

The interaction between democracy and terrorism

Marianne Oenema

Abstract

There is a great deal of research about terrorism and policy changes, but the broader political dimension has thus far received scant attention. I have therefore written a literature review focusing on this broader political dimension of the interaction between democracies and terrorism. The results show that, contrary to the foreign policy aim of the United States to turn countries with a lot of terrorist activity into democracies for the purpose of decreasing the risk of terrorist attacks, being a democratic country actually increases the probability of suffering such an attack. It has also been found that, following a terrorist attack, fundamental features of democratic countries sometimes change, though this issue requires further research. Interestingly, it seems more important to know how a country, whether democratic or not, acts towards their own citizens and abroad to accurately predict the probability of future terrorist attacks.

Keywords: democracy, democratic fundamental values, politics, domestic terrorism, transnational terrorism.

Introduction

“Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us” (President George W. Bush, 21 September 2001, as in Boyle, 2011:413).

This quote from President Bush in the wake of the 9/11 attacks defines democracy in opposition to terrorism, because “freedom” and “fear” in this quote are meant as synonyms for “democracy” and “terrorism” respectively. The one excludes the other, which means that only one of them can win (Boyle, 2011).

This quote is representative of the foreign policy of the United States after 9/11, which is based on the idea that democracy reduces terrorism (Boyle, 2011). Therefore, the argument goes, countries like Afghanistan and Iraq should be turned into democracies. But does democracy really reduce terrorism? Do democracies get hit less often by terrorist attacks than other countries? And what happens to a democratic country after it is attacked by terrorists? Do the fundamental values of democracy become more or less important in such circumstances?

These are some interesting and

relevant questions, because democracy is at the core of the values of the Western world. It

is thus important to know more about the interaction between terrorism and democracy and, in this paper, I will review some relevant literature about this topic. The goal is to gain a greater understanding about the link between terrorism and democracy, and to draw attention to the broader political consequences of terrorism.

The central question in my article is as follows: *Does the occurrence of a terrorist attack change the fundamental values of a democratic country and do democratic countries have a smaller probability than non-democratic countries of being victimized by a terrorist attack?*

To answer this question, however, it is important to make a distinction between domestic and transnational terrorism. Terrorism is defined as, “domestic when an incident involves perpetrators, victims, and an audience of the country in which the incident occurs, and transnational when an incident in one country involves perpetrators, victims, institutions, governments, or citizens of another country” (Savun and Phillips, 2009:880).

Fundamental values of democratic countries

To answer the question as to whether an occurrence of a terrorist attack changes a democratic country, I first need to discuss what the fundamental values of democracy are. In this article, I will use four central principles as pillars of a liberal democracy. The fundamental principles that guide the formation of domestic public policy, and establish the criteria by which it is judged are: security, liberty, equality and efficiency (Haubrich, 2006). Citizens voluntarily give their power to the state, and in return the state guarantees to secure citizens rights, both domestically and against aggression from abroad. "Liberty provides the right to privacy and informational self-determination" (Haubrich, 2006:399). This means that citizens have freedom of person and expression, right to property, free movement, and the right to resort to their nation's courts. Equality means that democratic institutions have to give all citizens equal power over the outcomes of political decisions, and therefore equal procedural opportunities. The state is not allowed to discriminate against anyone because of, for example, gender, religion, ethnicity, color or sexual orientation. A government has to provide efficiency, meaning that scarce resources are apportioned just and in the most efficient way, without wasting them (Haubrich, 2006).

Do terrorist attacks change a democratic country?

Both Haubrich (2006) and Weinberg, Eubank and Francis (2008) discuss whether the occurrence of a terrorist attack has ramifications for the fundamental values in democratic processes. According to Haubrich (2006) terrorism, and especially transnational terrorism, challenged these fundamental values. In case of domestic terrorism, the force and scope of the conflict is limited, because both the government and the terrorist organization seek support from the same domestic population, which makes the effect of an attack on other areas of domestic public policy smaller. With transnational terrorism, this does not appear to be the case. There is a

matter of miscalculation because the state is not able to distinguish between greater and lesser terrorist threats, domestically and globally, and therefore security is severely compromised. Also the national security of the country depends more on national security of other countries. Liberty is undermined in two ways, laws are stretched upstream by anti-terrorism legislation because it is impossible to distinguish between crime and acts of war, and downstream because of the impossibility to distinguish between crimes and minor public order disturbances. Equality is challenged because the state fails to treat individuals of certain nationalities and religions the same as others. Efficiency is compromised through the spending of large amounts of money to protect citizens against future attacks, without clear knowledge about the effectiveness of such measures (Haubrich, 2006).

Weinberg, et al. (2008) on the other hand, argue that a terrorist attack does not change fundamental democratic values. They analyzed 24 countries from 1968-2003 and measured the relationship between the number of transnational terrorist attacks and the levels of civil liberties and political rights according to the Freedom House, as well as the level of democracy according to the Polity IV scale. The Freedom House provides a measure of real-world rights and freedoms that are experienced by individuals in different countries and does not rate governments and their performances. The Polity IV scale does not measure if a country is democratic, but whether its political institutions and processes are democratic. Both the Freedom House scales and the Polity IV scale reveal a great deal about the existence within a nation of liberty and equality, but they do not tell anything about security and efficiency. Weinberg, et al. generally find no relationship between the number of terrorist attacks, on the one hand, and the level of civil liberties, political rights and democracy, on the other. When they do find a statistically significant relationship, it is negative.

Haubrich explains interestingly and plausibly why transnational terrorist attacks

affect the four fundamental values of a democratic state, however he does not have actual data to prove his thesis. Weinberg, et al. presented data showing that transnational terrorist attacks do not give a democratic country less liberty and equality. Therefore it seems that their outcomes regarding liberty and equality are more reliable, but it is possible that Haubrich might be right about security and efficiency. Maybe democracies become less secure and efficient after transnational terrorist attacks.

Is it less probable that democratic countries will suffer terrorist attacks?

Why would it be less probable that democratic countries suffer a terrorist attack? Schwarzmantel (2010) argues that liberal democracies give citizens an equal voice, which provides a discussion platform for everyone. Conflicts and differences in opinions are settled through rational debate. Because of this, the best decisions are made and violence is unnecessary. Because everyone is equal and gets their say, “democracy and violence are mutually exclusive terms: where there is full democracy, there can be no violence, since democracy means exactly the renunciation of violence in favor of the processes of dialogue and discussion, leading to reconciliation of difference through compromise” (Schwarzmantel, 2010:223).

So are there fewer terrorist attacks in democratic countries, as many people believe? According to Briggs (2010) there may be. Briggs investigated British Muslims, who, because of the kick-start effect of government funding, their feelings of continued social injustice, and their growing dissatisfaction with British foreign policy, are increasingly participating in political and social activities. The foregoing especially applies to young British Muslims. Briggs argues that this participation is a positive development, because Muslims, a growing segment of British society, are thus given a greater voice in the public sphere and politics, and because democratic participation is the best way to tackle terrorism (In Briggs’ words, “tackling terrorism through

democracy, not in spite of it”) (Briggs, 2010:273).

Briggs gives four reasons why domestic terrorism might occur less in democratic countries. First, democratic governments are often more efficient, which gives citizens fewer reasons to be dissatisfied. Second, minority groups may feel more included, because democratic governments are often more just. Third, democratic governments are seen as more legitimate, because they are chosen by the citizens, which results in people more readily accepting the results political outcomes. And fourth, democratic governments tend to be less repressive when there are economic, ethnic, or religious tensions (Briggs, 2010).

Eyerman (1998) is not so sure that democracies are less likely to be victimized by terrorist attacks. He finds that established democracies do have a smaller probability of suffering a domestic terrorist attack, but that new democracies on the other hand have a greater likelihood of being victimized by domestic terrorism. Established democracies discourage domestic terrorist attacks by providing citizens non-violent alternatives to advocate for political change (Eyerman, 1998). New democracies may not be able to provide such alternatives yet. According to Eyerman (1998) there are three reasons why new democracies might be more likely to suffer terrorist attacks than established democracies and even non-democratic countries. First, the newly formed democratic country may not know yet how to most effectively prevent and punish violence. Second, because terrorist organizations do not know yet that they can use non-violent alternatives to get what they want following a democratic transition, they keep on using violence. Third, established democracies may experience less terrorism because they are able to show that non-violent political activities have a greater effect than violence.

Eubank and Weinberg (2001), Piazza (2008) and Savun and Phillips (2009) argue that democratic countries do not have a smaller, but a greater probability of suffering terrorist attacks. According to Savun and Phillips (2009) transnational terrorism occurs

more often in democratic countries, not because these countries are democratic, but because of the foreign policies most democratic countries are inclined to pursue. They argue that democracies tend to be more actively involved in international affairs, which can create resentment abroad and lead to democracies becoming a target of transnational terrorism (Savun and Phillips, 2009). Piazza (2008) also finds evidence that democracies are more likely to suffer transnational terrorist attacks. He also finds, contrary to Eyerman (1998), that frequent regime changes (i.e., an indication of instability) do not reliably predict terrorist attacks (Piazza, 2008). It is important to note that this discrepancy may be explained by the fact that Eyerman addressed domestic terrorism, while Piazza examined transnational terrorism. Lastly, Piazza (2008) finds that a country plagued by state failures is more likely to experience transnational terrorism than countries that do not experience such failures. Eubank and Weinberg (2001) argue, also contrary to Eyerman (1998), that there is more terrorism, especially domestic terrorism, in stable democracies. Their findings suggest that this may have something to do with the internal dynamics of democracies, which possibly makes the use of terrorist attacks appealing for their own citizens. "Democracy makes it possible for dissident groups of all sizes and shapes to wage campaigns of terrorist violence on behalf of whatever goals they seek to achieve" (Eubank and Weinberg, 2001:163).

Both Eubank and Weinberg (2001) and Eyerman (1998) have collected data which provide contradictory conclusions regarding the likelihood of established democracies experiencing domestic terrorist attacks. It seems that, on the one hand, citizens in a democratic country have an equal voice and thus a greater chance to get what they want through non-violent means. As Briggs (2010) says, political and social participation from citizens, and especially minority groups, is a positive development. But not all citizens choose to participate and, even when they do so, they might not get

what they want. When only a few people in a country want the same things as you and the majority wants something different, you can use non-violent means to get your voice heard, but it may feel like the government does not listen because, in the end, you still do not get what you want. For this reason, I must agree with Eubank and Weinberg (2001) that democracies have a greater probability of being victimized by domestic terrorism because, while their citizens get the chance to express their claims, they might end up feeling that their governments simply ignore them.

It also seems that there is a greater probability of a domestic terrorist attack (Eyerman, 1998) and a smaller probability of a transnational terrorist attack in newly-formed democracies (Piazza, 2008). This finding from Eyerman (1998) can also be explained by the argument I just presented. Also, as mentioned before, it might be that citizens do not know yet that there are effective non-violent ways to get what they want (Eyerman, 1998). The findings from Piazza (2008) might be explained in terms of transnational terrorist organizations not yet having any grievance against these newly-formed democracies, and therefore not feeling the need to attack them.

Most interesting is the argument from Savun and Phillips (2009) that not the democratic country in itself, but the foreign policy of most democratic countries, with their active international involvement, seems correlated with a greater probability of suffering transnational terrorist attacks. I would agree that democracies are more likely to suffer transnational terrorist attacks. But the interesting part in their argument for me is that it is not the fact that a country is democratic that makes it more likely to be targeted, but rather the foreign policies pursued by a country, irrespective of whether it is democratic.

Conclusion

The questions I posed at the outset of this paper were as follows: *Does the occurrence of a terrorist attack change the fundamental values of a democratic country and do*

democratic countries have a smaller probability than non-democratic countries of being victimized by a terrorist attack?

It seems that the fundamental values liberty and equality do not change following a transnational terrorist attack. Haubrich argues that they do change, but Weinberg, et al. have gathered data that show that there is not less liberty and equality in a democratic country after a terrorist attack. Security and efficiency are fundamental values that may be undermined after a transnational terrorist attack, but because Haubrich only has a theory and not actual data to prove his assertion that this is the case, we cannot be sure. This might, however, be an interesting relationship to research. Also it is unknown what domestic terrorism does with these four fundamental values of democracy. Haubrich hints that this might not change these fundamental values, because of the limited scope and force of such an attack, but this is another area requiring further research.

As for the second question, regarding whether democratic countries are less likely to be victimized by a terrorist attack, a number of conclusions have been reached. Even though Eyerman (1998) and Eubank and Weinberg (2001) reached conflicting conclusions about the heightened probability of established democracies suffering domestic terrorist attacks, it seems this is indeed the case. For newly-formed democracies, it seems that there is a greater probability of a domestic terrorist attack (Eyerman, 1998) and a smaller probability of a transnational terrorist attack (Piazza, 2008). Savun and Phillips (2009) argue that democratic countries have a greater probability of being victimized by a transnational terrorist attack, not because a country is democratic, but because of the active foreign policy that most democratic countries tend to pursue. This is an interesting argument and I think that it reveals something important. It is, of course, vital to know if a democratic country has a smaller or greater probability of being victimized by terrorist attacks, but it is more important to understand why there are differing probabilities of some democracies and non-democracies suffering a domestic or

transnational terrorist attack than others. Such differences may have to do with the foreign policies they pursue, their systems of government, the responsiveness of government to their citizens, the strength of their institutions, and the vitality of democratic values. These are issues that definitely require further research.

An important limitation of my article is that I did not address the impact terrorist attacks have on government formations (for example two-party systems, multiparty systems, minority party governments, surplus party governments) and how countries with different government formations might have differential probabilities of suffering terrorist attacks. Several authors, including Indridason (2008), Piazza (2010) and Chowanietz (2011), address some interesting things about this issue.

Reflection

I would like to end with a short reflection on the viewpoint from which my article is written, and also suggest another view that can be used to look at this topic. I am an interdisciplinary social scientist and I have written the present paper mainly from the standpoint of a political scientist, with some aspects of sociology. It is also possible to say something about this topic from an anthropological point of view. The point I made at the end of the article, that it might be more important to look at processes inside a country to understand if there is a greater probability of a country being victimized by a terrorist attack, rather than focusing on whether a country is or is not a democracy, is something an anthropologist would be inclined to do. An anthropologist would try to understand how the society works and what is going on in the society in order to know more about what makes people use violent means to get what they want. An anthropologist can also observe a minority group, and determine if and how its members participate in political and social activities, and if they believe they have an influence on public policy.

References

- Boyle, M. J. (2011). Between freedom and fear: Explaining the consensus on terrorism and democracy in US foreign policy. *International Politics*, 48(2-3), 412-433. doi:10.1057/ip.2011.1
- Briggs, R. (2010). Hearts and minds and votes: The role of democratic participation in countering terrorism. *Democratization*, 17(2), 272-285. doi:10.1080/13510341003588690
- Chowanietz, C. (2011). Rallying around the flag or railing against the government? political parties' reactions to terrorist acts. *Party Politics*, 17(5), 673-698. doi:10.1177/1354068809346073
- Eubank, W., & Weinberg, L. (2001). Terrorism and democracy: Perpetrators and victims. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13(1), 155-164.
- Eyerman, J. (1998). Terrorism and democratic states: Soft targets or accessible systems. *International Interactions*, 24(2), 151-170. doi:10.1080/03050629808434924
- Haubrich, D. (2006). Modern politics in an age of global terrorism: New challenges for domestic public policy. *Political Studies*, 54(2), 399-423. doi:10.1111/j.14679248.2006.00608.x
- Indridason, I.H. (2008). Does terrorism influence domestic politics? Coalition formation and terrorist incidents. *Journal of Peace Research*, 45(2), 241-259. doi:10.1177/0022343307087183
- Piazza, J.A. (2008). Do democracy and free markets protect us from terrorism? *International Politics*, 45(1), 72-91. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800220
- Piazza, J.A. (2010). Terrorism and party systems in the states of India. *Security Studies*, 19(1), 99-123. doi:10.1080/09636410903546673
- Savun, B. & Phillips, B.J. (2009). Democracy, foreign policy, and terrorism. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53(6), 878-904. doi:10.1177/0022002709342978
- Schwarzmantel, J. (2010). Democracy and violence: A theoretical overview. *Democratization*, 17(2), 217-234. doi:10.1080/13510341003588641
- Weinberg, L.B., Eubank, W.L., & Francis, E.A. (2008). The cost of terrorism: The relationship between international terrorism and democratic governance. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20(2), 257-270. doi:10.1080/09546550801907615