Introduction:
What is New About Research on Terrorism

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Research on terrorism is now in the midst of a period of rapid progress, much of which is embodied in the articles in this volume. Although our understanding of the phenomenon is still in its early stages, knowledge about the causes, conduct, and consequences of terrorism is accumulating. Important methodological advances have helped to make this progress possible, and continuing to deepen and extend the marriage of social science and the study of terrorism can be expected to yield further advances in the future.

Good theories about complex social and political phenomenon rarely emerge all at once from the efforts of individual scholars working in isolation. Instead, progress tends to occur over time as part of a broad commitment of intellectual resources, by numerous scholars and communities of scholars, to originate and analyze logics of the internal dynamics and casual linkages in theories, and to test theories about the real world with facts from the real world. This approach is sure to discover ambiguities and deficiencies in prior formulations and likely to bring forth improved or even wholly new theories that strengthen our knowledge. In recent decades, the field of international relations has witnessed this process working to enrich our knowledge about ethnic and civil war, international institutions, and the politics of unipolarity. This is now happening in the study of terrorism.

It is useful to think of progress in the study of terrorism as divided into two waves. The first wave was published mostly in the 1970s, 1980s, and
1990s by such scholars as David Rapoport, Walter Laqueur, Brian Jenkins, Jerrold Post, Ariel Merari, Martin Kramer, Bruce Hoffman, and Martha Crenshaw, some of whom are continuing to make contributions in the present day.\(^1\) Although ingredients can be observed earlier, the second wave began in earnest in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 and is commonly associated with scholars such as Robert Art, Daniel Byman, Mohammed Hafez, Alan Krueger, Andrew Kydd, Ami Pedahzur, Louise Richardson, Marc Sageman, Barbara Walter, and myself, among a growing number of others.\(^2\) While distinct, these waves share some commonalities and together are likely to influence future progress in the field for a long time to come.

The first wave of research on terrorism was heavily influenced by the perceptible and persistent, but also modest and gradual, rise of violence against innocent civilians and off-duty members of security forces by non-state actors against Western societies—particularly in the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Israel, and Japan—in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The United States was not immune, but the locus for much of what appeared to be leftist-inspired, revolutionary, and simply strange violence occurred elsewhere, threatening America’s principal allies in the Cold War more than the United States itself. Further, although some actors called “terrorist groups” at the time were large in number and had long-standing and reasonably well-known histories (for example, the Irish Republican Army and Palestinian Liberation Organization), many were newly formed, tiny, and nebulous (for example, Baader-Meinhoff, Black September, Red Brigades, and Aum Shinrikyo).

These circumstances influenced the study of terrorism, most especially by giving rise to a wave of what are commonly called “experts in terrorism.”

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The need for highly specialized information about militant individuals and small networks with cloudy agendas was highly salient for government agencies and for the media, and this demand for specific knowledge about particular terrorist groups accounts for many of the professional elements characterizing the first wave scholarship on the subject: (1) close working relationships with governments, as reflected in various degrees of support and cross over of personnel in the major first wave institutions on terrorism at St Andrews in Scotland, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel, and RAND in the United States; (2) numerous specialty journals dedicated exclusively to terrorism, such as *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, and *Violence, Aggression, and Terrorism*; (3) prominent journalists with deep knowledge of certain terrorist groups, such as Robin Wright, Thomas Friedman, and Peter Bergen; and (4) little representation of terrorism scholars among the tenured faculties at major research universities. Although these circumstances enabled a variety of accomplishments, they also restricted their reach and tended to separate terrorism from the broader marriage of social science and national security affairs that has been occurring increasingly from the end of World War II onwards.3

Among its important accomplishments, first wave research laid the foundations for and anticipated many insights in subsequent research. While new hypotheses appear in later work, it is the first wave that is responsible for much of the menu of causes of terrorism at the individual and social level that continue to be of interest. Today’s stock set of explanations—economic, religious, social network, and mental illness—are all prominent in the literature of the 1970s and 1980s, although scholars usually did not consider more than one in the same project, which limited testing. Further, data techniques associated with journalism and intelligence collection contributed to the rise of field research—particularly interviews of terrorist leaders and supporters—which was becoming more robust as the first wave continued.4 Finally, the first wave produced numerous examples of excellent more general analysis of cause and effect with lasting value. For example, even after some thirty years, Charles Russell and Bowman Miller’s study of the socio-economic characteristics of 350 Western terrorists remains one of the landmark studies of individual profiles of ordinary (that is, non-suicide) terrorists in the field.5 Similarly, Rapoport’s analyses of the different doctrine and methods of Thugs, Assassins, and Zealots-Sicarii was one of the earliest comparative

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4 Two fine examples of the use of elite interviews, which bridge the first and second waves, are Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God* (New York: Ecco, 2003).

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studies of religious terrorist groups and remains an exemplary model of this approach decades later.\(^6\)

Distinct from the first wave, although it built on its earlier accomplishments, a new second wave of research on terrorism is now underway. The second wave was triggered less as a response to the first than by the new concerns related to the spectacular terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, which killed more people (three thousand) than any terrorist attack in history and on a scale comparable to Japan’s attack at Pearl Harbor in 1941. This event not only increased interest in the study of terrorism, but also changed the nature of that interest, particularly for the United States. Whereas terrorism had often previously been viewed as a persistent, but modest menace comparable to individual acts of violence associated with domestic criminals, 9/11 increased the fear of another large-scale, direct attack usually connected with acts of war. Whereas terrorism was seen before as a persistent threat that could be contained by greater specialized knowledge about particular individuals and groups, the new elements of the attack—as a “surprise attack” and “suicide attack”—created powerful interest in broad questions about the causes of terrorism in general and suicide terrorism in particular.

These new circumstances are pushing the study of terrorism in new substantive and methodological directions. The most striking aspect of this new literature is that it fully embraces a variety of sophisticated qualitative, quantitative, formal social science methods and is routinely published in first-line journals in political science. The demand for general explanation of cause and effect about a complex social science phenomenon that is highly prominent for policy makers, the academic community, and the public at large—and not just for specific government agencies or journalists with fleeting attention in the subject—is already having profound changes in the professional development of scholarship on terrorism. Most important, although second wave scholars work with government agencies and even receive government funding on occasion, the locus of the production of knowledge has shifted from government and government-funded think tanks to independent centers and scholars in major research universities. Since 2002, many tenure and tenure-track faculty have contributed to the study of terrorism, including at the University of Chicago, Princeton University, Stanford University, Northwestern University, Columbia University, University of California at Los Angeles, University of California at San Diego, University of California at Berkeley, and many others. Further, while it was once rare to see articles on terrorism in major journals in the field, it is now commonplace. A survey of the American Political Science Review, International Security, World Politics, International Studies Quarterly, and

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*International Organization* over the past thirty years finds eight articles on terrorism published from 1977 to 1984, three articles from 1985 to 2000, and forty-two articles from 2001 to 2007. This survey does not include *Security Studies*, which, with this volume, is significantly increasing its attention to terrorism, like other prominent journals. As this growth demonstrates, the study of terrorism is now less relegated to the narrow area of terrorism experts and emerging as a productive variety of social science research programs on par with the major literature in the field of international relations.

Today’s growing marriage of professional social science and the study of terrorism is profoundly affecting progress in this field. With more scholars and scholarly resources, the study of terrorism is not simply expanding and re-asking old questions. It is also asking new questions and applying sophisticated social science methods to improve competitive testing of propositions, demonstrate their strength of effect, and formalize linkages in their logic.

These methodological advances are improving the ability for knowledge on terrorism to accumulate. Sometimes this occurs by subtraction, such as the work by Sageman on mental illness and terrorists, which has largely discredited this popular first wave explanation. Sometimes accumulation occurs by addition, as with new work on suicide terrorism showing the crucial role of foreign military occupation, an explanation playing little role in first wave research. Sometimes it occurs by superior tools, as with Nichole Argo’s sophisticated survey instruments that improve the quality of field research, or by using comprehensive data and quantitative analysis, which is the case with Jenna Jordan and Lindsey O’Rourke in their studies of the effectiveness of leadership decapitation, and gender and terrorism, respectively. Sometimes knowledge improves through better frameworks that clarify and overturn conventional logics, as with Risa Brooks on the theoretical linkages between democracy and terrorism.

More than any one contribution, however, is the growing ability of the new wave to reshape the study of terrorism as a whole. Whereas first wave scholarship focused on single causal factors and rarely considered more than one, the second wave has self-consciously sharpened frameworks for considering factors that operate at fundamentally different levels of analysis, improving our understanding of the theoretical connections across strategic, social, and individual levels of causes for terrorist events.\(^7\) Perhaps most fundamentally, while the first wave paid tremendous attention to irrational factors (irrational individuals and cultural biases), second wave scholarship is broadly committed to investigating rational logics (rewards and compromises, and costs and threats), as well.\(^8\) Irrationality may be neither necessary

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\(^8\) On rational logics of terrorism, see Kydd and Walter, “Sabotaging the Peace,” Pape, “Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism”; Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Columbia
nor sufficient for terrorism and better understanding of rational causes may reduce the unpredictability of at least some types of terrorism.

The Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism (CPOST), based at the University of Chicago and funded by the Carnegie Corporation in New York, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency of the U.S. Department of Defense, Argonne National Laboratories, and the Social Sciences Division of the University of Chicago, is pleased to contribute to this new wave of research. The purpose of this project is to use the intellectual resources of the social sciences, and a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis, to contribute to important public policy debates and to address serious public policy challenges related to the principal international terrorism issues facing the United States and the world community. CPOST advances its purpose through two main substantive activities: (1) the collection, maintenance, and expansion of a strategic knowledge-base of violent extremist attacks (especially suicide terrorism); and (2) research projects to help the policy community solve fundamental international security problems that threaten the United States and international peace related to terrorism (such as the causes and solutions to terrorism, the dynamics of martyrdom, the consequences of nuclear proliferation, and the analytic premises of the U.S. war on terrorism).

As part of its commitment to new research, CPOST has recently supported a variety of research endeavors on the causes and consequences of terrorism and strategies to respond to it by faculty and graduate students at the University of Chicago, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Northwestern University. The results are being published, for the first time, in *Security Studies* and represent the leading edge of the new wave of research on terrorism in a number of specific areas:

*Individual Logic of Terrorism.* Do individuals carry out terrorist acts for self-interested reasons (seeking status, money, or rewards in the afterlife) or for altruistic motives (values related to the security and quality of life of their communities)? Although recent empirical studies on the individual logic of terrorism have improved our knowledge, the field has a lack of detailed surveys of the presence of selective versus public incentives in the populations of rebellious communities. In a major effort to correlate individual personal values with willingness to participate in terrorist violence at various levels of anticipated sacrifice, Nichole Argo has surveyed the attitudes of 351 Palestinians living in Balata Refugee Camp near Nablus on the West Bank. Her findings suggest that Palestinians who score high on self-enhancing values feel less likely to participate in collective action in general, and costly resistance in particular.

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Gender and Terrorism. What makes female suicide terrorists special? This has been one of the most commonly asked questions of the past few years. Relying on the first complete database of every female suicide terrorist attacker since 1980, with over one hundred in all, Lindsey O’Rourke provides important new answers that strongly challenge the common view of female suicide terrorists as young, easily manipulated girls caught up in a ferocious religious struggle. Most importantly, she finds that (1) female suicide terrorists are overwhelmingly likely to carry out attacks for secular groups, with the result that religion may well be dampening the number of suicide attackers who would otherwise exist; and (2) female attackers are generally over the age of twenty-four and deeply committed to the traditional norms of their society, with the implication that efforts to Westernize traditional societies with military power are likely to backfire.

Decapitation of Terrorist Groups. The idea that terrorist groups can be readily destroyed by leadership attacks has long been a core tenet of the counterterrorism policies of many states, despite the fact that many attempts produce high collateral damage and other serious negative international consequences. Until now, a key obstacle to assessing the consequences of this military strategy has been the lack of comprehensive and systematic data about leadership attacks on terrorist groups. To fill this gap, Jenna Jordan collects every leadership attack against terrorist groups from the end of World War II to 2004, over 280 attempts in all. The preliminary findings are important and surprising. Leadership decapitation is successful only against terrorist groups less than ten years old—groups that are likely to collapse for internal reasons about half the time in any case. For older groups, particularly older religious groups, leadership attacks generally increase the vigor and lethality of the group—likely because institutionalization of leadership selection allows younger and more aggressive leaders to take command.

Democracy and Terrorism. The connection between democracy and terrorism has emerged as a major public policy issue in the United States, playing a central role in recent American policies in Iraq, the West Bank, Pakistan, and elsewhere. However, there exists surprisingly little theoretical research and only a handful of empirical analyses on how democracy affects militant group strategy and decisions to use terrorist tactics. Risa Brooks provides a crucial starting point for investigating the causal relationship between democracy and terrorism. She analyzes five sets of proto-theories, or “schools of thought,” about the motivations of militant groups within terrorism studies: the Strategic Choice, Psychological, Ideational, Organizational, and Societal approaches—exploring the basic assumptions, causal logic, and empirical evidence for each. Most significantly, her research shows that purely on theoretical grounds, in only a very few cases should we actually expect democracy to yield a reduction in the incidence of terrorism. Together, these studies represent a substantial advance in the march of the second wave of social science research of terrorism. To be sure, our understanding of the
origins of terrorism, the motivations of terrorists, strategies of terrorist organizations, and counterterrorism responses remains at an early stage. Yet, recent progress has meaningfully contributed to improved knowledge on these terrorism issues, which is so vital to the security of the United States, and many countries and peoples across the world. As young scholars continue to enter the field, we have every reason to look forward to even more progress in coming years.