

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR  
“TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM”  
a video interview with Dr. Martha Crenshaw,  
Center for International Security and Cooperation



- Organizing Questions**
- What makes terrorism so hard to define?
  - What drives people to engage in terrorism?
  - What do terrorists want?
  - What are some strategies for countering terrorism?

**Summary** In this video, Professor Crenshaw explores some fundamental issues about terrorism, such as why people resort to terror, the political goals of terrorism, and the importance of understanding the complex web of relationships among terrorist organizations. She also places contemporary terrorist groups (like ISIS and al-Qaeda) into a broader history of terrorism and discusses some of the challenges of confronting and countering such organizations successfully.

- Objectives** During and after viewing this video, students will:
- gain a general understanding of the definition, causes, and motivation for terrorism;
  - delineate meaningful similarities and differences among several different terrorist groups; and
  - examine the history of specific terrorist incidents and groups.

**Materials** Handout 1, *Video Notes*, pp. 4–6, 30 copies  
Handout 2, *Analyzing Terrorist Incidents*, p. 7, 30 copies

Handout 3, *Terrorist Incident Presentation Notes*, pp. 8–10, 30 copies  
Handout 4, *Research a Terrorist Group*, p. 11, 30 copies (optional)  
Projection, *Wrap-up Discussion Questions*, p. 12 (optional)  
Answer Key 1, *Video Notes*, pp. 13–14  
Answer Key 2, *Terrorist Incident Presentation Notes*, pp. 15–17  
Teacher Information, *Video Transcript*, pp. 18–21  
Video, “Terrorism and Counterterrorism,” online at <https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedia/terrorism-and-counterterrorism>

**Equipment** Computer with Internet access and a Flash-enabled or HTML5-supported web browser  
Computers with Internet access (for student research on Day One)  
Computer projector and screen  
Computer speakers

**Teacher Preparation** Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

1. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts.
2. Set up and test computer, projector, speakers, and video before starting the lesson. Confirm that you are able to play the video with adequate audio volume.
3. Preview Video, “Terrorism and Counterterrorism.”
4. Become familiar with the content of handouts, answer keys, and projection.

**Time** Two 50-minute class periods

**Procedures Day One**

1. Explain to students that they will be viewing a short video that introduces modern-day terrorism and counterterrorism. Dr. Martha Crenshaw, an expert on terrorism studies and Senior Fellow at Stanford’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, is the speaker.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1, *Video Notes*, to each student. Give students several minutes to read through the questions and defined terms before they view the video.
3. View the video, “Terrorism and Counterterrorism.” If necessary, pause the video at various points to allow students to respond to the prompts on Handout 1.
4. Once the video has ended, give students several minutes to write their answers to the questions.

5. Organize students into six groups. Distribute one copy of Handout 2, *Analyzing Terrorist Incidents*, to each student. Assign each group one of the six terrorist incidents to analyze. You may assign incidents randomly or allow groups to choose their preference.
6. Make computers available for student use, and allow time for students to research and address the prompts on Handout 2 in their groups. Students can conduct research on the Internet as well as reference points made in the video.
7. If students have not completed Handout 2 by the end of the class period, ask them to do so for homework.

### Day Two

1. Ask students to return to their groups from the previous class period, when they worked on Handout 2, *Analyzing Terrorist Incidents*. Allow groups five minutes to choose a representative and prepare to report their findings to the rest of the class.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 3, *Terrorist Incident Presentation Notes*, to each student. Instruct students to complete the handout, and inform them that you will collect it for assessment at the end of the class period.
3. Call up one representative from each group to present its findings to the rest of the class for three minutes. Allow other groups two minutes to ask questions of the presenting group.
4. Once all groups have presented, discuss with the class the biggest differences and similarities they noticed among the incidents.
5. Collect Handout 1, *Video Notes*, and Handout 3, *Terrorist Incident Presentation Notes*, from students for assessment. Use the two answer keys to assess student responses.

### Optional Activities

1. After all groups present their responses to Handout 2, display Projection, *Wrap-up Discussion Questions*, with the numbered quotes hidden. After you reveal each quote, give students three minutes to discuss their responses in groups. After three minutes have passed, ask one representative from each group to report on what the group discussed.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 4, *Research a Terrorist Group*, to each student. Ask each student to choose one of the six terrorist groups listed and perform research on the associated webpage to answer the questions on the handout. Students should complete their research as homework and bring their responses to the next class period. (Alternatively, you can ask students to complete this task in groups during class.)

**VIDEO NOTES**

*You are about to watch a 14-minute video interview with Stanford Professor Martha Crenshaw, a renowned expert in terrorism studies and Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. Professor Crenshaw will explore some fundamental issues about terrorism, such as why people resort to terror, the political goals of terrorism, and the importance of understanding the complex web of relationships among terrorist organizations. She will also place contemporary terrorist groups (like ISIS and al-Qaeda) into a broader history of terrorism and discuss some of the challenges of confronting and countering such organizations successfully. Use the space below to answer each question; you may want to take notes on another sheet of paper as you watch the video.*

1) According to Dr. Crenshaw, what are the elements of a definition of terrorism?

2) What are three potential reasons that people might use terrorism?

3) What are some of the types of objectives terrorist groups want?



**Reference: Defined Terms (in order of mention)**

**contested concept**—a concept whose definition cannot be settled by empirical evidence and for which proper usage thus involves continuous disputes

**ideology**—a system of ideas and ideals, especially one that forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy

**repression**—the condition of having political, social, or cultural freedom controlled by force

**homegrown terrorism**—violent acts committed by citizens or permanent residents of a state against their own people or property within that state without foreign influence

**self-radicalization**—a phenomenon in which individuals become terrorists without affiliating with a radical group, although they may be influenced by its ideology and message

**psychopathology**—psychological and behavioral dysfunction occurring in mental illness or in social disorganization

**ISIS**—Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as “Islamic State” and “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).” A militant movement that has conquered territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria and proclaimed itself a caliphate with exclusive political and theological authority over the world’s Muslims.

**national separatist**—one who advocates disjunction of a cultural, ethnic, tribal, religious, or racial group from a larger group or political unit

**ethno-nationalist**—someone who believes that the “nation” should be defined in terms of ethnicity

**Islamism**—social and political activism advocating that public and political life should be guided by Islamic principles, sometimes including full implementation of *sharia*

**jihadism**—militant movements whose ideology is based on the notion of *jihad*, or holy war

**apocalyptic**—forecasting the ultimate destiny of the world

**caliphate**—the land or dominion of a caliph (a political and religious leader of Islam)

**sarin**—an extremely toxic nerve gas that can be used as a chemical weapon

## ANALYZING TERRORIST INCIDENTS

Your group will research one of these six terrorist incidents:

1. June 1985: Destruction of Air India Flight 182 in mid-air
2. March 1995: Tokyo subway gas attack
3. April 1995: Bombing of Oklahoma City federal building
4. July 2005: Coordinated bombings of public transportation in London
5. June 2015: Shooting at church in Charleston, South Carolina
6. November 2015: Coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris

Conduct research on your assigned incident and answer the following questions. You will share your answers to the entire class tomorrow. Your teacher will collect your responses for assessment.

1. Dr. Crenshaw defines terrorism as “a method or strategy that seeks to instill fear in a watching audience.” What made this incident an act of terrorism?
2. Who were the main perpetrators of this attack? With which groups, if any, did they affiliate?
3. Would you classify this attack as domestic or transnational? Why?
4. What were the motives—alleged or stated—behind the attack?
5. How did the affected government(s) respond to this attack?

**TERRORIST INCIDENT PRESENTATION NOTES (PAGE 1 OF 3)**

Use information from your classmates' presentations to complete the table below. If their presentations do not provide all of the necessary information, ask them questions to fill in the gaps. Before turning this sheet in to your teacher, ensure that you enter information for the terrorist incident your group researched.

	<b>Why considered terrorism?</b>	<b>Perpetrators</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>Motives</b>	<b>Response</b>
<b>Destruction of Air India Flight 182 in mid-air</b>					
<b>Tokyo subway gas attack</b>					



TERRORIST INCIDENT PRESENTATION NOTES (PAGE 2 OF 3)

	Why considered terrorism?	Perpetrators	Classification	Motives	Response
Bombing of Oklahoma City federal building					
Coordinated bombings of public transportation in London					

TERRORIST INCIDENT PRESENTATION NOTES (PAGE 3 OF 3)

	Why considered terrorism?	Perpetrators	Classification	Motives	Response
Shooting at church in Charleston, South Carolina					
Coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris					

## RESEARCH A TERRORIST GROUP

Dr. Crenshaw and her colleagues have created the “Mapping Militants Project,” which provides interactive visual representations and profiles of key militant organizations. You can access the project at <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants>.

To learn more about the motives and history of some of the world’s most prominent terrorist groups, research one of the groups below and prepare to present some of the associated information to your classmates.

- **Abu Sayyaf Group:** <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/152>
- **Al Qaeda:** <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/21>
- **FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia):** <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/89>
- **Hezbollah:** <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/81>
- **The Islamic State:** <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1>
- **The Taliban:** <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/367>

*Hint: Use the “contents” menu in the right-hand column of each page to navigate to relevant sections quickly.*

Answer the following questions as they pertain to the terrorist group that you have chosen to research:

- 1) How long has the group been active?
- 2) How many people are currently involved in the group? Where do most of their activities occur?
- 3) What are the goals of this group? How, if at all, have these goals changed over time?
- 4) What are the group’s main tactics?

## Wrap-up Discussion Questions

How would you respond to a friend who makes the following statements?

1. “Why are you so worried about terrorism? You have a greater chance of dying from a car accident.”
2. “Terrorism is much worse now than it was 30 years ago.”
3. “We should spend more time focusing on how to prevent terrorist incidents carried out by domestic groups, since these are more common in the United States than incidents planned by transnational groups.”
4. “The media should not publicize the names of people or groups who commit terrorism, since terrorists want an audience. Doing so would lead to fewer terrorist incidents.”

## VIDEO NOTES

1) According to Dr. Crenshaw, what are the elements of a definition of terrorism?

*Terrorism must involve*

- *Violence or a threat of violence*
- *Political intent (i.e., the desire to influence those who hold power)*
- *Organized and systematic methods*

2) What are three potential reasons that people might use terrorism?

- ***Broad-scale societal, economic, or political conditions:*** *an expression of protest or desperation borne from living in abject poverty, political repression, or discrimination*
- ***Individual psychopathology:*** *mental instability, illness, or malcondition that causes people to not care about the harm they inflict on others*
- ***Affiliation with terrorist group:*** *to help an established terrorist group achieve its goals*

3) What are some of the types of objectives terrorist groups want?

*In the immediate term, they want publicity for their cause: attention is one of the defining characteristics of terrorism.*

*Beyond that, there are a few typologies of terrorist groups:*

- ***National separatists*** *want to create a new state for their particular ethnic or religious group.*
- ***Revolutionary movements*** *want to overthrow an existing government.*
- ***Jihadists*** *want to unite the world in a new Muslim government.*
- ***Apocalyptic groups*** *seek to hasten the end of the world.*

4) Is domestic or transnational terrorism more prevalent?

*In the United States, domestic far-right groups commit more violence than transnational Islamic groups.*

5) What large-scale terrorist incidents does Dr. Crenshaw mention?

- *Aircraft hijackings in the 1970s*
- *Midair bombings of aircraft, beginning in the 1980s (Note: In particular, she refers to the 1982 incident in which alleged Sikh extremists seeking independence from India destroyed Air India Flight 182 in mid-air, between London and Montreal.)*
- *Bombing of federal building in Oklahoma City in the 1990s (Note: The bombing occurred in 1995.)*
- *Tokyo subway gas attack by apocalyptic Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo in 1995*
- *Coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015*

6) What are two ways to counter terrorism?

- **Military means:** the use of weapons and troops to kill leaders of targeted terrorist organizations
- **Social and psychological approach:** attempts to de-radicalize extremists, prevent the radicalization of would-be extremists, and persuade people who are sympathetic to the ideology of terrorist groups not to become terrorists

7) Why have U.S. efforts to combat terrorist groups in Syria proven so difficult?

*There are a large number of armed groups in Syria whose alliances and priorities change frequently. Rivals sometimes end up collaborating, and even groups with intense ideological differences may ally to temporarily combat a bigger rival.*

*Thus, while the United States' priority may be to defeat Islamic State, it is sometimes unclear how best to do so and whether weakening Islamic State may actually strengthen other terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda.*

TERRORIST INCIDENT PRESENTATION NOTES (PAGE 1 OF 3)

Please use the following table as a guideline to ensure that students' responses to Handout 3 are generally accurate.

	Why considered terrorism?	Perpetrators	Classification	Motives	Response
<b>Destruction of Air India Flight 182 in mid-air</b>	Organized, pre-meditated bombing of a 747 jet that intended to instill fear and draw attention to Indian government operations against the Sikh "Golden Temple" and to promote the cause of an independent nation for Sikhs	The Sikh militant group Babbar Khalsa (classified by some as a terrorist organization) was suspected to have planned the attacks, although only one of its members was ever convicted.	Transnational (The attack targeted an international flight, even though the planners lived in Canada and their cause was in South Asia.)	Desire for an independent Sikh state in the Punjab region of north India	Criminal: investigation to find perpetrators; arrest and trial of suspects
<b>Tokyo subway gas attack</b>	Organized, pre-meditated attack that intended to harm or kill Japanese civilians with the goal of bringing about demise of Japanese government and promoting group's aims	Members of Japanese religious cult Aum Shinrikyo	Domestic (limited to Japan)	Desire to speed about the end of the world by bringing down the Japanese government and installing the group's leader, Shoko Asahara, as the new emperor of Japan	Criminal: investigation to find perpetrators; arrest and trial of suspects and Shoko Asahara, the leader of Aum Shinrikyo  Legal: removal of religious organization status from Aum and seizure of its assets

TERRORIST INCIDENT PRESENTATION NOTES (PAGE 2 OF 3)

	<b>Why considered terrorism?</b>	<b>Perpetrators</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>Motives</b>	<b>Response</b>
<b>Bombing of Oklahoma City federal building</b>	Organized, pre-meditated attack that intended to harm or kill people associated with the U.S. federal government	Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, former soldiers in the U.S. Army	Domestic (limited to the United States)	Desire to inspire a revolt against the U.S. government, and revenge for federal government's campaigns against two other paramilitary groups	<u>Criminal</u> : investigation to find perpetrators; arrest and trial of suspects  <u>Legal</u> : new antiterrorism legislation
<b>Coordinated bombings of public transportation in London</b>	Highly organized, pre-meditated attacks that intended to harm or kill civilians and intimidate a wider audience	Four British-born Islamic extremists	Transnational (The attackers were allegedly linked to global terrorist networks.)	Alleged retaliation for British military and financial support for attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq	<u>Criminal</u> : investigation to find potential co-conspirators and supporters; raids and arrest of suspects  <u>Legal</u> : deportation of Abdullah el-Faisal



TERRORIST INCIDENT PRESENTATION NOTES (PAGE 3 OF 3)

	<b>Why considered terrorism?</b>	<b>Perpetrators</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>Motives</b>	<b>Response</b>
<b>Shooting at church in Charleston, South Carolina</b>	Organized, pre-meditated attack that intended to harm or kill civilian black Americans, intimidate a wider audience, and ignite a race war	Dylann Roof, 21-year-old white supremacist	Domestic (limited to the United States)	Desire to ignite a race war that would lessen the number of black Americans	<u>Criminal</u> : investigation to identify perpetrator; arrest and trial of perpetrator  <u>Other</u> : removal of Confederate flag from South Carolina statehouse grounds
<b>Coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris</b>	Highly organized, pre-meditated attacks that intended to harm or kill civilians and intimidate a wider audience	Members of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL)	Transnational (The attackers were allegedly linked to global terrorist networks.)	Retaliation against French air strikes against Islamic State territory	<u>Criminal</u> : investigation to find perpetrators; arrest and trial of perpetrator  <u>Legal</u> : declaration of national state of emergency to improve security  <u>Military</u> : increase in air strikes on ISIS territory in Syria

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

On-screen text:

Terrorism and Counterterrorism  
a discussion with Martha Crenshaw

On-screen text:

Martha Crenshaw  
Senior Fellow, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies

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 day care 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?

Martha Crenshaw: 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.