

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT FOR “TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM”

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On-screen text:

Terrorism and Counterterrorism
a discussion with Martha Crenshaw

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Martha Crenshaw
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Martha Crenshaw: Those of us who study terrorism have struggled to define it from the very beginning of studying terrorism. It’s still controversial. It’s what we call a “contested concept.” You’ll see this just by reading the news media every day; people disagree as to what it is.

I think of it, first of all, as a form of violence or threat of violence. So it has to involve violence. It has to be political. And it has to be organized and systematic.

In my research I’ve mainly been interested in the organizations that use terrorism as a strategy. I’m indifferent as to what type of organization or actor or entity is behind terrorism—it can be any ideology, any sort of person or group—but I’m interested in terrorism as a method or strategy that seeks to instill fear in a watching audience.

On-screen text: Why do people use terrorism?

Martha Crenshaw: We have looked at the question in terms of three different types of answers. One type of answer would be broad-scale societal or economic or political conditions. Maybe people use terrorism because they live under a repressive regime. Or maybe they use terrorism because they suffer from poverty and discrimination. The problem is that these explanations aren’t very satisfactory, because very small numbers of people who are poor or deprived or suffering actually resort to terrorism. So how do you explain the behavior of a very few people in terms of what happens to a lot of people?

The next answer would be [that] it has something to do with individual psychology. That sort of answer is very popular now, with all of the emphasis on homegrown terrorism and self-radicalization. These are often individuals who are members of very small groups. We ask ourselves, “Was there some psychological reason for them to resort to horrifying violence, like the attacks in Paris last November that killed 130 people? How could we explain that in terms other than some sort of psychopathology of the individual?” We’re not entirely convinced by those sorts of explanations, either, because a lot of the people who are terrorists appear otherwise to be as normal as anybody else. I can’t say they’re perfectly normal, but really, there don’t appear to be significant differences in terms of their mental stability.

My focus—and I’ve looked at all angles here—is on the group that uses terrorism. So if we’re looking at the Paris attacks last November, we would look not just at the psychology of the individuals who were part of the conspiracy, but [also] at the strategy behind it, which was an ISIS strategy—because apparently it was organized as, in effect, an ISIS act, and they claimed credit for it and explained why they did it. So that’s what I would look at. Why would ISIS do this? Why would they think it would be useful for the promotion of their goals in the Middle East?

But a real answer has really to combine all of these things. That’s the trick—bringing all these factors into your explanation.

On-screen text: What do terrorists want?

Martha Crenshaw: We understand about the short term. They want publicity. They want to be on the international agenda. They want to call attention to themselves, attention to their goals. This might be attention to their brutality, as well as attention to the content of their message.

Beyond that, what do they want? Well, we can classify groups that have used terrorism over time in terms of [questions like]: Are they national separatists? Do they want to break away from a country that they're part of, and they're an ethno-nationalist group? This would be true of the Basques in Spain, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. They want to break away and form their own state. Do they want to overthrow an existing government? Are they a revolutionary movement? Are they a right-wing movement? Do they want to enforce a more authoritarian regime? It could be political goals like that.

Of course, what we're occupied with now is ISIS and Islamism and jihadism. And what do they want? I think most people would argue that their goals have shifted over time. If you look back to the late 1990s and the original formulation of al-Qaeda, they said they wanted American troops out of what was to them their holy land. They wanted to expel American troops. But American troops left Saudi Arabia and still we had terrorism. Then they wanted to expel us from Afghanistan and then from Iraq. And, of course, we left Iraq, and terrorism continued. So that could not be a comprehensive goal.

In terms of ISIS, they tend to have apocalyptic ambitions. That is, they have a very, very long-run idea of some sort of state-type entity that would be governed by the particular type of law that they espouse. They want to return to a pure form of Islam that they think existed hundreds of years ago—in fact, at the time of the Prophet in the seventh and eighth centuries. Apparently, this goal appeared pretty unrealistic until civil war broke out in Syria and they actually were able to seize territory. Remember in June of 2014 they seized the town of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. They actually controlled territory. Now they were able to establish a caliphate. This was one of their goals, but typically, in the past, it had been a very long-run goal. “Years from now we'll be able to establish a caliphate.” Now they have the caliphate. So I'd say their goal has shifted to maintaining that territory that they have.

On-screen text: Is domestic or transnational terrorism more prevalent?

Martha Crenshaw: In a modern world—in this world—most terrorism can very easily be transnational. It's really hard to keep it within the borders of a country.

But, yes, there is terrorism that is instigated by groups that do not have ambitions that go beyond the borders of the country that they're in. For example, in the United States, we actually have more violence committed by far-right groups than we have violence committed by groups associated with transnational Islamism. But we are much more afraid of terrorism that's associated with Islamism and jihadism. We don't quite know why that is so, except that I think it seems more unfamiliar, more threatening, more foreign, more alien. Domestic right-wing terrorism—we're more accustomed to it. It also appears to us to be less organized, more sporadic. I use that term advisedly as to how it appears to us, as opposed to what the reality might be. But the perception is of a lesser threat.

But as I said earlier, there are separatist movements in various countries—the IRA in Northern Ireland; ETA, the Basque group in Spain; the Tamils in Sri Lanka; various other groups that simply want to split away—and their aims don't go any further than that. The Basque groups in Spain actually want to have part of France as well as part of Spain, so their ambitions were transnational [but] they've largely faded away. But the Tamil Tigers wanted part of Sri Lanka.

They didn't want a Tamil state encompassing the entire world. They just wanted the part of Sri Lanka that Tamils lived in. They've obviously lost that struggle rather decisively.

What appeared to us to be if not unusual at least striking about the Islamist movement is that their aims were global. They went beyond a single nation-state. They wanted to unite all Muslims in some sort of Muslim community that would extend worldwide.

On-screen text: How common are large-scale terrorist attacks?

Martha Crenshaw: When I learned about the Paris bombings, I immediately began to think, "Well, do we have any precedents for these attacks?" Again, they're rare—I don't want to give the impression [that] this is a constant feature of life in a modern society. They're rare, but we look back and we say that there have been attacks where people were willing to kill large numbers of innocent people.

If we look back at the 1970s, remember, this was the beginning of aircraft hijackings. Passengers were killed. The hijackers threatened to kill everybody on the airplane if their demands were not met. In many cases, this led governments to intervene with the use of specialized military intervention units to try to rescue the passengers.

We also, beginning in the 1980s, had midair bombings of aircraft. In the 1980s an airliner was brought down over the Atlantic apparently by Sikh extremists who were seeking independence from India—not jihadists whatsoever.

If we look at the 1990s, remember the Oklahoma City bombing, which was American far-right, and a fairly small conspiracy, at that. And willing to kill not just people in the federal building, but schoolchildren—children at a daycare center in the basement of the building. They had to know that children were there.

We would have the attack on the Tokyo subways, also in 1995, which fortunately did not kill that many people. It sickened a larger number. But had Aum Shinrikyo—which was the apocalyptic Japanese cult that perpetrated the attacks—had their sarin gas been of a purer form, it would've killed a whole lot more people. They intended to kill a lot of people. So we do see precedents in the non-jihadist realm of terrorism [of] people who were willing, if not always able, to kill very large numbers of people.

On-screen text: What are current strategies for countering terrorism?

Martha Crenshaw: This is something we're clearly struggling over—as to how best to counter terrorism without playing into their hands.

If we talk about a military response to terrorism, the one that's been most popular with American government, certainly for the past eight years or so, is the use of drone strikes. This is a very pinpointed use of military force. There are civilian casualties; we don't know how many exactly, but it's relatively precise. And it avoids having to put troops on the ground. The purpose of it is really to degrade the leadership of the organizations that we are confronting. This is largely Islamist organizations: ISIS, al-Qaeda, Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab, various places where we've used drone strikes. We hope that by removing their senior operatives, their top leadership, their bomb-makers, their external operations planners, we'll weaken the organizations so they won't pose so much of a threat to us.

At the same time, we recognize that we have a problem of people within Western societies who are attracted to and sympathetic with the ideology of groups like the Islamic State. So

how do we deal with these sorts of extremists, would-be extremists, proto-extremists at home? The Obama administration has a big program to try to persuade mostly young men, we have to say, not to follow this ideological line, not to be attracted. The success of these initiatives appears somewhat problematic, but we have worried about how to prevent radicalization or de-radicalize already-radicalized individuals for some time. This tends to be a social and psychological approach to the problem.

Again, we're not quite sure as to whether either of these strategies—military or social-psychological—has really worked as of yet.

On-screen text: What is a principal challenge in countering terrorism?

Governments don't confront a monolithic adversary in these conflicts. They confront a really divided and disaggregated adversary that's composed of lots of different factions. There's no one organization out there. There are lots of different ones.

Syria is a case in point, where you have, of course, pro-Assad and anti-Assad, but even if you just look at the Islamist side of it, there are many different groups. There's al-Nusra Front, there's ISIS, there's wal-Ansar. There are all these different groups, and they're fighting each other as well as fighting Assad and fighting the United States. It's immensely complicated.

So the U.S. has a strategy against ISIS. But does that help al-Qaeda and the al-Nusra Front, because now we're fighting ISIS? Have we thought about the effect of what we're doing on other groups in this same chaotic environment of different groups?

And the groups morph over time. Sometimes they cooperate with each other; sometimes they fight each other. Unless you understand these shifting relationships among them—this sort of complicated evolution over time—how can you figure out what effect your counterterrorist actions are going to have on their behavior?

You'll even find groups that ostensibly disagree ideologically, but they'll cooperate on specific operations. There'll be tactical cooperation, even though they disagree in terms of strategy. How do you deal with that?

For example, the United States tried to train some Syrian rebels that we thought we could insert into the theater there. They would be not Islamist but anti-Assad, and we would support them. We trained them, we spent quite a lot of money on this initiative, we inserted them in the Syrian theater, and they were promptly wiped out. Almost none of them were left, sadly. Some went over to the Islamists; some were killed by the Islamists. The U.S. government appeared to be surprised that this would happen—that they weren't welcomed with open arms. I feel like if we had understood better the dynamics of the relationships among the groups, we might have been a little less naïve about trying to train forces and put them into the theater and [more able to] figure out how the other groups were going to react to them. So my argument is that it's really, really important to understand these relationships.