtues of martyrdom, leaders may witness members exercising individual (and at times flawed) judgment that undermine a group's political objectives. Reflecting on the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, Mustafa Hamid, a prominent jihadi veteran, has argued that the quest to become a *Shahid* (martyr) can come at the expense of strategic planning to achieve victory on the battlefield. In an example of how micro-level action can have macro-level consequences, he criticized the inclination of many volunteers to simply seek death rather than use their death to promote battle objectives.[23] At other times, lone wolves, self-starting cells, or simply undisciplined operatives might focus on martyrdom instead of its desired political effects. Acts of martyrdom could even harm the terrorists' cause; instances of killing innocent Muslims, such as the Amman bombing (2005), led to reduced support in the Arab world for al-Qaeda's cause and the tactic of suicide bombing.[24]

Sometimes terrorist leaders' own beliefs about the inevitability of victory cripple terrorist efforts. Because religious terrorist groups attribute the outcome of the fight to the will of God, leaders can easily explain away failure in battle. Such an attitude could boost actors' resilience by assisting them in coping with defeats. As ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani clarifies, God did not promise those fighting in his name victory on all occasions. In fact, God ordained that days of victory and defeat alternate. Defeats are tests for those loyal to God. Although setbacks are inevitable, the victory of Allah's servants is predetermined.[25] However, the belief in ultimate victory is counterproductive when it leads jihadis to move ahead with their plans without presenting a fully developed causal theory of war outcomes or seriously considering the implications of material power imbalances. Additionally, a sense of certainty is likely to undermine actors' interest in learning from mistakes. Thus, jihadi

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[21] Al-Adnani 2015. [22] For example, see Islamic State 2015b: 52–54.
[23] For example, see Brown 2007: 57. [24] Gerges 2005; Wike 2015.
[25] Al-Adnani 2015.

terrorists are particularly prone to enter confrontations without a solid strategic foundation. In such cases, states are likely to be surprised by the initiation of terror campaigns but also able to successfully thwart the terrorists' goals.

Responding to Religious Certainty

Religion is not a given, it is interpreted, and as such open to discursive contestation, the realm of radical uncertainty, and protean power. Terrorists seek to legitimize their religious interpretation while confronting other claimants for religious authority, some of which hold considerable material, institutional, and ideational resources in another meeting of control and protean power.

Confronting terrorist actors holding strong religious convictions is challenging and often requires confronting their religious message head-on. Such efforts are particularly difficult because states appeals are directed at a faceless audience rather than specifically targeted individuals; Muslim states may dissuade most people from joining jihadi groups, but even a small minority could have a tremendous impact, and states are usually unable to identify those pockets of resistance early enough. Additionally, the decentralized nature of Islamic authority empowers radicals and defies states' control efforts.

Secular countries are unlikely to persuade religious terrorists that their group misrepresents their religion. However, countries in which religion plays a central role, while more vulnerable to the allure of religious terrorism, are also better positioned to confront it because their delegitimation of terrorists' religious narrative is perceived as more authentic. Importantly, these states can use religious institutions under their control to condemn the terrorists and declare that they have the "correct" understanding, whereas the terrorists distort the religion. For example, to reduce the danger of recruitment by firebrand preachers, Muslim states have tightened their supervision of mosque imams, requiring preachers to undergo special training focused on moderate versions of Islam, dictating sermon content, and spying on preachers to assure their compliance.[26]

But these attempts at control have their limits, sometimes simply pushing jihadis' recruitment underground. Ultimately, states' measures involve a high level of uncertainty as they compete with the jihadis over a largely faceless audience sitting in front of their computer screens. The jihadis seek to mobilize this audience to action, whereas states wish to keep them loyal to state authorities and the official versions of Islam they

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[26] *The Economist* 2014: 52.

promote. States have no way to truly assess the effectiveness of their efforts; after all, success is manifested in keeping people away from radical groups – that is, in a non-event.

De-radicalization programs to change the position of jihadi terrorists are somewhat easier to evaluate. In these programs – established in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Yemen, and elsewhere – jailed terrorists deemed to be reformable engage in direct dialogue with Islamic scholars who "correct" the prisoners' understandings of Islam. The state also presents important inducements to reformed radicals, including early release (often under the supervision of the terrorist's family, in an attempt to increase his commitment to the deal with the state), financial support, vocational training, and even assistance in finding wives.[27] In such programs, states rely on risk assessment before they graduate participants and release them, but even low rates of recidivism could result in devastating terrorist attacks that, in turn, undermine public support and, as in the Yemeni case, cripple the whole program.

Recantations by former jihadis are another tool to undercut jihadism's appeal. Over the past two decades, imprisoned jihadi leaders from the Egyptian Gama'a Islamiya, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and the Southeast Asian Jema'a Islamiya have published numerous books articulating their revised position regarding the Islamic legality of their past terrorist activities. In addition to explaining why it is wrong to assassinate Muslim rulers, target foreign tourists, and kill ordinary people, they criticized al-Qaeda and other groups.[28] Al-Qaeda tried to dismiss these works as coerced and part of deals to mitigate prisoners' suffering, rather than as sincere reflections. Nevertheless, at times it was so troubled by these works that its leaders intensely sought to refute them.[29]

States' efforts to contest the extremist messages of groups such as ISIS were often ineffective. A video titled "Welcome to ISIS Land," produced by the US State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, sought to counter the caliphate's self-portrayal as a haven for devout Muslims by showing its brutality and challenging the worthiness of its cause. Although it had close to a million views on YouTube, scholars and practitioners doubted its usefulness and even warned that it could actually appeal to ISIS supporters.[30]

The lack of clear religious hierarchy in Islam (in contrast to, for instance, Catholicism) further complicates countering the jihadi message.

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[27] On the Saudi program, see Rabasa et al. 2010: 56–77.
[28] For an example of criticism of al-Qaeda, see Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya 2004.
[29] Al-Zawahiri 2008.   [30] Miller and Higham 2015.

States experience heightened uncertainty, struggling to identify both a persuasive anti-jihadi message, and Islamic scholars who would be viewed as its legitimate and reliable conveyers. Islamic universities such as Egypt's al-Azhar and positions such as the Saudi Grand Mufti accrued considerable influence over the years, but they do not have ultimate authority and their ability to reach young Muslims is limited. Jihadis enhance this uncertainty with concerted efforts to challenge the authority of the state-sponsored *ulama'* (Islamic scholars), and labeling them as collaborators of un-Islamic apostate rulers.

The accelerated erosion and fragmentation of Islamic authority following the revolution in communications technology and the rise of social media is adding further complexity. No one actor could control information and completely suppress undesirable views. Moreover, new claimants of religious authority utilize widely available platforms and reach vast audiences far beyond the areas where they live. The result has been a remarkable opening of the market for interpreting Islam. The new platforms seem to particularly favor virulent and extreme voices that can offer their followers easy-to-understand messages (preferably in 140 characters). A new class of jihadi scholars, many with little religious training but with charisma and great oratory skills, is overshadowing not only mainstream scholars but also jihadi old-guard scholars. Agile actors such as the Islamic State exploit the new landscape, while old-school scholars struggle to capture the imagination of a young, frustrated generation of Muslims. In this context even prominent jihadi scholars such as the Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who try to dissuade young Muslims from adopting the ultra-radical ISIS version of Islam, struggle to assert their authority.[31]

Improvisation, Agility, and Operational Uncertainty

Whereas terrorists' strategic logic involves the exploitation of radical uncertainty, in their tactics they harness operational uncertainty – the de facto unknown unknowns. Agile terrorist groups improvise, developing tactics such as suicide bombing and lone-wolf attacks that rely on the inevitable limitations of states' control. They also subvert and repurpose originally benign tools such as Facebook and Twitter for predatory purposes, recruiting members, promoting violence, and spreading fear.

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[31] Al-Maqdisi 2014; Abu Qatada al-Filistini 2013.

Terrorism, Tactical Improvisation, and Social Media

Suicide bombing and lone-wolf attacks are two principal examples of how terrorists respond to and publicly expose the futility of states' control efforts. Both tactics are extremely hard to defend against due to inherent operational uncertainty: states may be on high alert for terrorist threats, but they are unable to disarm bombers wearing suicide vests or to identify individuals without direct organizational links before they go on a killing spree. Furthermore, by directing operatives to attack "soft targets," terrorists force states to defend an incalculable number of targets. When states inevitably fail – no matter how successful they were previously – terrorists reveal their inability to provide citizens absolute security.

Suicide bombing turns perpetrators into "smart bombs" able to insert themselves in the middle of civilians and produce a high number of fatalities. Because almost any individual can become a suicide bomber with little training, and because suicide bombers view their actions as altruistic self-sacrifice and are knowingly and happily going to their deaths, identifying bombers in time and thwarting such attacks is extremely difficult. Indeed, suicide bombing has proven to be an effective fighting tool, causing more deaths than unmanned bombs[32] and terrorizing foreign occupiers into compliance.[33] The use of suicide bombers strengthens terrorists' claims that their foes are fighting an unwinnable war; bombers' quest for martyrdom prevents states from maintaining security.

Lone-wolf attacks are another manifestation of protean power, based on the belief that the aggregation of uncoordinated autonomous acts can produce strategic effects. Such attacks are a form of swarming: the group does not need to plan all terrorist attacks or even know the perpetrators. Instead, it encourages individuals to attack on their own.

Al-Qaeda has long called for lone-wolf operations but has been largely unsuccessful. Its interest in "leaderless jihad" stemmed from post-9/11 operational constraints, drawing on the ubiquity of the Internet and the innovative thinking of Abu Musab al-Suri and his book *The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*.[34] Military action and crackdowns led al-Qaeda to envision completely disconnected, invisible, infinite task forces, each responsible for the part of the mission for which it is best equipped. The realization of this vision required training, but since bombing drove al-Qaeda from its Afghanistan safe haven and training camps, the organization sought to reconstitute them in cyberspace. Using the Internet, it disseminates training manuals and instructs followers on how to carry

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[32] For example, see Institute for Economics and Peace 2015: 32–35.   [33] Pape 2005.
[34] Lia 2007.

out attacks. The Saudi branch of al-Qaeda even designated a journal, *Mu'askar al-Battar*, as a virtual training camp. In another example, its Yemeni branch's *Inspire* magazine included instructional articles such as "How to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom."[35]

Nevertheless, centralized dissemination of information is susceptible to disruption. The next logical step, therefore, was to decentralize knowledge-sharing. Al-Qaeda calls on individuals to use the vast information available online to identify material and instructions that will facilitate assembling explosives, producing toxins, forging documents, building jamming devices, and other activities that utilize rudimentary dual-use, widely available material (such as car parts, gardening equipment, plumbing tools, building material and other hardware). Once information and material are gathered, volunteers are asked to record an instructional video, presentation, or document and upload it online to provide others throughout the world (particularly non-specialists) with access to basic how-to knowledge, and, through comparison, to "best practices." Sympathizers are also urged to share information about enemy weaknesses and how to exploit them. Indeed, participants on jihadi forums often raise ideas for attacks based on perceived Western weak spots.[36]

Despite its calls for lone-wolf attacks, al-Qaeda appears more comfortable encouraging its supporters to assist in propagating the jihadi message. It empowers sympathizers by assuring them that with even limited technological knowledge they can "change history right there from your home town, under the cool air of your air-conditioner, safe and sound away from any danger or fear."[37] The media warriors would collect statistics about "America's filth" to remind Americans "how evil and disgusting they are and why the mujahideen will do anything to kick them out from the Muslim lands." They would also prepare statistics on the "crimes" the United States had committed throughout its history, and American servitude to the banks and the lobbyists (particularly the Israeli lobby). Muslims too should be targets for independent propaganda efforts, encouraged through simple messages to help their brethren and join jihad. These media efforts should be customized to the language and norms in each target country and spread through all media platforms available, including Facebook, Twitter, and blogs.[38]

Al-Qaeda's ambivalence regarding lone wolves might be the result of its bitter experience with rogue agents. The indiscriminate violence of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch until his death in 2006 and the forefather of ISIS, harmed al-Qaeda's brand and taught the

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[35] Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula 2010: 33–40.   [36] Al-Somali n.d.   [37] Ibid.: 3.
[38] Ibid.: 14–15.

group's central leadership a valuable lesson about the hazards of uncontrollable agents: an effective decentralized campaign of terrorism requires its leaders to first articulate clear guidelines to insure that its followers' attacks are in line with the group's strategic plan, and that their actions will not end up backfiring. Indeed, in 2013, Ayman al-Zawahiri introduced a document titled "General guidelines for jihad," although these guidelines hardly guarantee that agents will acknowledge the boundaries of "useful" violence.[39]

In comparison, ISIS is less apprehensive of agents' overreach, because it has few qualms about the use of indiscriminate violence. Moreover, whereas al-Qaeda promotes selective targeting, the Islamic State embraces and encourages extreme and indiscriminate brutality against the West, Shia, and even other Sunni jihadi groups. If inflicting pain is the only thing that matters, control is unnecessary as any lone-wolf attack could be a valuable contribution. The group does not worry about the psychological reasons that drove some of those who answered its call, or how well they fit its ideal model of Islamic behavior. The only thing ISIS asks from lone wolves is that they leave behind a message (such as a Facebook status update or YouTube video) paying homage to the group and its self-styled caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Islamic State seeks to produce a self-sustaining dynamic in which one lone-wolf attack inspires other individuals to carry out their own operations, thus making the fight less dependent on the activities of ISIS itself. Although it has inspired such attacks throughout the globe (including the United States, Germany, France, Australia, and Canada) they are still relatively uncommon and have failed to generate the momentum that would turn them from isolated events into a strategic threat. ISIS has been more successful in using lone-wolf attacks to amplify societal cleavages. ISIS wants to erase the "gray zone" and create a clear division between friends (Muslims) and enemies (non-Muslims).[40] By persuading Muslims to abandon their national identity for its version of Islamic identity and to attack the society in which they live, ISIS is feeding doubts regarding the loyalty of Muslims to their states of residence and respective societies. And yet growing suspicion and even outright hostility toward Muslims, over which states have only limited influence, has yet to produce clear radicalization among Muslims, which would then lead to further terrorist attacks.

Terrorists' agility is also apparent in their use of social media. They embrace platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter while repurposing them for malignant use. Such platforms enable the bypassing

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[39] Al-Zawahiri 2013.   [40] Islamic State 2015a.

of traditional media channels with their restrictions on the presentation of graphic violence, limits on time allocated to each news item, and other editorial considerations. They can disseminate information and propaganda independently. Al-Shabab's attack on the Kenyan Westgate shopping mall was even live-tweeted by the perpetrators, adding to the drama and terror.[41]

ISIS is particularly adept at utilizing social media. It produces numerous videos and magazines in several languages, and distributes them independently online, sometimes reaching an audience far greater than it would have had it relied on TV stations. The organization also uses manipulation to increase the visibility of its message. For example, it uses twitter bots to amplify the effectiveness of tweets, so that a tweet is retweeted automatically and at specifically tailored intervals in order to make it trend. The message then reaches a broader audience and strengthens the sense of ISIS's omnipresence.[42] Co-opting hashtags (e.g., the hashtags for the World Cup games #Brazil2014 and #WC2014) extends ISIS's reach.[43] ISIS also uses social media in a more targeted way, trying to reach out to individuals and, through online interaction, recruit them to come to its "caliphate" or to carry out terrorist attacks in their country of residence.[44]

Agility and Improvisation in Counterterrorism

States have invested vast resources in counterterrorism in recent years, with technological developments boosting their control power. Drones, for example, have become a prominent counterterrorism tool for both surveillance and targeted killing. Technological innovations also enhance states' ability to guard their borders.[45] Radical content online is closely monitored, and, notwithstanding legal limitations, electronic surveillance is rampant. The United States compelled (or went around) tech companies to make their data available for government investigations, seeking "back doors" into their programs and forcefully discouraging them from offering the public encryption programs that protect from state surveillance.[46] It was only after the Snowden leak revealed the extent of American online spying that the government began facing pressure to constrain its online surveillance.

States are gleaning information about radicalized youth who are looking to join terrorist groups by combing through Facebook statuses. They

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[41] Higham and Nakashima 2015.   [42] Stern and Berger 2015.   [43] Ibid.: 147.
[44] For example, see Callimachi 2015.   [45] Mendelsohn 2009: 161–84.
[46] Barrett et al. 2014; Nakashima and Gellman 2015.

also collect intelligence about individuals who have reached jihad arenas and the arenas themselves by examining Facebook pages, Instagram pictures, and YouTube videos. Technological advancements allow the bringing together of huge amounts of information, while computing helps to make sense of the collected intelligence. Network analysis, for example, enables states to identify clusters of terrorist supporters and routes to join jihadis in conflict zones.

States also embrace protean power. Creatively, they improvise and innovate in an attempt to generate favorable effects. However, hierarchical structures and bureaucratic rigidness sometimes undermine their ability to steal from the playbook of their agile non-state enemies. Countering terrorists' narratives, for example, is an objective that practitioners endorse yet struggle to implement for many reasons, including the danger that engaging terrorist claims would lend legitimacy to terrorist groups, and the need to quickly cut through bureaucratic hurdles to provide immediate responses to jihadis' messages.[47]

States achieve greater success in their attempts to magnify and exploit the uncertainty that terrorists face. Intelligence agencies have become adept at turning Internet forums into a source of information about the identities of jihadis, their ideology, and even internal debates. In lightly moderated forums, intelligence agents, using assumed identities, were able to confront radical messages. In more restricted password-protected forums, states utilized their superior technological capabilities to become privy to members' discussions, expose their locations and identities, and even attempt to sow discord among forum participants. Because such engagements happen in cyberspace, penetrating jihadi circles has become both easier and safer for state agents. States also tried to erode users' confidence and inflame relations between participants of different forums by temporarily shutting down some forums and not others and by spreading rumors of penetration.[48] These successes reached their limit as terrorist groups largely abandoned the forums and shifted to social media and to direct communication through encrypted messaging platforms (primarily, Telegram).

However, the expansion of the Islamic State's manpower presented states with the opportunity to plant spies in its ranks. The fear of spies, magnified as the group started suffering defeats, is fomenting internal divisions and even leading to purges. As a result, foreign fighters that are loyal to ISIS nevertheless end up defecting to save themselves from their suspicious and ruthless fellow ISIS members.[49]

How protean power circulates across different levels of analysis can be seen in the creation of new private actors dedicated to combatting

[47] Miller and Higham 2015.   [48] *The Economist* 2007.   [49] Sengupta 2016.

terrorism. Many such actors operate out in the open and in the bounds of the law. Others, however, work in the shadows and their actions sometimes violate state laws. Although such empowered actors could undermine some states' counterterrorism efforts, they can take actions that states avoid due to political and legal considerations. Shortly after 9/11, an operator of gambling and sex websites took advantage of al-Qaeda's failure to re-register the domain name of its website al-nida.com to snatch it and replace its content with a picture of an American flag. This move was consequential: al-Qaeda responded by piggybacking unsuspicious websites and putting its content in their back pages, before later moving on to relying on chat rooms as the next generation of online jihad.

The London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence has been at the forefront of private efforts to identify European foreign fighters. In another case, the hacktivist group Anonymous declared war on ISIS and launched a campaign to identify and report (to intelligence agencies' chagrin) ISIS-linked Twitter accounts.[50] Hacktivists also take a more direct approach, identifying websites, blogs, videos, and social media accounts and disrupting them through denial-of-service attacks.[51] Naturally, the most important private actors to impact counterterrorism online are the social media companies, primarily Twitter, Facebook, and Google (which owns YouTube). Driven primarily by financial considerations, they interact with governments and provide information to intelligence agencies. Moreover, they design policies regarding prohibited content and take down the accounts of suspected terrorists and terrorist groups, as well as their material.

A comprehensive and persistent campaign by Twitter to take down radical accounts has significantly limited the reach of ISIS propaganda.[52] In response, many ISIS sympathizers transitioned to Telegram, which has weaker terms of use and stronger encryption. Although Telegram provides jihadis a safe haven in cyberspace, ISIS leaders are calling on followers to return to Twitter.[53] The suspension of accounts makes retaining followers an onerous task, but giving up on that platform means abandoning the efforts to mobilize new crowds. As long as most of the individuals whom ISIS wishes to mobilize stick to Facebook and Twitter – a trend over which jihadis have very little control – the group must stay there.

The recent wave of Palestinian terror attacks and Israeli reactions to it exemplifies the unpredictable and often negative effects of this new class of counterterrorist actors. In response to knife attacks by young lone-wolf Palestinian terrorists, most acting on their own initiative, Israeli leaders called on their people to assist in neutralizing attackers. Civilians'

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[50] Griffin 2015.   [51] Cottee 2015.   [52] Berger and Morgan 2015.   [53] Bunzel 2016.

responsiveness created an awkward situation in which the state is outsourcing the provision of security to individuals it does not know before they take action. Moreover, empowered and often undertrained Israelis, fearful of any Palestinian-looking individual, ended up killing instead of subduing attackers and, consequently, further inflaming the atmosphere. Discrimination and sometimes outright violence directed at Israeli-Arabs amplified tensions within Israeli society. Additionally, cases of mis-identification led to the lynching and shooting of innocent Israeli residents. It is a cautionary tale for the way enhancing state capabilities through broad mobilization of the public could backfire; terrorists can be stopped faster, but the strengthening of a state's capabilities could enhance uncertainty and produce unanticipated dynamics that might result in increased motivation to commit terrorism as well as the amplification of societal and racial cleavages.

Conclusion

Terrorism could be understood as a creative resistance to the control power of the state. On the face of it, terrorists are better equipped to exploit uncertainty than their state opponents. State legitimacy strongly depends on its ability to demonstrate control, predictability, and accountability. No wonder it prefers to view the world through the lens of risk. But such inclination is a source of weakness given the prevalence of uncertainty. States might try to address this uncertainty by planning for the worst-case scenario and throwing resources at the problem, implicitly translating uncertainty into risk. As it is impossible to show that a particular means used was successful or not, such a damaging dynamic could continue for a long time, costing the state considerable resources without necessarily making it safer. Ultimately, states repeatedly fall into the trap of terrorists who expose control power's limitations.

Notwithstanding the greater agility of terrorist groups, they are confronted with the fact that protean power is very hard to control. As a result, protean power can become a double-edged sword, manifesting in unanticipated and undesirable effects (in the eyes of those harnessing uncertainty). Furthermore, terrorists' agility does not guarantee success. Terrorist groups can survive online by jumping between different social media platforms, thus defying control attempts. But Telegram allows them to only communicate with each other or post their propaganda; it does not offer channels to the much broader Muslim audience whom ISIS must mobilize if it is to attain its objectives. As long as most young Muslims stick to platforms that do not tolerate ISIS, it must fight to stay on Facebook and Twitter.

Even more problematic from the terrorists' perspective is the fact that most of them seek control power and thus must still grapple with their weaker material capabilities. It appears that protean power is more meaningful as an effect of subversion, designed to undermine local and international order. But when terrorist groups seek to establish their preferred order, it is the logic of control power that dominates. In fact, the greater the trappings of a state that terrorist groups attain, the less relevant their ability to negotiate protean power and the more vulnerable they become to their enemies' control power. This could explain how terrorists can wreak havoc yet still often fail to achieve their political objectives.

The turmoil in the Middle East is a testament to states' struggles to handle flaws and internal contradictions at the heart of the international system. The Arab revolutions involved great uncertainty from the start as individuals took to the streets long before they could enjoy the safety of numbers. But this was only the beginning of the story as the toppling of regimes further enhanced an already pervasive uncertainty. The regional system is in flux as control power diminishes and greater space for protean power opens. Regimes throughout the region have been unable to re-establish control power, but are also ill-equipped to harness uncertainty. Whether due to the sovereignty norms, fears of entanglement, or the complexity of recreating functioning states that could provide their people security and other services, members of international society appear unable to find a solution to the chaotic aftermath of the revolutions. In contrast, jihadi groups, who thrive in this chaos and benefit from exacerbating it, have been quick to capitalize on the uncertainty and fill political and security vacuums. But the loss of territories that ISIS and al-Qaeda had controlled in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya show that as long as terrorist groups keep looking to achieve control at the expense of others, they will find that, like their state enemies, they also are vulnerable to both control and protean power.