Lauder School
of Government,
Diplomacy & Strategy

Program on
Democratic Resilience
& Development

Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

The Terrorism-Guerrilla Continuum: Violent Nonstate Actors and their Variegated Modes of Warfare

Ronit Berger and Assaf Moghadam

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Abstract

Terrorist organizations are presumed to specialize in the planning and execution of acts of terrorism, but how dominant is their use of terrorist tactics when compared to other modes of violence? We explore this question by examining the relative use of terrorism vis-à-vis other modes of violence among 776 groups listed as “terrorist organizations” in the Global Terrorism Database from 1970--the earliest year for which GTD data is available—to 2018. Our analysis offers three key findings: 1) In the last half century, practically all groups listed as “terrorist organizations” in the GTD have relied on mixed modes of violence that include terrorism, but also guerrilla and hybrid tactics; 2) while terrorism has generally been the preferred mode of violence in this period, the preference gap between the use of terrorism and the use of guerrilla and hybrid tactics has narrowed over time; and 3) highly active “terrorist” organizations, which are particularly prevalent in the 2010s, tend to prefer guerrilla over terrorist tactics. Our analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the violent behavior of organizations frequently labeled as “terrorist,” and provides an empirical foundation in support of recent scholarly trends that refrain from adopting the “terrorist” label and instead rely on more value-neutral terms to describe violent non-state actors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the frequent labeling on the part of terrorism scholars of militant groups employing acts of terrorism as "terrorist organizations" has come under increased scrutiny. Many contemporary scholars of conflict and political violence have questioned the logic and utility of classifying militant groups based on the mode of warfare that these groups presumably favor, and opt for more value-neutral descriptors such as "armed groups," "insurgent organizations," or "violent non-state actors" (VNSAs). These critics argue that terrorism is no distinct social phenomenon, but rather a tactic that can be employed by a variety of groups. Another argument they muster is that militant groups typically rely on blended modes of warfare, such as a combination of terrorism and guerrilla. Adopting a nomenclature that highlights one tactic over others, these scholars argue, appears to be arbitrary, at times misleading, and politicized.

The present study contributes to the debate by testing one of the critics' key assumption, namely that contemporary militant actors in fact employ a broader array of tactics. The focus in this study is on those groups labeled as terrorist organizations. Specifically, our study examines the following question: How dominant is the use of terrorist tactics among "terrorist groups," and to what extent do terrorist groups rely on other modes of warfare?[1]

Empirical support showing that terrorist groups use a blend of tactics would appear to lend greater weight to the arguments of many contemporary scholars of conflict, who adopt more value neutral labels to describe these militant organizations. In contrast, evidence that would suggest that groups commonly labeled as "terrorist groups" rely predominantly or exclusively on terrorist tactics would seem to help sustain the arguments of those scholars and practitioners who continue to refer to these entities as "terrorist groups."

To answer our research question, we examine the modes of warfare among all groups that are listed as "terrorist organizations" in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) of the University of Maryland's Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)—the most widely used database of its kind. Our analysis builds upon, and significantly expands, an earlier study we conducted along with a third researcher in 2014 (Moghadam, Berger and Beliakova, 2014), when we examined the target choices of the 119 most active "terrorist groups" listed in the GTD from 2002 to 2012. In the earlier study, we found that all but one organization identified by the GTD as a "terrorist group" in that time period aimed its attacks not only at civilians, but also at government, police, and military targets. Since attacks against government, police, and military targets are frequently associated with guerrilla tactics, we

[1] We use the terms "tactics" and "modes of warfare" interchangeably. The main tactics, or modes of warfare, examined in this study are terrorism, guerrilla, and hybrid tactics, as will be explained below.

concluded that "terrorist groups" active in the decade following the attacks of September 11, 2001 typically adopted a blend of terrorism and guerrilla tactics.

The present study significantly expands the time frame of analysis of the 2014 study to nearly five decades of data on terrorist organizations and their activities. Our data examines trends from 1970—the first year covered in the GTD and, incidentally, the year often cited as the beginning of modern international terrorism—all the way to 2018. Altogether, we analyze data on 770 groups listed as "terrorist organizations" active during this half century, offering one of the most comprehensive time-series analyses of its kind.

To trace patterns in the use of different modes of warfare, we apply an original coding system that attributes specific target preferences to different tactics, notably terrorism, guerrilla, and hybrid tactics. This method allows us to trace shifting patterns in the use of specific modes of warfare over time.

Our analysis offers three key findings. The first is that in the last half century, the vast majority of groups listed as "terrorist organizations" in the GTD have relied on mixed modes of violence that include terrorism, but also guerrilla and hybrid tactics. Secondly, we find that while terrorism has generally been the preferred mode of violence in this period, the preference gap between the use of terrorism and the use of guerrilla and hybrid tactics has narrowed over time. Third, our analysis shows that highly active "terrorist" organizations, which happen to be particularly prevalent in the 2010s, tend to prefer guerrilla over terrorist tactics.

Our study uses an empirically rich, evidence-based approach to advance the debate about the merits and demerits of the use of the term "terrorist group," but also the discussion on the labeling and analysis of contemporary militant actors more broadly. Besides these academic contributions, our study also helps inform the policy debate on countering terrorism and other forms of political violence by helping to improve assessments of the contemporary threat posed by militant actors and widening the scope of policy efforts to address this threat.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. In Part I, we review existing approaches in which scholars have described and defined terrorist groups. We argue that two such approaches—the inclusivist and exclusivist approaches—are germane to the "terrorism paradigm" that became popular in the 1970s. A third approach that we describe as "rejectionist" claims that terrorism is a tactic that can be used by a variety of groups, thereby obviating the logic and utility of the concept of the "terrorist organization." We locate the intellectual origins of the rejectionist approach in the "insurgency paradigm" predominant in the pre-1970s, and that witnessed a revival of sorts in the post-9/11 period. In Part II, we conduct our empirical investigation. We start with a description of our methodology, followed by a discussion of the dataset and its limitations, and finally our coding mechanism before turning to the results of the analysis. The final part of the paper concludes our discussion with some reflections on the broader implications of our findings for theory and policy.

2. DEFINING TERRORIST GROUPS

The concept of terrorism has been notoriously hard to define, but most scholars of terrorism agree with regard to its key characteristics. Although not all of these characteristics have to apply in all cases, terrorism is typically considered as distinct from other forms of violence in that it aims its attacks at unarmed civilians, employs extra-normal violence, aims to instill fear in the target population, and seeks to obtain political objectives by trying to influence a broader audience beyond the immediate victims of the attack (Schmid 2011, Hoffman 2017, Ganor 2005, Wilkinson 2011). But what do the above characteristics imply for our understanding, and definition, of the groups that plan and carry out acts of terrorism? Since the emergence of terrorism studies as a discipline in the 1970s, these groups have been traditionally referred to as "terrorist groups" or "terrorist organizations." Ever since that period, scholars of terrorism have used the "terrorist group" as the primary unit of analysis in studies of terrorism. Yet, similarly to the concept of "terrorism," a definition of the "terrorist groups" has largely eluded scholars to this very day.

Questions over how to conceptualize and label terrorist organizations have been conducted less frequently and with less intensity than debates on defining terrorism. And although not all studies that examine terrorist groups define the term, studies that attempt to do so have gained more prominence in recent years (Philipps 2015; Moghadam et.al. 2014). Key questions, however, remain unanswered. Among the most critical of these are the question when exactly an organization merits the name "terrorist group." How heavily do militant groups have to rely on terrorism before the label "terrorist group" can, or should, be applied to them? Is a group automatically a terrorist group once it has carried out a single act of terrorism? What if the group utilizes terrorism rarely, instead opting more heavily for other violent or non-violent tactics?

The discussion of the appropriate labeling of militant groups—including those conducting terrorism—has been further complicated, but also enriched, by cross-disciplinary studies that have placed such groups in the broader context of civil wars, insurgencies, or social movements. Consequently, the discussion on the appropriate labeling has implications not only for terrorism studies, but also for these related disciplines and sub-disciplines.

As far as descriptions of the militant groups conducting acts of terrorism are concerned, three key approaches have crystallized over the years (Phillips 2015).[2] The first two approaches to defining terrorist groups are what Brian Phillips has called the inclusivist and exclusivist approaches. What unites both of these approaches is that they take the existence of a separate

[2] These three approaches are not all-encompassing, i.e., not all definitions fit one of these categories. In addition, most researchers who use the term terrorist group do not define the term. Phillips 2015, 229-230.

category of "terrorist groups" as a given. Moreover, these two approaches are both conceptual derivatives of what might be called the terrorism paradigm, i.e., the advent of modern international terrorism in the 1970s, the accompanying establishment of terrorism studies as a discipline and, along with it, the emergence of the "terrorist group" as its key unit of analysis. The third approach might be described as the rejectionist approach. Unlike its two counterparts, this approach rejects either the logic or utility of the idea of the "terrorist group" as a distinct actor category. Conceptually, the rejectionist approach is the heir of the insurgency paradigm, according to which terrorism was viewed not as a self-standing phenomenon, but rather as a subset of broader armed insurgencies. The insurgency paradigm for understanding terrorism was the predominant perspective in the pre-1970 period, and has witnessed a revival among some scholars in the decade following the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Mackinlay 2009; Kilcullen 2005).

2.1 THE TERRORISM PARADIGM: INCLUSIVIST AND EXCLUSIVIST APPROACHES

Simply put, inclusive definitions of terrorism consider any non-state group that carries out acts of terrorism in the service of political ends as a terrorist group. (Phillips 2015). To "inclusivists," it makes little difference whether these groups employ terrorism in moderation or excess, or whether terrorism is used rarely or frequently when compared to other modes of violence. According to this view, groups that rely on terrorism cross a certain moral or ethical threshold that separates them from other groups that shun this tactic entirely.[3] (Ganor 2005; Asal 2012).[4]

A second way in which scholars have defined terrorist organizations adopts a more exclusive approach. Exclusivists believe that militant groups do not automatically cross a threshold to becoming a terrorist organizations when they have carried out an act of terrorism. Instead, additional requirements must apply, although there is no consensus as to what these requirements should be. Some scholars believe that the threshold is crossed only when terrorism is the primary tactic that these groups adopt (Cronin 2009; Crenshaw Hutchinson 1972; Shapiro and Siegel 2012). Others believe that a necessary requirement for a group to be considered a terrorist organizations is that it does not hold territory. According to this argument, terrorist groups function largely underground. If these groups are strong enough to

[3] Research conducted by Jessica Stanton, 38 out of 103 militant groups involved in civil wars from 1989 to 2010 engaged in terrorism, as measured by their use of small-scale bombs to attack civilians targets. (see Stanton 2016).

[4] : say something along the lines of any groups that uses terrorism is a terrorist group. F.ex. Ganor. Idea here is that groups who use terrorism are ethically or morally distinct. (Phillips, 230; see also Asal et.al in ISR). Other inclusivists include Seth Jones and Libicki (in "How Terrorist Groups end) or David B. Carter ("A Blessing or a Curse" in IO). See other examples in Phillips (230 and table on p. 229). Phillips summarizes the "inclusive definition as "Terrorist groups are subnational political organizations that use terrorism." 3 elements: 1) subnational gaps (which includes transnational); groups must be political, i.e., no criminal); and 3) they must use terrorism. (Phillips, 231)

hold territory, they should be considered guerrilla groups, even if they adopt acts of violence against civilians (De La Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca 2011).[5]

Inclusivists and exclusivists disagree on when exactly a group crosses the threshold toward becoming a terrorist organization, but these two approaches converge in one fundamental respect: both approaches see value in distinguishing "terrorist groups" as a qualitative category from other categories of militant actors. Inclusivists are agnostic about the level and intensity of terrorism used, or whether a group using terrorism holds territory or not. Exclusivists may believe that terrorists must rely heavily on terrorism, or must function in a conspiratorial, underground fashion. Both approaches, however, explicitly or implicitly adopt the notion that terrorist organizations are deserving of an analytical category of their own.

This convergence of inclusivist and exclusivist approaches is not accidental. Both approaches are the conceptual offspring of the emergence of terrorism studies as a new discipline in the early 1970s, a time when groups began adopting new, dramatic, attention-grabbing tactics that increasingly transcended geographic boundaries. (Stampnitzky 2013; Stampnitzky 2018). The new international terrorism was perhaps best exemplified in the growing use of hijackings. While airline hijackings were not entirely novel in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were now carried out by actors bent on creating an innovative form of political theater. In the words of Lisa Stampnitzky, in the 1970s "the spectacle of the incident became a crucial part of its intent and effectiveness, harnessing the global media to bring international attention to seemingly local social and political struggles." (Stampnitzky 2013, 24-25.)

One of the most gruesome examples of the new terrorist spectacle—and a harbinger of terrorism's future destructive potential—came during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, when eight members of the Palestinian "Black September" organization took the members of the Israeli Olympic team hostage, eventually killing all nine of them.[6] In the course of the decade, Western views of the perpetrators of such highly destructive and increasingly theatrical acts of terrorism began to change, with the individuals and organizations responsible for these attacks increasingly seen as irrational, evil, and indeed pathologically aberrant (Silke, 1998). Terrorism itself came to be viewed less as a tactic, and more as a distinct identity. (Stampnitzky 2018; Kilcullen 2005). As Stampnitzky observes, by the mid-1970s, terrorism "was assumed to be a particular type of action, committed by particular types of actors, with a particular moral and political valence." (Stampnitzky 2018, 22).

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[5] The present authors are not convinced by this view. See also Moghadam, Berger and Poliakova.

[6](Stamp, Ch. 2, 27). See also Hoffman, Inside terrorism; Laqueur, Age of T.

2.2 THE INSURGENCY PARADIGM AND THE 'REJECTIONIST' APPROACH

While the inclusivist and exclusivist approach to defining terrorist groups sees value in identifying the "terrorist organization" as a distinct empirical and analytical category, a third approach that we term "rejectionist" altogether avoids the use of "terrorist groups" as a separate unit of analysis.[7] According to the rejectionists' logic, terrorism is a tactic, and therefore no group is inherently a terrorist group. (Merari 1993; Findley and Young 2012; Tilly 2016; Jackson et.al. 2005; Philipps 2015; Stanton 2019). Rejectionists therefore adopt a logic that focuses on the "action-sense" of terrorism, according to which terrorism is a tactic that can be carried out by a variety of actors.[8] (Sanchez-Cuenca and de la Calle 2009; Asal 2012; Stanton 2019).

According to Charles Tilly, for example, terrorism is not a casually coherent and distinct social phenomenon and occurs "across a wide variety of actors and political situations." (Tilly, 2016, 5). Neither do those who execute terrorist attacks embody a "distinct, coherent class of actors (terrorists) who specialize in a unitary form of political action (terror)." (Tilly 2016, 5)

The rejectionist approach emphasizes that terrorism is typically used in conjunction with other forms of violence.[9] According to Tilly, acts of terrorism usually occur as "as complements or as byproducts of struggles in which participants—often including the so-called terrorists—are engaging simultaneously or successively in other more routine varieties of political claim making." (Tilly 2016, 6). This has also affected how terrorist incidents are coded in neighboring fields of study. As Brynjar Lia points out, scholars of political violence and social movements tend to code incidents of terrorism together with other forms of "collective political violence." (Lia 2005, 10). Rejectionists hence call to study terrorism in a multidisciplinary fashion, along with related forms of political violence and agitation, including civil wars, insurgencies, and social movements. As Lia argues, to study terrorism in isolation from the larger body of political-violence and civil-war studies is problematic." (Lia 2005, 12).

Far from a recent approach, the rejectionists' arguments are conceptual derivatives from the pre-1970s period, when terrorism did not yet crystallize as a discipline of its own, but was instead subsumed within an insurgency paradigm. Hence, their arguments not only differ from those of the inclusivists and exclusivists on matter of substance, but also in terms of their intellectual origins.

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[7] Brian Phillips acknowledges this trend, but does not use the term "rejectionist."

[8] The "actor-sense" is sometimes contrasted with the actor-sense of terrorism.

[9] Scholars in the rejectionist camp adopt an approach that has been termed an "action-sense" approach to terrorism

Under the insurgency paradigm, terrorism was seen as one tactic among several used in the context of armed insurgencies. Unlike in later decades, however, terrorism (or rather "terror"—the preferred label in that period) was not seen as a "defining feature of individual or group identity." (Stampnitzky 2013, 52). Terror was also not considered as a predominant tactic in the insurgent strategy, but oftentimes as an initial, suboptimal stage of the armed uprising. The broader insurgency invariably included other tactics, most often guerrilla warfare, and the assumption was that the adoption of terrorism was to set the stage for the eventual switch to guerrilla or conventional warfare. (Crenshaw Hutchinson 1972; Merari 1993; Stampnitzky 2013).

While the terrorism paradigm that became fashionable in the 1970s viewed terrorists as irrational at best, and as pathological misfits at worst, the discourse on terrorism in the context of the insurgency paradigm assumed that militant actors relying on terrorism were largely rational actors. (Stampnitzky 2013; Kilcullen 2005). Their actions did not reflect any internal pathological impulse to employ gruesome violence, but instead deeper underlying social grievances. (Kilcullen, 2005). The insurgency paradigm refrained from attributing any moral deficiencies to terrorists, and instead viewed insurgents and counterinsurgents as filling "parallel roles." (Stampnitzky 2013, 50).

3. "TERRORIST GROUPS" AND THEIR DOMINANT MODES OF WARFARE: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

To examine the prevalence of terrorism vis-à-vis other tactics in the repertoire of "terrorist groups," we proceed to analyze the choice of targets most commonly used by groups labeled as "terrorist groups" in the GTD Database.[10] The GTD is the most comprehensive open source and provides information for all "terrorist attacks" occurring around the world (LaFree et.al., 2015). Although far from perfect, it is the currently the best source available to address the questions at the heart of this study.

To analyze the preference in modes of warfare among "terrorist groups," we focused on their target selection. The GTD distinguishes between 25 different types of targets in its dataset. In our more limited 2014 previous study, we focused on 5 types of attacks out of those – attacks against civilians, attacks against general and diplomatic government targets, attacks against the military and attacks against the police. Although the results of our previous study confirmed our central assumption and claim, they were limited in two ways, both of which were related to

[10] By using data that was collected, coded and reported by others, we have no control over the quality, validity and reliability of the data. Nonetheless, we find the data reported by the GTD to be valid and reliable enough for the purposes of this analysis.

how data in the GTD is coded. Conceptually speaking, attacks against government and police targets can be plausibly regarded as either terrorist or guerrilla attacks. The second problem had to do with the lack of differentiation between attacking military targets in a combatant versus a non-combatant context. By using externally generated data, we have no control over decisions that were made in coding and collecting of that data. We also do not have control over definitions – and insufficient information about the context of the attacks in question. Nevertheless, due to our relatively modest goals in our previous study, i.e., to show that even the most notorious terrorist groups relied on modes of warfare other than terrorism, we were able to overcome these limitations, while keeping them in mind.

In the present article, we aimed to strengthen our claims. To do so, we sought to address the first conceptual problem mentioned above by updating our coding scheme. Understanding that the differentiation between what "counts" as a terrorist attack and what as a "guerrilla" attack may be fluid, and cognizant that some target types may fall under both categories, we decided to adopt a three-way categorization that distinguishes between terrorist, guerrilla, and hybrid target types (and hence tactics, or modes of warfare). Table 1 below provides the distribution of target types between the three categories.

Table 1 - Target type by category

Terrorist	**Hybrid**	**Guerrilla**
Abortion	Airport and aircraft	Military
Business	Food and water supply	Police
Educational institutions	Government (diplomatic)	Terrorist/non-state militants
Media and journalists	Government (general)	Violent political parties
NGO	Telecommunication	
Private citizens and property	Transportation	
Religions figures and institutions	Utilities	
Tourists	Other	
Maritime		

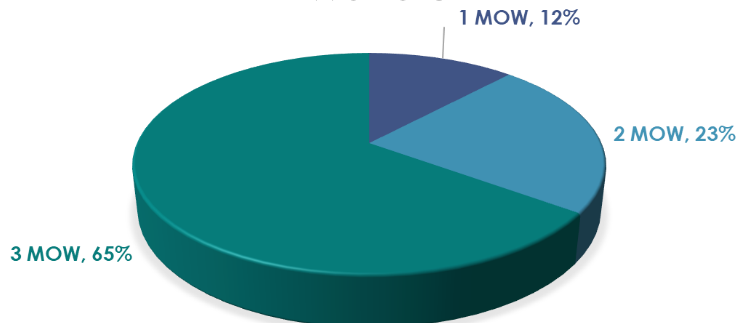
In our view, the above categorization provides a more complete picture of the type of targets that groups identified by the GTD as "terrorist organizations" tend to focus on. Under the category of terrorist, we included all target types that follow from our understanding of what terrorism is about, which includes attacks against noncombatants and private institutions, in addition to other targets where the group seems to seek to influence a broader audience besides the immediate victims. In a similar fashion, we chose to look at guerrilla groups as those who attack mainly military and police targets, but also other non-state militant and political actors around them. As far as the “hybrid” label is concerned, we included all those target types that can be regarded as part of either a terrorist or guerrilla agenda. We also included the "Other" category found in the GTD under the “hybrid” category mainly due to lack of sufficient information in the GTD. Hereinafter, when we discuss “terrorism” in our study, we refer to attacks against the target types included under this category as reflected in Table 1 above. The same applies when we refer to “guerrilla” and "hybrid" modes of warfare.

Following are the scope conditions for our categorization of target types: there are a total of 3,642 groups covered by the GTD in the period between 1970 and 2018. Due to our three-way taxonomy of target types, we removed from the analysis all groups who conducted less than four attacks in the course of their career—a total of 2,521. We chose a minimum of four attacks because if a group listed in the GTD database used all modes of warfare (as most of them did), setting four attacks as the minimum would ensure that at least one mode of warfare was used more than the others. A lower cut-off point would have rendered the statistical analysis less meaningful. Since most of our analysis is a time series analysis that reviewed attacks per year, we removed an additional 261 groups that attacked less than four times in any given year from our analysis. Lastly, we removed from our consideration an additional 84 groups because their attribution in the GTD was vague, or because of our inability to connect them to any one specific conflict or area. Examples of the latter problem includes "terrorist groups" identified in the GTD with suffixes such as “gunmen,” “terrorists,” “left-wing fighters,” “militants,” etc. A complete list of all groups removed is available in Appendix A. We were left with a dataset of 776 groups to analyze. As many of these groups operated in multiple years, we have 9,237 data points. Each data point is a group operating in any single year. The year with the smallest number of operating groups that are included within our scope conditions is 1973 which had 13 active groups which attacked 290 times. The year with the most active groups who fit our scope conditions is 2015 with 132 active groups attacking 7,782 times. Over 49 years, these 776 groups attacked 185,753 times in total.

After setting the scope conditions, we moved to the analysis stage. Here we used a time-series analysis to be able to track changing trends in the use of tactics among these groups over the years and decades. Since our concern in the present study was not in finding causes or explanations for why groups behave the way they do, we focus on descriptive statistics rather than correlational analysis.

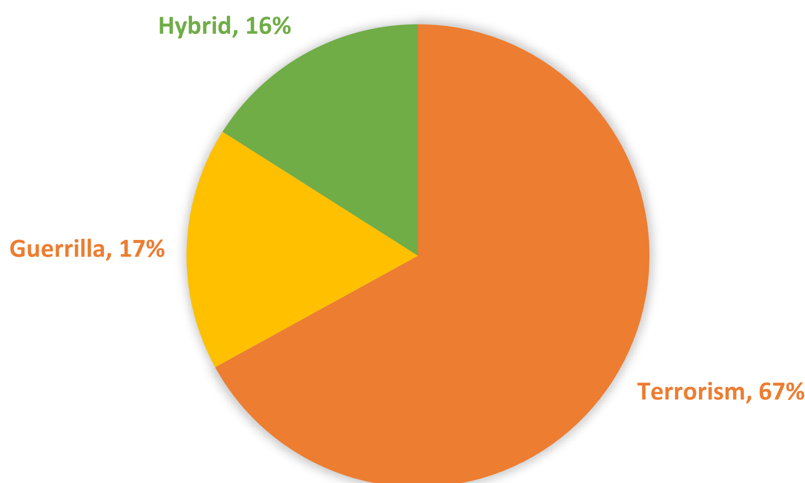
First, we divided the actions of the remaining 776 groups into the three categories of targets types. This helped us arrive at our first main finding, namely that almost all groups in this dataset rely on mixed modes of warfare. Figure 1 below provides the distribution of modes of warfare by all 776 groups in the dataset for the entire period under study.

Figure 1: Distribution of Modes of Warfare Used – All Terrorist Organizations, 1970-2018



Specifically, the data shows that 88% of all terrorist organizations that we examine have relied on a mix of tactics. 65% of the groups studied used all three modes of warfare—terrorism, guerrilla, and hybrid tactics—while 23% used a combination of two of these. Only 12% of the groups analyzed used only one mode of warfare, and those tend to be relatively less active groups. Furthermore, even for those 12% of groups using only one mode of warfare, the tactic of choice was not necessarily terrorism. Figure 2 below shows the distribution of the mode of warfare for those groups that were committed to the use of only one.

Figure 2: use of single mode of warfare distribution – all terrorist organizations 1970-2018



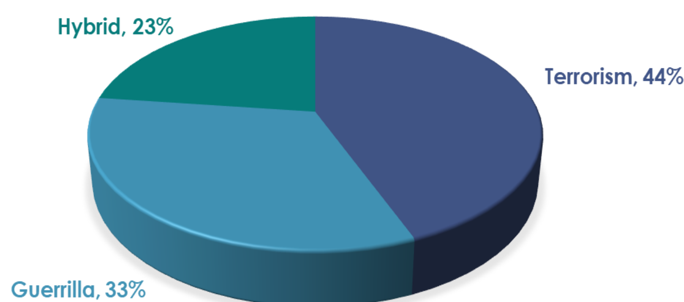
When looking closely into the most active groups, all groups that attacked more than 100 times in their careers (110 groups in the dataset) used all three modes of warfare. When looking into groups that attacked at least 50 times in their careers, which is an additional 79 groups, or 189

groups in total, all but two of them relied on three modes of warfare, with the remaining two relying on a combination of two. The significance of this finding is clearly that active groups prefer a diversified portfolio of action and attack a more varied set of targets. Whether they do so due to cost, opportunity, ideology, or for another reason is beyond the scope of this study.

As figure 3 below shows, although terrorism is the most preferred tactic, it is used in only 44% of the attacks. Put differently, more than half of the attacks reviewed in the GTD that were carried out by groups relevant to our study rely on guerrilla and hybrid tactics more often than on terrorism.

Figure 3: Distribution by mode of warfare used – All terrorist organizations, 1970-2018

DISTRIBUTION BY MODE OF WARFARE USED--ALL TO'S, 1970-2018



Our analysis enabled us to find the most common mode of warfare for each year and the most common level of commitment for each year. It also allowed us to find how many groups in each year were strongly committed to any of the modes of warfare and what percentages of the groups were only moderately to weakly committed to any of the modes of warfare. This process allowed us to compare trends in levels of commitment over years and across decades.

As figure 4 below shows, one clear result that came out of this process of analysis is that although terrorism is indeed the most preferred mode of warfare and has been so all along, the gap between the preference of terrorism over guerrilla or hybrid tactics has narrowed over time. What figure 4 also shows very clearly is the steep rise in the number of attacks in the 2010s, compared to the previous decades.

Figure 4: Preferred Modes of Warfare By Decade, All Terrorist Organizations, 1970-2018

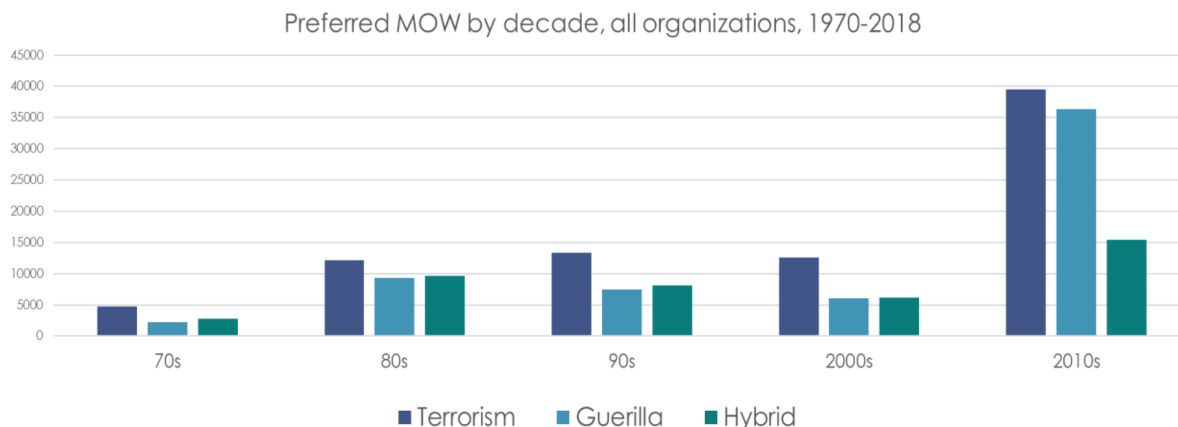
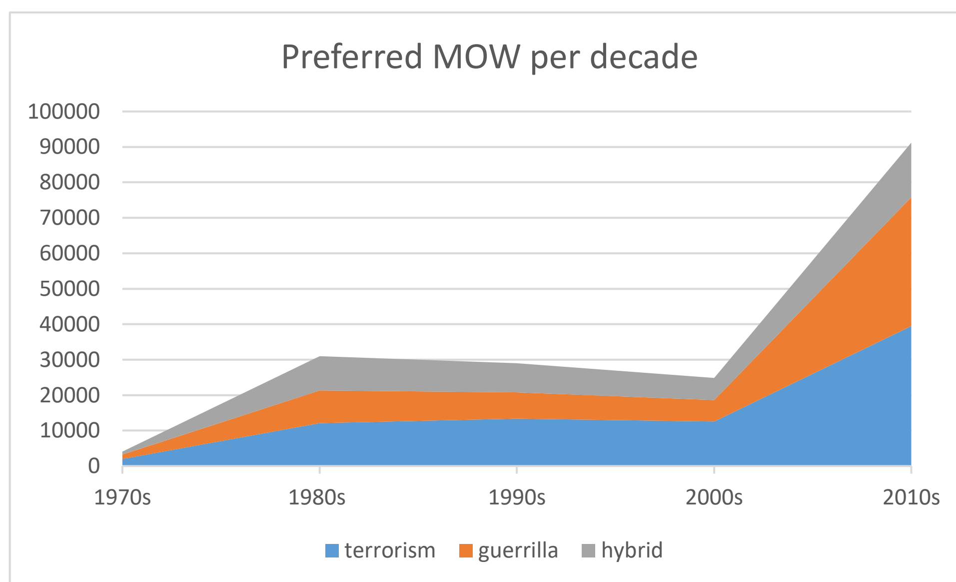


Figure 5 below provides a different graphic to make the same point – not only has the gap between terrorism and the other modes of warfare narrowed over the years, but if we combine the results of guerrilla warfare with hybrid tactics, we can clearly see that in combination they are used far more than terrorism, when studying all groups in the database, throughout the entire period under review. In sum, although it is the most preferred tactic, terrorism only comprises less than 50% of the attacks in any decades under study.

Figure 5: Preferred Mode of Warfare Per Decade, All Terrorist Organizations II, 1970-2018



To strengthen our claim even further, we examined the level of commitment each organization holds to any specific tactic over the others. To clarify, when one tactic was used in more than 75% of the attacks carried out by the group, we coded the group as having a "strong commitment" to one specific category—be it terrorism, hybrid, or guerrilla. When the percentages of attacks carried out by the group using one tactic was between 50% and 75% of its activity, we coded it as "moderately strong commitment" to that one specific category. If the most frequently used tactic by that group was in fact only used in less than 50% of its attacks, we coded it as having a "moderately weak commitment" to that one strategy. A

moderately weak commitment to one tactic or choice of mode of warfare means in essence that the two other modes of warfare were used in over 50% of the attacks carried out by that organization. Due to the way we code the data and the fact there are three categories for modes of warfare, there is no point in coding for a "weak" commitment to any tactic, as there will always be one tactic that is more preferred in such a case. To examine whether there is some correlation between the level of commitment and the type of tactic preferred by any particular organization, we examined levels of commitment per year (for each group) and per group (for its entire history of action). Figure 6 below shows the distribution of levels of commitment:

Figure 6: Commitment Levels – All Terrorist Organizations, 1970-2018

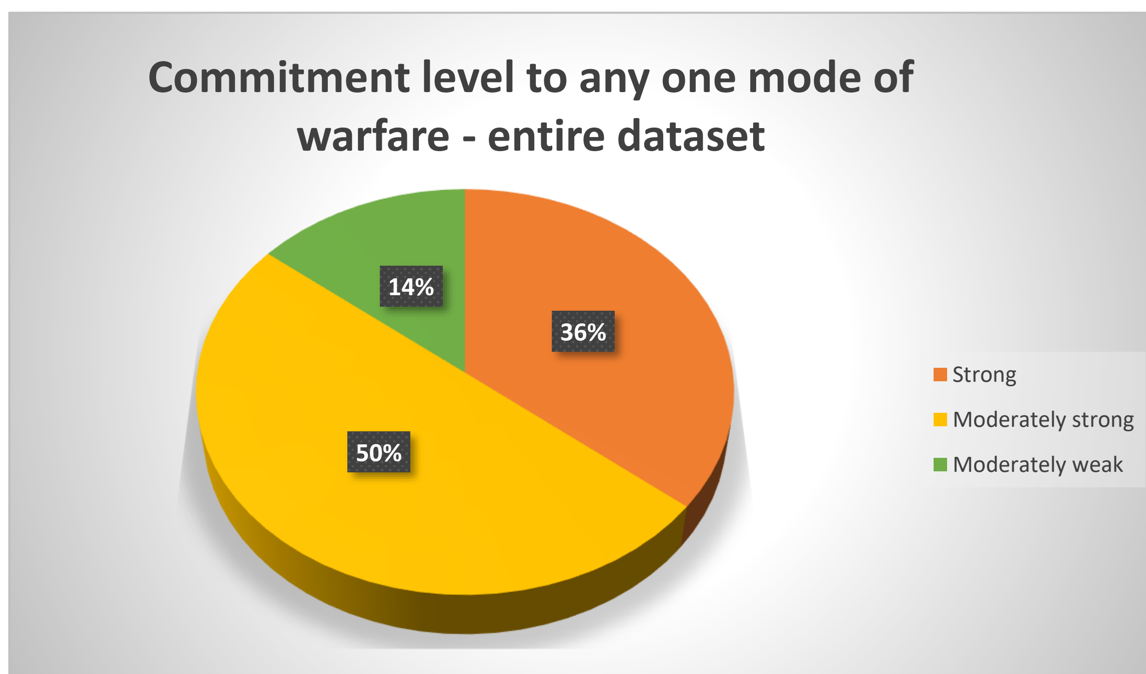
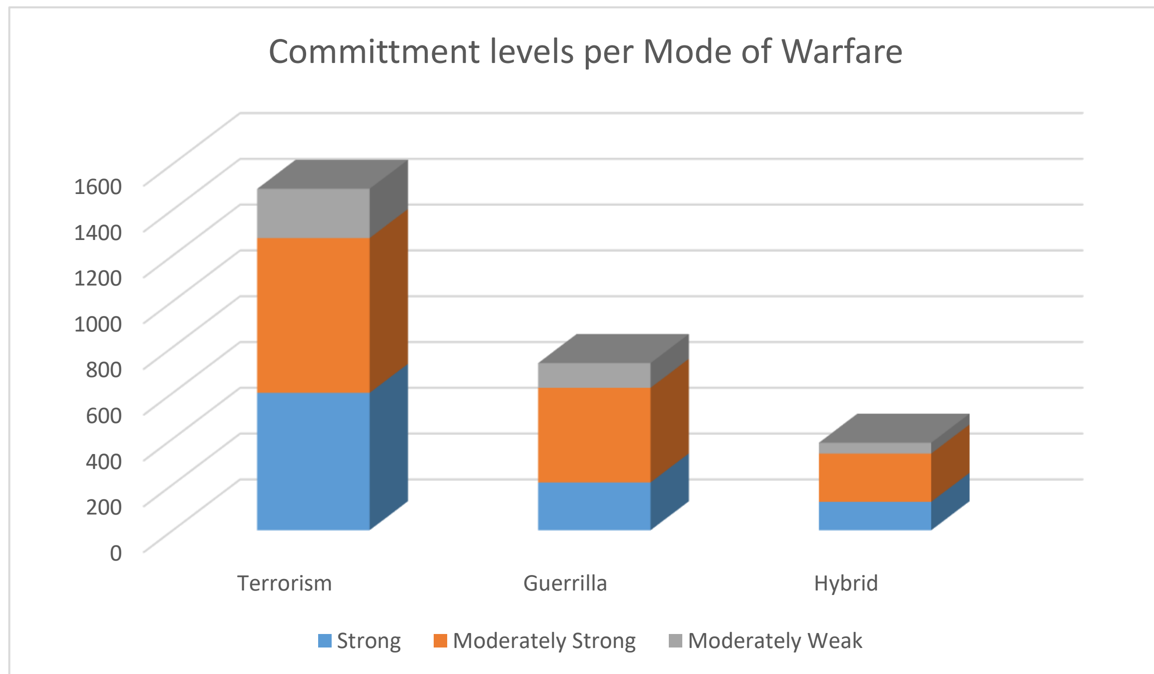


Figure 6 clearly shows that overall, groups tend to be committed to any one mode of warfare between 50% and 75% of their operations, as moderately strong is by far the most common commitment of the three. Examining the entire data as a whole, 50% of the groups were "strongly committed" to one particular mode of warfare in any specific year of their operations. However, it is more interesting for us to examine whether these organizations—especially those that tend to be those strongly committed to any specific mode of warfare—choose one over the other two. To do so, we examined the distribution of the commitment levels between the different modes of warfare for all groups over the years. Figure 7 below shows this distribution over the years.

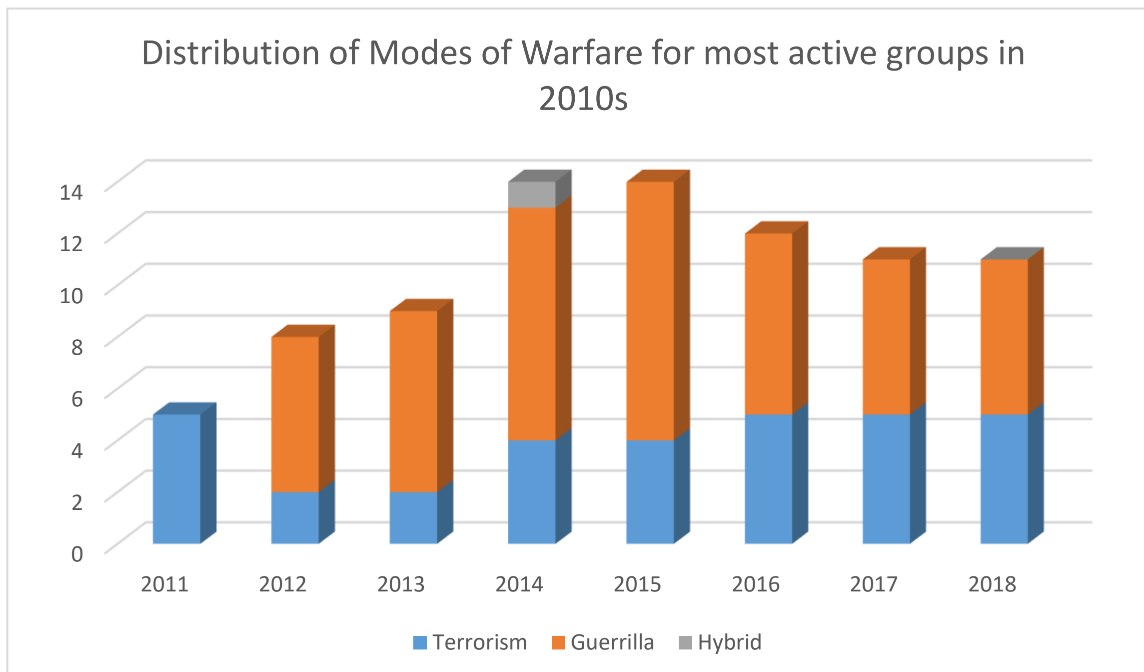
Figure 7: Commitment Levels Per Mode of Warfare – All Terrorist Organizations, 1970-2018



What figure 7 clearly shows is that moderately strong commitment is indeed the most common type of commitment, and that terrorism is indeed the preferred mode of warfare by most groups. It also shows that when it comes to a strong commitment to a particular mode of warfare, terrorism is used the most by groups that are strongly committed to one tactic over the others. Nevertheless, hybrid and guerrilla tactics are still rather common, for all levels of commitment.

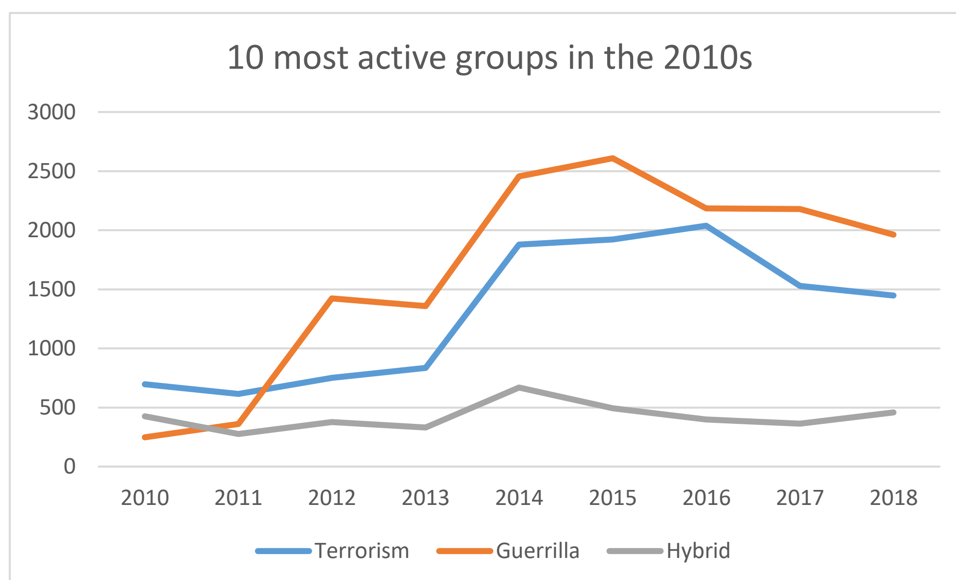
We believe such results merit a closer look into the most active groups, in each year, but mostly in the last decade which has seen a steep increase in the number of attacks, as well as the number of groups which are active each year. We are also interested in learning more about the most active groups in that decade, as their behavior is the one that affects world politics and our understanding of violent organizations. In the 2010s, the most active groups each year—i.e., those who executed more than 100 attacks a year—tend to favor guerrilla tactics over terrorism. Figure 8 below provides details regarding the most active groups in the 2010s.

Figure 8: Distribution of Mode of Warfare – Most Active Terrorist Organizations, 2011-2018



As figure 8 clearly shows, apart from 2011 that had very few groups attacking more than 100 times and those used purely terrorism, from 2012 on, guerrilla is the most preferred tactic by most of the highly active groups of the decade. Interestingly enough, hybrid tactics are almost never the chosen mode of warfare, apart from one group in 2014. Figure 9 below shows the distribution of mode of warfare for the 10 most active groups in the previous decade.

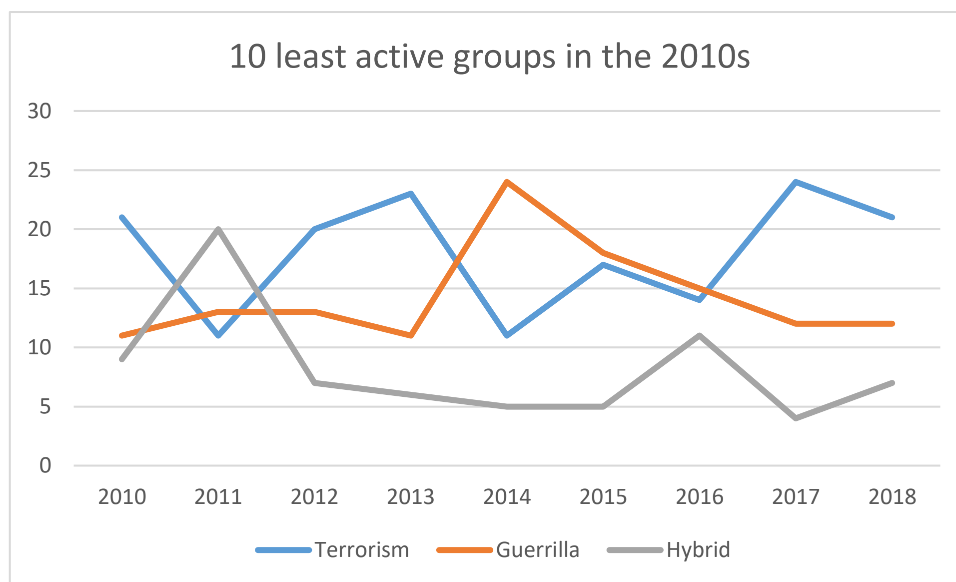
Figure 9: Distribution of Mode of Warfare – 10 Most Active Terrorist Organizations in the 2010s



By way of comparison, and to strengthen our point regarding the fact that the most active groups fit the label of terrorist organization the least, we also took a closer look at the least active groups (though still groups that attacked at least 4 times in any given year). As figure

10 below portrays, the picture that is revealed from the least active groups of the 2010s is a bit more complex and may explain why terrorism overall is the most commonly used mode of warfare when aggregating the data. Nevertheless, it is clear that terrorism is not a clear favourite or a single tactic used by even the least active groups.

Figure 10: Distribution of Mode of Warfare – 10 Least Active Terrorist Organizations in the 2010s



4. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the extent to which groups commonly labeled as "terrorist organizations" use terrorism over other tactics. Analyzing the preferred modes of warfare of 776 "terrorist groups" listed in the GTD over a period of nearly half a century, we provide very strong evidence that the vast majority of "terrorist groups" in fact rely on a blend of tactics that typically combines terrorism, guerrilla, and hybrid tactics. Our study arrived at several other key findings. Terrorism is, broadly speaking, the preferred mode of violence, but in the most recent decade the preference gap between the use of terrorism and the use of guerrilla has narrowed. We also found that when it comes to highly active "terrorist groups"—i.e., those that claim more than 100 attacks in a given year—the preferences in tactics are reversed, with guerrilla being the preferred tactic.

Several implications follow from our findings. First, our findings lend empirical support to the argument of the rejectionists, who argue that terrorism is not a distinct social phenomenon, and hence not unique to any one type of organization. Our findings also strengthen the critics' argument that terrorist groups highlight the use of one tactic over others. In fact, we found that terrorism is hardly ever used as a singular mode of warfare by a "terrorist group."

Our second finding of a narrowing preference gap between terrorism and guerrilla tactics suggests that militant groups are learning organizations that have become more pragmatic over time. Groups that rely solely on acts of terrorism appear to rarely achieve their objectives. This is evidenced by the fact that most groups that have relied exclusively on terrorism have

been short-lived. It is also possible that the narrowing preference gap is driven by the growing influence of unusually active groups. As our third major finding shows, such groups in fact prefer guerrilla over terrorist tactics. This last finding supports the theory that terrorism is often used as an initial stage in armed insurgencies—a key assumption of the insurgency paradigm" discussed in the second part of the paper. Based on this logic, organizations initiate their insurgency campaigns with a heavy use of acts of terrorism, but gradually substitute terrorism with guerrilla tactics as they experience greater battlefield successes (Byman 2008).

Most importantly, the present analysis lends strong empirical support to arguments in favor of adopting more value neutral labels to describe contemporary militant actors. Labels such as "armed groups," armed non-state actors, violent non-state actors, or insurgent organizations not only allow for improved analysis of such actors across various disciplines, but also avoid the charge of unfairly highlighting the use of one tactic over another.

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