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Conceptualizing and measuring terrorism

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Challenges in conceptualizing and measuring terrorism

Many commentators have noted the difficulty of conceptualizing and measuring terrorism (Crenshaw, 1981; Schmid and Jongman, 1988; Hoffman, 2008). These difficulties can be seen on both conceptual and methodological levels. On the conceptual level, terrorism has never received a universally accepted definition that distinguishes it from other forms of political violence and crime. This was brought home to me in a recent trip to India, where a member of an audience in Uttar Pradesh, upon hearing my lecture on terrorism, complained that I had not distinguished “good terrorists” from “bad terrorists.” The interlocutor was referring in particular to the Communist Party of India—Maoist, which not only engages in a fair amount of behavior that many would classify as terrorism, but at the same time participates in nonviolent legitimate political and social activities. And this is not an isolated example. Quite a number of groups that are credited with terrorist attacks—ANC, PRI, IRA, Hamas, Hezbollah, to name a few—simultaneously engage in legal nonviolent activities. Indeed, many of the most prominent terrorist groups in the world—including the Shining Path, ETA, the IRA, the LTTE, and the FARC—often conceive of themselves as freedom fighters and have a loyal constituency who may denounce terrorism but are, indeed, relying on these groups to advance their political agenda. This fundamental characteristic of terrorism no doubt explains in large part why international organizations such as the United Nations have not succeeded in adopting a universally-accepted definition (European Commission, 2008:3–4).

Defining terrorism is no less complex for scientists. Schmid and Jongman’s (1988:5) survey found 109 different research definitions of terrorism. More recently, Sheehan (2012) compared 12 definitional elements used in five of the most influential unclassified terrorism event databases. He found that none of the five databases included all of the 12 elements in their definition, and there were major differences across the databases in terms of how many definitional items were included. One database (RAND) included nine of the elements, two databases (GTD, ITERATE) included seven, one (WITS) included six, and one (TWEED) five. Only two elements were included in terrorism definitions for all five databases (perpetrators are sub-state groups or clandestine agents, and the act is outside the context of legitimate warfare or a coup d’état). Two additional elements were included in the terrorism definitions of four of the five databases (use of violence and intended to influence or coerce an audience). The remain-
ing eight elements were divided between different combinations of three or fewer of the five databases.

On the methodological level, measuring terrorism is challenging because the main parties to terrorist attacks either lack accurate information, do not share a common view of what terrorism is, or have information that they are unwilling to share. In general, criminal behavior includes three different types of human observers. First, offenders are obviously able to provide first-hand knowledge. Second, social control agents, including police, prosecutors, judges and even witnesses, may possess a good deal of information about crimes. And finally, for most crimes (except so-called victimless crimes like drug offenses or prostitution), victims may also be able to report on their crime-related experiences. In criminology, these three types of human contact with crime have resulted in data that come either from offenders (self-reported surveys), social control agents (official data), or victims (victimization surveys).

As my colleagues and I have noted elsewhere (LaFree, Dugan, and Miller, 2015: ch. 2), all three of these data sources are problematic when it comes to terrorism. Most active terrorists are obviously unwilling to participate in interviews. Even if willing to participate, getting access to known terrorists for research purposes raises evident logistical challenges, and when offenders are willing to participate, their self-reports may be biased and incomplete. Terrorism data from official sources like police are challenging because anti-terrorism statutes vary widely across countries, and in many cases individuals who have committed terrorist acts are convicted not of committing terrorism but rather for other related offenses, such as weapons violations and money laundering (Smith, Damphousse, and Jackson, 2002). Thus, Dzhokar Tsarnaev, the surviving bomber in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing case, was charged not with terrorism but with one count of using an improvised explosive device and one count of malicious destruction of property by means of an explosive device resulting in death (LaFree, Dugan, and Miller, 2015).

Victimization surveys have been of little use in the study of terrorism. Despite the attention it gets in the global media, terrorism is much less common than more familiar types of violent crime like robbery and homicide. This means that even with extremely large sample sizes, few individuals in most countries will have been victimized by terrorists. Moreover, because victims of terrorism are often chosen at random, they are unlikely to know the perpetrators, making it difficult to produce details about offenders. And finally, in many cases, victims of terrorism are killed by their attackers, making it impossible for them to share their experiences. For all of these reasons, terrorism data that relies on the reports of victims is likely to be of limited use.

**Moving from definitions to reality**

There is a famous expression by American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1869; and commonly misattributed to German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck) that “laws are like sausages. Better not to see them being made.” The creation of data on terrorism from open sources is equally messy. To illustrate these complexities in the rest of this essay, I take apart the separate components of the definition of terrorism currently used by the team that collects the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

**GTD background**

The GTD began in 2001, when a research team from the University of Maryland was able to secure the original hard copies of unclassified data on terrorist attacks collected by the Pinkerton Global Intelligence Service (PGIS), which by then contained more than 67,000 cases
from 1970 to 1997 (LaFree, 2015). As this chapter was being prepared, the GTD includes more than 140,000 terrorist attacks from around the world for the period 1970 to 2014. The first version of the GTD was developed about a decade ago, and in recent years updated versions have been made available to the public each year (LaFree et al., 2015). Early versions of the GTD were based mostly on individual news outlets such as the Associated Press, Agence-France Presse, and the BBC. Over time, data collection has relied increasingly on existing media aggregators such as Lexis/Nexis, Factiva, and the Open Source Center. At present the data collection process begins with a universe of 1.6 million articles published daily worldwide in order to identify the relatively small subset of articles that describe terrorist attacks. Data collection uses customized search strings to isolate an initial pool of potentially relevant articles, followed by more sophisticated techniques to further refine the search results.

When we first digitized the original PGIS data we adopted its definition of terrorism:

… threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by non-state actors to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.

(START, 2015:8)

After the PGIS data were reinterpreted to create the GTD, we developed plans to extend the data beyond 1997. In general, these plans were guided by a desire to preserve as much as possible the definition of terrorism used to create the PGIS legacy data, but at the same time to make the definition as accurate and useful as possible for researchers and policymakers. Accordingly, we added three inclusion criteria to the case selection process, but to provide maximum flexibility for users who might approach the data with differing definitions of terrorism, we included all cases that meet at least two of these criteria. The three new criteria are:

**Criterion 1:** The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal.

**Criterion 2:** There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims.

**Criterion 3:** The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities.

Because the GTD includes cases that meet only two of these criteria, it is possible to analyze the extent to which each of the three criteria is met. Taken together from 1970 to 2014, 18,776 attacks (13 percent of the total) recorded in the GTD are missing one of the three criteria. Criterion 3—whether the action was outside legitimate warfare—is by far the most likely to be missing, accounting for nearly 86 percent of the attacks where one of the criteria is missing. Criterion 1—whether the perpetrators have the intent of attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal—accounts for nearly 9 percent of the attacks with one criteria missing. And finally, the other 5 percent of attacks missing Criterion 2—evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience.

In addition, as the GTD data collection process matured, the team increasingly recognized the fact that there is often definitional overlap between terrorism and other forms of crime and political violence, including insurgency, conflict between rival groups, hate crime, and organized crime. Moreover, in some cases the available information is insufficient or conflicting. In response, the GTD team added a filter called “doubt terrorism proper,” which signifies that while the analysts’ concerns are not sufficient to exclude the case, they have enough uncertainty about the case to single it out. For all cases from 1998 to 2014 where doubt terrorism proper is indicated, the GTD analysts also provide an alternative designation: (1) insurgency/guerilla
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action; (2) other crime type; (3) intra/intergroup conflict; or (4) lack of intentionality. The first three categories are self-explanatory; the fourth indicates a situation where the analyst is not sure that the motives of the perpetrators constitute intent to commit a terrorist act. Of the four types, by far the most common is insurgency, accounting for 79 percent of the 21,517 total cases recorded between 1998 and 2014. Next most common are other crime types, accounting for nearly 15 percent of the total. Inter/intragroup conflict involves 5 percent of the cases of doubt terrorism proper, and lack of intentionality is responsible for one-half of 1 percent.

In 2013, the team added a fifth type of doubt terrorism proper: that the event was committed by a state actor (rather than a non-state actor). This designation is indicated by GTD analysts in only 99 attacks from 2013–2014—about 0.4 percent of the total.

To illustrate the complexity of conceptualizing and measuring terrorism in the rest of this chapter, I consider how the various elements of the original PGIS definition of terrorism and the added criteria have been operationalized by the team that produces the GTD. For convenience, I follow through the various elements of the definition above from front to back and then consider the implementation of Criteria Two and Three; I will discuss Criteria One as one part of the original terrorism definition.

**Threatened or actual use**

The GTD definition of terrorism not only includes the actual use of violence but also threats to use violence. This seems defensible in that terrorism sometimes involves threatened as opposed to actual use of violence. For example, aerial hijackers who seize an aircraft and say they will blow it up unless their demands are met may threaten violence without actually using it. But in practice, the inclusion of threatened violence in the GTD depends heavily on specific situations. Thus, while our GTD team routinely includes threats that are a part of an evolving situation where some action has already been taken by the perpetrators—like an airline hijacking or hostage-taking—the team routinely excludes cases where threats are made but no known physical action has been taken. For example, the GTD has never included threats such as bomb hoaxes made by phone or threats against the life of world leaders that are (as far as can be discerned from media sources) never acted upon. So in this sense, the argument that the GTD includes threatened violence is conditional based on the specific situation.

**Illegal force and violence**

The next part of the GTD definition of terrorism requires that an act involve illegal force and violence. Violence would seem to be a relatively objective measure of terrorism, but in practice it is often ambiguous. In everyday use, violence generally implies physical force that is directed at injuring or killing another human being (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). So we might decide that any attack on humans is violent and therefore fulfills this part of the definition, and any attack on property is nonviolent and so cannot be terrorism. But this is not nearly as clear-cut a distinction as it may at first appear. For example, we have just seen that violence can be threatened rather than actualized in some terrorist situations—like aerial hijacking or hostage-taking. And the line between attacks on property and attacks on humans can be surprisingly complicated. To begin with, some attacks on property are actually meant to kill or injure people. Thus, the GTD includes 113 cases where the weapon is given as “sabotage equipment”: for example, an individual or group removes the bolts from a railroad track with the intent of derailing the train and killing its passengers. While the attack itself is on property rather than humans, its effects can still be extremely lethal.
In other cases, attacks are specifically aimed at property but through some miscalculation end up killing or injuring people. Both the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the Environmental Liberation Front (ELF) rarely plan their attacks with the idea of injuring people (Varriale-Carson, LaFree, and Dugan, 2012). But there have been cases where ELF members have put spikes in trees to prevent loggers from cutting them down, and by accident a lumberman has hit one of the spikes with a chainsaw and has been seriously injured (Varriale-Carson et al., 2012).

More generally, what separates a nighttime attack on a laboratory facility that is unoccupied and kills no one from a similar attack on the same facility that is mistakenly thought to be unoccupied and does kill someone? To help clarify these distinctions between attacks against people and property, the GTD codebook (START, 2015:8) requires that “the incident must entail some level of violence or immediate threat of violence, including property violence, as well as violence against people.” But this provision does not eliminate all ambiguity, and of course in many cases the data to draw such fine-grained distinctions are unavailable.

Non-state actors …

Another definitional requirement of most terrorism event databases including the GTD is that the acts recorded be limited to “non-state actors.” In general, this requirement is meant to distinguish the political violence committed by groups and individuals from the violence committed by nation-states. This requirement is not an argument against the importance of state-based terrorism—which McCauley (2006) and others (e.g., van Creveld, 1991) have persuasively argued likely kills more people than non-state terrorism—so much as a frank admission that it is easier to collect terrorism data on non-state than state actors. Nonetheless, distinguishing non-state terrorist attacks from others raises at least three serious challenges.

First, what is a state, and who determines this? For example, because the Palestine territories are not officially recognized by most governments of the world as a state, distinguishing state from non-state terrorism there is likely more complex than in other parts of the world. Similar complications arise in other contested areas, including the relationship between France and Corsica, the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, and the United States and Puerto Rico. And of course, it is exactly in these contested areas where terrorist attacks are likely to be especially common. For example, LaFree, Dugan, and Miller (2015:Table 8.1) estimate that from 1970 to 2012, nearly 8,000 attacks identified in the GTD were connected to separatist groups operating in the Palestinian territories, Corsica, Northern Ireland, or Puerto Rico.

Second, it is frequently complex to determine whether a terrorist attack is being directed by a state or by a terrorist organization that is either directly aligned with a state or simply happens to be useful for state leadership. For example, Mitchell, Carey, and Butler (2014) demonstrate how governments frequently use right-wing militias to achieve government policy objectives. Many of these right-wing attacks get classified as terrorist attacks in the GTD. This was especially common for right-wing terrorist organizations operating in Latin America in the 1980s. In some cases, governments simply looked the other way and allowed them to operate (Avilés, 2006). In other cases, governments may have actually provided material support to such groups to further their own political ends. For example, the GTD includes many cases attributed to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC, in Spanish), a Colombian para-military and drug trafficking group that was an active belligerent in the Colombian armed conflict during the period from 1997 to 2006. The AUC was responsible for attacks against the FARC and ELN rebel groups but was also widely believed to receive significant support from Colombian politicians and members of the Colombian military (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 1997–2005).
And this phenomenon is not limited to right-wing groups. We could argue that nearly all left-wing terrorist organizations until the collapse of the Soviet Union were to some extent under its influence and in some cases received active financial and tactical support. Likewise, the GTD includes attacks by the “Contras” in Nicaragua that were clearly being supported to some extent by the United States. And certainly many have pointed out (e.g., Stepanova, 2008; Flanagan, 2009) that radical extremist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah receive direct and indirect support from various countries.

Finally, there can be ambiguity in deciding when a state becomes a state. For example, while the GTD was being collected, the world’s countries experienced important changes, including the unification of East and West Germany; the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia; and the independence movements of Eritrea and South Sudan. Distinguishing acts by state and non-state actors during these transitions includes an added layer of complexity. More recently, the Islamic State of the Levant (ISIL) has proclaimed itself to be a state and has begun levying taxes, setting up social services, and even undertaking the development of a national currency (Lister, 2015). At what point should terrorism databases conclude that a developing political entity is indeed a state and therefore its acts represent state-based rather than non-state-based attacks?

As previously noted, in 2013–2014, the GTD identifies 93 cases where analysts were concerned that the attack might have involved a state rather than a non-state actor. In looking through these cases, it is clear that many take place in countries undergoing civil war or substantial conflict and violence: the top five countries in order are Syria, Ukraine, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Iraq. The typical pattern is an attack where no group claims responsibility and there are either few available details or contradictory details, as illustrated in this 2014 case from the Ukraine (#07070059):

Assailants fired a mortar shell at a car in Iuansk City, Ukraine. The driver of the car was wounded in the blast. No group claimed responsibility for the incident.

With so little information to go on, the GTD team was unsure whether rebels or the government were responsible for the blast.

To attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal …

The PGIS data that we used to create the GTD from 1970 to 1997 included this phrase in its definition of terrorism, and because we were interested in maintaining consistency with the data collection over time, we retained this phrase in the GTD definition. However, the fact that the definition lists economic, religious, and social goals as well as political ones has required us to think seriously about the implications for our data collection efforts. Most basically, it isn’t entirely clear how economic, religious, or social goals differ from political goals. In general, we have included attacks that appear to be motivated for these other purposes only if they also seem to have a political purpose. So a bank robbery (economic), an attack on a place of worship (religious), or an assault on another person (social) are generally excluded from the GTD unless we can also find evidence of a political motive.

At base, implementing this part of the definition of terrorism is especially challenging because it requires insights into the motives of the perpetrators, which may be falsely reported, distorted, or simply unavailable in media sources. Yet as we saw above, this distinction is so central to the GTD classification of terrorism that it is included as Criterion 1 of the three required criteria for terrorism in the Codebook (START, 2015:8). Just after the statement that the act must be
aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal, the GTD Codebook warns analysts that “In terms of economic goals, the exclusive pursuit of profit does not satisfy this criterion. It must involve the pursuit of more profound, systemic economic change” (START:8). A few pages later, analysts are reminded that this criterion is not satisfied in those cases where the perpetrator(s) “acted out of a pure profit motive or from an idiosyncratic personal motive unconnected with broader societal change” (START, 2015:13).

As can be seen from these instructions to GTD analysts, one of the main reasons why this requirement is so critical is that it endeavors to distinguish terrorist acts from other types of criminal acts. For example, if a group of attackers robs a bank to make themselves richer, it is an ordinary bank robbery; if the same group robs a bank to support a politically-motivated violent social movement, it is terrorism. Complicated examples abound. According to the GTD, kidnapping or hostage-taking for purely economic gain is ordinary crime; kidnapping or hostage-taking to further a political goal is terrorism. Selling drugs (or other banned or regulated products) only for profit is ordinary crime; doing so to support a terrorist cause is not.

As noted above, starting in 1998, GTD analysts indicate whether they had some suspicion that the attack being coded was not terrorism but rather some other type of crime. From 1998–2014, a total of 2,208 attacks in the GTD were coded as possibly involving in part or in total a crime other than terrorism. When analysts coded an event as potentially involving a crime other than terrorism, 35 percent of the time they also indicated that the attack may not have met Criterion 1—attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal. The top five countries where GTD analysts were concerned that the incident involved crime other than terrorism were surprisingly diverse, with Pakistan having the most cases and the United States the second largest number (India, Algeria, and Iraq round out the top five). While the countries are diverse, the underlying reasons for the ambiguity are fairly similar. The most common issue encountered is evidence from the open sources that is contradictory. A typical example from Pakistan in 2014 is described as follows (Case #02110014):

Assailants attacked police officers protecting a polio vaccine team in the Parowa area, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. One police officer was killed and another was wounded in the attack. No group claimed responsibility.

This case was flagged as potentially non-terrorism because there was also credible media information in the case indicating that the police may have been targeted because fighting tribal members thought they were about to be arrested.

In a 2013 U.S. case (Case #05200075) where the GTD team was concerned that the event might not have been terrorism, there was also a dispute over the facts about the case presented in the media:

A letter containing ricin was mailed to the Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg. The letter caused no injuries as it was intercepted before it could reach Mayor Bloomberg. The letter, which was one of three sent to pro-gun control political and social figures on May 20, 2013, warned of future attacks if Bloomberg and other gun control advocates pursued legislation to limit gun ownership. Shannon Richardson, an American television actress, was arrested on June 7, 2013 in connection with the attack.

The case was contradicted when Ms. Richardson later claimed that she had sent the letters to the Mayor and others in order to frame her husband.2
Of course, decisions in cases like these are no doubt affected by the context in which they occur. For example, if a kidnapping is attributed to a known terrorist organization, such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), it may be easier for the GTD team to conclude that it is a terrorist act than if no attribution of responsibility is made. This no doubt explains why 84 percent of the cases where GTD analysts are uncertain about whether an act is terrorism and decide that it might be an ordinary crime are also cases where no perpetrators have been identified. And it is important to note that linking an attack to a criminal organization may have the opposite effect. For example, attacks perpetrated by well-known criminal organizations like the Mafia may be less likely to be interpreted as terrorism even when they fulfill the other definitional requirements.

Through fear, coercion, or intimidation …

The final part of the GTD definition of terrorism, that the act involve fear, coercion, or intimidation, is also built into the GTD coding procedures as Criterion 2: “There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims” (START, 2015:8). The first challenge with this definitional requirement is that terrorist attacks are often complex, involving multiple perpetrators. What do we do if some perpetrators use fear, coercion, or intimidation, but others do not? The GTD coding manual provides direct guidance on this issue: “It is the act taken as a totality that is considered, irrespective if every individual involved in carrying out the act was aware of this intention. As long as any of the planners or decision-makers behind the attack intended to coerce, intimidate or publicize, the intentionality criterion is met” (START, 2015:8).

Starting in 1998, the GTD team identified 105 cases where there is concern that the intentionality requirement has not been met. Interestingly, only 3 percent of these cases were missing one of the three criteria. The top five countries in terms of cases where the GTD team was not totally confident that the act qualified as terrorism because of the intentions of the perpetrators were: Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Ukraine. For example, a 2014 case (#03250064) in Pakistan reads as follows:

An explosive device was discovered and safely defused on the roof of a bus at Shah Abdul Latif University in Khairpur City, Sindh Province, Pakistan. No group claimed responsibility for the incident.

The intention of the perpetrators to commit a violent act is thrown into doubt in this case because a spokesperson for the University denied that there were bombs on the roof of the bus and described the whole incident as a hoax.

A 2014 case in India (#06070025) where intentionality was an issue reads as follows:

A grenade detonated at the General Bus Stand in Anantnag town, Jammu and Kashmir State, India. Seven people, including two police officers, were injured in the blast. No group claimed responsibility for the incident.

The media source goes on to say that the cause of the blast is still unknown and under investigation, and local witnesses reported that it was a grenade blast, while police suspected that it may have been an accidental explosion caused by a battery.
Outside the context of legitimate warfare

One of the challenges faced by all terrorism event databases is to try and distinguish terrorist attacks from ordinary warfare. The GTD team includes Criterion 3 to distinguish violence “in the context of legitimate warfare activities” (START, 2015:8) from acts that are “outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law.” In particular, GTD analysts look for violations of humanitarian law that “deliberately target civilians or non-combatants” (START, 2015:8). But distinguishing legitimate warfare from collateral damage, insurrection, or civil war is often challenging. And these challenges frequently arise in situations where access to credible media sources is especially limited.

From 1970 to the present, the GTD team identified 16,058 cases (11 percent of all cases) where Criterion 3 is not met. The five top countries that do not meet Criterion 3 are El Salvador, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and Pakistan: countries that have experienced many years of war and political conflict. The main reason why these cases are flagged for Criterion 3 is the concern that the attack is in fact conventional warfare rather than terrorism. For example, a 2014 case (#12020008) from Iraq reads as follows:

Assailants kidnapped a lieutenant colonel in Baajah area, Shirqat District, Saladin Governate, Iraq. This was one of three similar abductions in the area on the same day. The outcome of the kidnapings is unknown. No group claimed responsibility for the incidents; however, sources attributed the attacks to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

This case was flagged for not meeting Criterion 3 because it appeared that the lieutenant colonel was in an active military situation.

Many of these cases are also likely to be flagged by GTD analysts from 1998 to 2014 under the “doubt terrorism proper” variable. As noted above, insurgency from 1970 to 2014 accounts for 79 percent of the alternates given by GTD analysts who were concerned that a case might not qualify as terrorism. Not surprisingly, the countries where insurgency or guerilla action was most likely mentioned as an alternative to terrorism were countries racked by civil war, including El Salvador, Iraq, and Afghanistan. For example, a 2014 case (#03210034) in Iraq was described as follows:

An explosive device detonated near the convoy of lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Saleh in Baiji District, Saladin Governate, Iraq. Three people, including Saleh and two soldiers, were killed in the blast. No group claimed responsibility for the incident; however, sources suspected that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was involved in the attack.

The GTD analyst designated this as potentially insurgency rather than terrorism because despite the unsubstantiated connection to ISIL, the attack targeted military personnel in an active combat zone.

Overall, the GTD records 347 cases from 1998–2014 as potentially being intra or intergroup conflict rather than terrorism. In 16 percent of the cases where analysts indicated that the act might instead by intra or intergroup conflict, they also indicated that it did not meet Criterion 1—the requirement that attacks have a political, economic, religious, or social motivation. The lead countries for cases where intra or intergroup conflict events were suspected are Pakistan, the United Kingdom, Lebanon, India, and Sri Lanka. Most of the cases in the UK have to do
with battles between the Provisional IRA and various branches of the Ulster Volunteer Force. A case in 2002 (#06020002) describes the following incident:

An outbreak of sectarian violence in Belfast between members of the Provisional IRA and the Ulster Volunteer Force in East Belfast led to 3 Protestant men being shot.

The GTD team indicated that this case was ambiguous because the media reports also noted that the attack may have been the result of conflict between the two sectarian groups.

While the context is different, the underlying circumstances are similar in a 2014 (#05190067) Pakistan case:

Assailants opened fire on two Sunni Tehreek workers in the Orangi Town neighborhood, Karachi city, Sindh Province. The two workers were killed in the attack. No group claimed responsibility.

The GTD team was concerned that this might not be a case of terrorism because other media sources speculated that the attack may have been related to recent fighting between a religious party and an ethno-political party.

Conclusions

This chapter should make it clear that conceptualizing and recording terrorist attacks is a complex task. No worldwide, universally accepted definition exists. Traditional sources of information are problematic. Open source information that is available is frequently contradictory or incomplete. The behavior that most would recognize as terrorism often overlaps with insurgency, guerrilla activity, ethnic cleansing, hate crime, and organized crime, among others. Distinctions between state actors and non-state actors are often murky. Information on perpetrators and their motives is frequently missing.

But indeed, developing accurate counts and descriptions of any type of criminal violence is challenging. For example, cross-national data on homicides, likely the most reliably measured type of ordinary violence, is limited to a large extent to highly industrialized democracies (Baumer and Wolff, 2014; LaFree, Carrillo, and McDowall, 2015). Reliable cross-national data on other types of violent crime—robberies, rapes, assaults—are only available for a handful of countries, and differences in legal definitions and reporting requirements make direct cross-national comparisons difficult or impossible (Aebi, 2004). Even within a single country, collecting detailed information on the characteristics of violent crimes is challenging. For example, in 2012 the proportion of homicides cleared by arrest or “exceptional means” in the United States was only 68 percent (FBI, 2012). Also, these are arrests, not convictions, which for most crimes are substantially lower. And of course, clearance rates are far lower for most other crimes. For example, FBI national clearance rates in 2012 were 13 percent for reported burglaries and 12 percent for reported auto thefts.

Indeed, in at least one respect, developing cross-national estimates of terrorism may be easier than developing cross-national estimates of any other types of illegal violence: unlike most other types of illegal violence, many of those who commit terrorist acts are actively involved in publicizing them. As Jenkins (1975:16) observed many years ago, “terrorism is theatre” and “terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press.” In fact, the media are so central to contemporary terrorist groups that some researchers have argued that the birth of modern terrorism is directly linked to the launch of the
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first television satellite in 1968 (Hoffman 2008:136–37). This invention meant that for the first
time in human history, stories could be transmitted almost instantaneously from local sources
anywhere in the world back to network news headquarters and on to the public. It seems
increasingly unlikely that a major terrorist attack—particularly one claiming many lives—can
any longer elude the attention of the global media.

Thus, while conceptualizing and measuring terrorism is complex, in the early part of the
twenty-first century, worldwide data on terrorism is arguably the most comprehensive type
of information on illegal violence that exists. At a time when homicide statistics are still only
available for a subset of mostly Western industrialized countries, and valid cross-national data on
rape, assault, and robbery are simply unavailable, terrorism estimates now exist for every country
in the world.

Notes
1. Once the new criteria were established and GTD analysts began collecting post-1997 data, the team
reviewed the earlier data and endeavored to apply retrospectively the three criteria to the legacy data.
2. Eventually Ms. Richardson was convicted of mailing ricin-laced letters to Mayor Bloomberg, President
Obama, and Mark Glaze, the director of Mayors Against Illegal Guns. On July 16, 2014, she was sen-
tenced to 18 years in prison (Huffington Post, 2014).
3. This estimate is based on an analysis of the full GTD, 1970–2014.
4. Exceptional means include cases where the alleged offender dies before legal processing.

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