

Politics of International Terrorism

Lieutenant General DV Kalra, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)[®]

Lieutenant General (Dr) SK Gadeock, AVSM (Retd)[#]

“The achievement of disproportionately large effects from the employment of minimal resources is what political terrorism is all about”

Chalmers Johnson

“Contemporary terrorism is inextricably international in character; the global arena is its stage, international relations its inevitable target, and disruption of global order its constant implication”

Sunil Adam

Abstract

This article examines the evolution, drivers, and global impact of political terrorism as a persistent form of low-cost, high-impact violence. It traces terrorism’s historical roots in tyrannicide and revolutionary struggles, through its ideological influences of nationalism, religion, and anti-globalisation, to its modern manifestations in state sponsorship, cross-border networks, and cyber-enabled extremism. The analysis highlights how terrorism exploits democratic vulnerabilities, weak international institutions, and unregulated arms flows, while increasingly adopting hybrid tactics that blur the line between conventional war and terrorism. Case studies such as the Irish Republican Army,

[®]**Lieutenant General DV Kalra, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)**, retired as Director General Ordnance Services in 1993 after serving as Commandant of the Military College of Materials Management and Dean of Faculty of Management Studies, Rani Durgavati Vishwavidyalaya. An expert in logistics and supply chain management, he is Research Fellow and co-author of a widely used textbook.

[#]**Lieutenant General (Dr) SK Gadeock, AVSM (Retd)**, held distinguished roles including Aide-de-Camp to two Presidents, Adjutant at the National Defence Academy, Logistics Adviser to the Botswana Defence Force, and Commandant of the Defence Services Staff College. Recipient of national honours, he now serves at Amity University, leading institutions in defence, technology, and strategic studies.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, 9/11, Mumbai 2008, and India's 2016 surgical strikes illustrate how historical grievances, ideology, and state policy converge in sustaining terrorism. Future threats include artificial intelligence-driven radicalisation and the potential use of weapons of mass destruction. The article underscores the urgent need for globally coordinated strategies that balance effective counterterrorism with the preservation of civil liberties.

Introduction: An Overview

Political terrorism on an international scale has emerged as a low-cost alternative to other forms of transnational violence. It is increasingly used by disaffected groups worldwide to exert pressure on target states through physical violence and psychological fear. As these tactics prove effective, terrorist activities continue to grow, particularly affecting democratic nations, though autocratic states are not entirely immune. A web of interconnections among global terrorist factions is becoming evident, while international countermeasures remain weak. This highlights institutional inertia and the inability of democratic states to respond swiftly to organised violence. Terrorism has surged as a global scourge with no signs of abating, increasing in both scale and intensity. Some argue that international political terrorism has replaced conventional warfare as a tool for advancing state policies. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that several states have adopted it as an instrument of state policy. With nuclear conflict deemed unthinkable, future generations will likely confront terrorism as a dominant force in global security. Political analysts and strategists must, therefore, study the dynamics of terrorism to craft effective countermeasures.

Definition

Terrorism remains challenging to define due to differing perspectives and legal ambiguities. The absence of a universal definition has hindered international counterterrorism efforts.¹ The United Nations (UN) Counter-Terrorism Committee has attempted to create a global definition of terrorism, but disagreements among member states continue to stall consensus.² Political terrorism is particularly complex, as it involves the legitimacy of state power,

not only against foreign entities but also against its citizens. When acts of anarchism transcend national borders, terrorism assumes international dimensions, making legal and diplomatic responses ambiguous. The absence of consensus has undermined resolutions in international forums and hindered efforts to effectively combat terrorism.

Origins

The origins of terrorism date back to tyrannicide in ancient societies, where assassinations were justified on political or moral grounds. Over time, terrorism evolved into organised revolutionary movements and insurgencies.³ In ancient contexts, the assassination of tyrants was seen as a moral duty, and history is replete with examples of individuals taking up arms against oppression. Brutus, for instance, justified his actions on both moral and political grounds, while many figures were celebrated as heroes for their pursuit of justice and freedom. However, when organised violence shifts from individual resistance to collective revolutionary movements seeking governmental change, it acquires political significance and is often labeled a liberation struggle. No state can fully satisfy the aspirations of all its citizens, particularly in ethnically diverse nations. As a result, marginalised groups frequently emerge, with leaders advocating violence to counter perceived injustices, often fuelling political terrorism. Subnational and regional identities can sometimes overshadow national allegiance, especially in postcolonial states still grappling with nation-building. While Western nations gradually evolved into nation-states, many others were shaped by colonial rule, leading to internal divisions and ethnic tensions. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) offer compelling insights into how deeply embedded historical grievances fuel enduring terrorist campaigns. The IRA's insurgency arose from prolonged British colonial influence and systemic discrimination against Northern Irish Catholics, leading to 'The Troubles'. Similarly, the LTTE's violent secessionist movement in Sri Lanka was a response to perceived discrimination against the Tamil minority, notably employing suicide bombings. Both groups sustained their militancy through external aid, strategic adaptability, and exploiting the perceived failures of peaceful political processes.⁴

Ideological Influence

Although political terrorism is historically rooted in leftist ideology, it is not always inherently ideological. Ideology, nevertheless, plays a crucial role in shaping international terrorism, providing a framework for beliefs, motivations, and justifications for violent actions. Key ideological influences include religious extremism, nationalist and separatist movements, and anti-globalisation economic thought. However, terrorism is ultimately driven by grievances—real or perceived—rather than strict ideological alignment, and is abetted by socio-economic injustices, political instability, and personal motivations.

Evolving Shape of Political Terrorism

A more worrisome aspect of political terrorism is state-sponsored terrorism. Notable cases include the United States (US) and Soviet Union-backed militant groups countering each other's global influence. The Soviet Union supported communist insurgencies in Latin America, while the US funded anti-Soviet militants in Afghanistan.⁵ Nations have historically supported militant groups as an extension of state policy. Examples include Cold War proxy wars, Pakistan's continued support for militant groups in Kashmir as well as pro-Khalistan separatists, and Iran's support for Hezbollah, a militant group operating in Lebanon against Israel, represent such state-sponsored interventions.⁶ North Korea, Cuba, and Syria have already been designated as state sponsors of terrorism by the US Government due to their alleged support for terrorist activities. Covert use of this instrument of state policy is not altogether uncommon.

Criminal violence, which lacks ideological or political motives, falls outside the realm of political terrorism. International crime syndicates and Mafia-style organisations often engage in acts of terror for financial gain, but their objectives remain distinct from those of political terrorists.

Trends in Political Terrorism

One alarming trend is that the increasing internationalisation of terrorism is met with weak institutional responses in democratic states, and the failure of international bodies to form a united counterterrorism strategy has contributed to its growth. Terrorist networks recognise these vulnerabilities and exploit them to operate

more effectively across borders. There is a clear kinship among terrorist groups, which transcends geography and ideology. A prime example is the 1975 attack on the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries headquarters in Vienna, where operatives claimed allegiance to the Palestinian Revolution. Yet their leader, Carlos, was a Venezuelan trained in Moscow, backed by Cuban intelligence, and allegedly funded by Libya's Muammar Qaddafi. This reflects a global network of support, mirroring multinational corporations in their strategic operations.⁷ In 2001, the Al-Qaeda network, which was responsible for the 9/11 attacks, operated across multiple countries with financial and logistical support from various sources.⁸

International Perspectives on Terrorism

Different nations hold varying views on terrorism, based on political interests and historical context. While some groups are labelled as terrorists in one country, they may be seen as freedom fighters elsewhere. For example, the Palestine Liberation Organisation is viewed as a terrorist organisation by the US, but many nations support its cause. Similarly, Sri Lankan politics have witnessed shifts in attitudes toward militant groups based on electoral gains rather than national security considerations.

Challenges in Combating International Terrorism

Governments often hesitate in counterterrorism efforts due to political constraints, public opposition, and diplomatic repercussions. Some states provide safe havens for terrorist groups.⁹ While security forces occasionally arrest terrorists, the fear of hijackings or political kidnappings discourages strict enforcement. The US drone warfare program faces ethical dilemmas regarding civilian casualties while targeting terrorists in ungoverned regions.¹⁰ The 2008 Mumbai attacks critically exposed systemic deficiencies within India's intelligence and counterterrorism frameworks.

In response, India implemented substantial reforms, notably establishing the National Investigation Agency for centralised terror investigations, bolstering coastal security through enhanced inter-agency coordination, and decentralising elite counterterrorism forces (e.g., National Security Guard) via regional hubs. These strategic overhauls aimed to optimise inter-agency synergy and response efficacy, thereby establishing new benchmarks in global

counterterrorism preparedness.¹¹ India's 'Surgical Strikes' in 2016, following the Uri attack, exemplified a decisive shift in its counterterrorism strategy. These precision-based operations targeted terrorist launch pads, demonstrating India's resolve to act against cross-border terrorism without escalating into a broader conflict.

This approach showcased the effectiveness of intelligence-driven, non-escalatory military responses in disrupting terrorist infrastructure, providing a potential model for global counterterrorism efforts prioritising targeted action and deterrence. India's counterterrorism approach, particularly in its neighbourhood, offers a compelling model for international cooperation. By focusing on targeted, non-escalatory operations to dismantle terrorist networks, India demonstrates a strategy that prioritises precision over broad military action. This measured response aims to achieve specific security objectives without escalating regional tensions or undermining stability. Such an approach could serve as a blueprint for global counterterrorism efforts, emphasising intelligence-led strikes and collaborative efforts to disrupt terrorist financing and recruitment, ultimately fostering greater international security while avoiding unintended consequences.

Access to Advanced Weaponry

The global arms trade enables terrorist organisations to acquire sophisticated weaponry, fuelling conflicts and increasing operational capabilities.¹² Weapons such as automatic rifles, explosives, and remote-controlled devices are frequently supplied through illegal or loosely regulated channels, making it easier for militants to arm themselves. Several factors contribute to this problem, including unregulated arms markets, state-sponsored arms transfers, technological advancements, and profit-driven arms dealers.¹³ The consequences of this issue are far-reaching, affecting regional stability, increasing civilian casualties, and complicating counterterrorism efforts. Addressing this challenge requires stronger international cooperation, tighter regulations on arms sales, and strategies to prevent illicit weapons from reaching extremists.

Future Threats: Chemical, Biological, and Nuclear Weapons

The risk of terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction continues to rise, requiring international cooperation to prevent catastrophic attacks.¹⁴ The most alarming aspect of modern

terrorism is the potential expansion into weapons of mass destruction. The Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995 stands as a chilling benchmark in chemical terrorism. This coordinated assault by a doomsday cult, releasing the deadly nerve agent sarin during rush hour, resulted in 13 deaths and thousands of injuries. The incident starkly demonstrated the profound vulnerability of civilian populations to chemical weapons, highlighting the alarming potential for non-state actors to inflict mass casualties using unconventional means.¹⁵ Without the deterrence of mutual destruction that exists between global superpowers, extremist groups may pursue the use of highly lethal weaponry, further destabilising international security.

Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Technologies

Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted terrorism and cyber warfare enhance attack sophistication, recruitment strategies, and operational effectiveness for terrorist organisations.¹⁶ AI-assisted terrorism involves using machine learning, natural language processing, and automation to analyse vast amounts of data, identify vulnerabilities, and optimise attacks. Generative AI is also being leveraged for propaganda, recruitment, and influencing behaviour through social media. As AI becomes more accessible, the barriers to entry for terrorist groups are lowered, making it easier for them to deploy sophisticated attacks. Cyber terrorism, on the other hand, involves using digital tools to disrupt critical infrastructure, steal sensitive information, or manipulate public perception, attacks. Governments and security agencies worldwide are working to counter these threats by developing AI-driven defence mechanisms and policies to regulate AI usage. The challenge lies in balancing technological advancements with security concerns. However, AI-driven cyber terrorism and cybersecurity have evolved into high-cost endeavours for both sides rather than the once-perceived low-cost alternatives to conventional warfare.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) adeptly exploited social media algorithms to globalise its recruitment efforts, targeting vulnerable individuals with tailored propaganda. By understanding how these platforms recommend content and connect users, ISIS created echo chambers that amplified extremist narratives and facilitated direct engagement with potential foreign fighters. This

strategic use of digital technology underscores the growing threat of AI-assisted extremism, presenting significant challenges for online counter-radicalisation.¹⁷

Political International Terrorism and Global Initiatives

Political international terrorism arises from global struggles for power. International efforts such as the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) programs aim to strengthen cooperative legal and strategic measures against terrorism.¹⁸ The absence of an international judicial system or enforcement authority, coupled with a lack of political will, has allowed terrorism to flourish. While democratic societies permit dissent, they also impose limits, reacting when violence surpasses acceptable thresholds. Through these conflicts, societies adapt and grow, learning from challenges. Several international efforts are currently in place to combat terrorism, including the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the UNODC Global Programme on Preventing and Countering. These initiatives reflect the global commitment to addressing terrorism through legal, strategic, and cooperative measures. The European Union Counterterrorism Strategy has introduced extensive measures, including intelligence sharing and financial tracking to deter terrorist funding.¹⁹ Counterterrorism efforts must balance national security with civil liberties, ensuring that policies do not undermine democratic freedoms.²⁰ Counterterrorism measures face a core dilemma protecting national security without eroding civil liberties. Governments must prevent attacks, yet expanded surveillance and enhanced law enforcement powers can inadvertently infringe upon rights such as privacy and free speech. The US Patriot Act exemplifies this tension, as its broad provisions sparked intense debates over surveillance policies and individual privacy rights, highlighting the ongoing challenge of balancing security with democratic freedoms.²¹

Blurring the Gap between Conventional War and International Terrorism

Ukraine's recent drone attack on Russian air bases, dubbed Operation Spiderweb, was a highly coordinated military strike targeting strategic bombers and command aircraft. The operation reportedly damaged or destroyed over 40 Russian warplanes and inflicted billions of dollars in losses. Whether this constitutes an

act of war or international terrorism depends on the perspective taken. From Ukraine's standpoint, it was a military operation aimed at degrading Russia's aerial capabilities in an ongoing war. Russia, on the other hand, has labelled it a terrorist attack, arguing that drones were smuggled into Russian territory and launched from within. Internationally, such actions are often assessed based on intent, targets, and context. Since Ukraine targeted military assets, many would classify it as an act of war rather than terrorism. However, Russia's framing of the attack as terrorism reflects its broader narrative in the conflict. Regardless of the belligerents' views, the line between conventional warfare and international terrorism has become blurred, leading possibly to increased use of such hybrid tactics in the future, giving credence to the 'Low-cost, high payoff' operational doctrine of the terrorists.

Conclusion

Violence has historically been a catalyst for socio-political transformations. It continues to serve as a method of protest against authority and as a central force in state conflicts. Over time, the nature of violence has evolved, now taking the form of political terrorism. Terrorist violence is designed for maximum impact with minimal resources, making it a formidable strategy in modern conflicts. Low-intensity warfare will shape conflicts for years, with terrorist organisations gaining access to increasingly lethal weapons. While terrorist violence aims to drive political change, history shows that no single terrorist act has successfully overturned a government or altered the global balance of power. Confrontations with established authorities can neutralise such movements, forcing terrorists to operate in the shadows. Both democratic states and the international system face limitations in addressing terrorism. Effective counterterrorism requires balancing security measures with civil liberties. Mobilising international consensus is crucial, yet historical delays in coordinated global responses suggest that political violence may remain relevant for some time.

India's swift response to the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack reshaped regional security strategies, showcasing determined retaliation, diplomatic pressure, and deterrence-based measures. This action has bolstered global counterterrorism efforts and could influence international policies by demonstrating the effectiveness of coordinated, precise, and strategic responses.

Endnotes

¹ Alex P. Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London: Routledge, 2013).

² United Nations, *A Comprehensive Strategy Against Terrorism* (New York: United Nations, 2004).

³ Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁴ David C. Rapoport, *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁵ U.S. Department of State, *State Sponsors of Terrorism Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2024), accessed 12 Jun 2025, <https://www.state.gov/>

⁶ Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁸ Martha Crenshaw, *Terrorism in Context*, 2nd ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Counter-Terrorism Measures* (2023), accessed 12 Jun 2025, <https://www.unodc.org/>

¹⁰ John Mueller, *Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and U.S. National Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *National Security Report* (2025), accessed 13 Jun 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/>

¹² Rachel Stohl and Suzette Grillot, *The International Arms Trade* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

¹³ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Global Arms Transfers and Illicit Trade Report* (2023), accessed 23 Jun 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/>

¹⁴ Jonathan B. Tucker, *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

¹⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *Nuclear Security Threats Report* (Vienna: IAEA, 2024), accessed 13 Jun 2025, <https://www.iaea.org/>

¹⁶ PW Singer and Emerson Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), accessed 13 Jun 2025, <https://www.hmhco.com/>

¹⁷ US Department of Homeland Security, *Cyber Terrorism and AI Threats* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2024), accessed 12 Jun 2025, <https://www.dhs.gov/>

¹⁸ Scott Nicholas Romaniuk, Francis Grice, Stewart Webb, and Daniela Irrera, *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

¹⁹ United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee, *Annual Terrorism Report (2023)*, accessed 12 Jun 2025, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc>

²⁰ David Cole, *Terrorism and the Constitution: Sacrificing Civil Liberties in the Name of National Security* (New York: The New Press, 2022).

²¹ Amnesty International, *Human Rights and Counterterrorism Report* (London: Amnesty International, 2023), 12 Jun 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/>