

Introduction

The Context for Analyzing Counterterrorism Difficulties—
Current Threats and the State of Academic Research

What is it about terrorism that makes it such a challenging policy problem? The purpose of this book is to explain the characteristics of terrorism that make it inherently difficult for governments, especially the U.S. government, to formulate effective counterterrorism policies. Why is terrorism so intractable? What are the obstacles to developing a consistent and coherent counterterrorism strategy? The barriers that we identify flow from the issue itself, not the particular political predispositions of individual policymakers or flawed organizational processes. We find that scholars and policymakers face similar difficulties—the study of terrorism is often confused and contentious, and the study of counterterrorism can be even more frustrating.

Our main thesis in this book is that the conceptual and empirical requirements of defining, classifying, explaining, and responding to terrorist attacks are more complex than is usually acknowledged by politicians and academics, which complicates the task of crafting effective counterterrorism policy. Although the policymaking process, the goals of individual American leaders, and American societal and political pressures are relevant factors, our focus is on the daunting complexity, variation, and mutability of the issue itself. Moreover, the stakes are especially high since the consequences of missteps and

miscalculations in responding to terrorism are potentially catastrophic. In the chapters that follow we outline some of the barriers to recognizing and responding to terrorist attacks and suggest ways to overcome the obstacles we identify. Terrorist attacks are rare, yet they encourage immediate and far-reaching responses that are not easily rolled back. Most attempts actually fail or are foiled, so that examining only successful terrorist attacks gives an incomplete picture. The actors behind terrorism are extremely difficult to identify, since there is no standard “terrorist organization.” Governments and researchers often struggle to establish responsibility for specific attacks. Evaluating the effectiveness of counterterrorism is problematic. For empirical comparisons we rely to a large extent on the nearly 157,000 terrorist attacks that have occurred around the world over the past four and a half decades since 1970; they are catalogued by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), maintained at the University of Maryland.¹

Following this introduction, in chapter 2 we argue that the atypicality of terrorist attacks makes them difficult to study and predict and, consequently, to prepare for and counter. We examine the frequency of terrorist attacks worldwide and against Americans at home and abroad, and we demonstrate that terrorist attacks, especially those with mass casualties, are exceedingly rare, however ubiquitous they might appear. Nevertheless, the U.S. government responded to 9/11 as though it presaged the beginning of a trend. The transformative policies and institutional reorganizations adopted in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 have reshaped international and domestic security politics. It has not been easy to roll back changes made in the moment of crisis in order to adapt to a shifting threat. Democratic governments may not be capable of treating rare but highly destructive terrorist events as outliers rather than regularities.

In chapter 3 we address the complications caused by the fact that a large number of attacks against Americans at home, apparently motivated by adherence to jihadist principles, fail or are foiled (an inference drawn from an original dataset). Much of the information about terrorism that is presented to the public is the proverbial tip of the iceberg, showing only terrorist attacks that transpired rather than attempts that were thwarted. Often the difference between success and failure in terrorism is difficult to discern. In general, failed and foiled plots are more difficult to study and have less impact on public opinion

and on policy than do completed attacks—with some exceptions that we will discuss. Yet developing a comprehensive response to terrorist threats requires that we not only track “successful” attacks attributed to groups and individuals but also examine who planned to accomplish what, how close they came to completion, and the intentions behind their actions.

Chapter 4 focuses on the elusiveness of the adversary. There is no single type of terrorist organization. We argue that our counterterrorist policies must be tailored to varying, complex organizational types as well as to relations among groups as they shift between cooperation and competition. The rivalry between al Qa’ida and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is a case in point. We compare common stereotypes about hierarchically organized, long-lasting terrorist organizations to the range of actors that are in fact linked to terrorist attacks. On one end of the spectrum are individuals operating with little or no direct support from formal organizations; on the other, a handful of hierarchically structured, relatively long-lived entities.

In chapter 5 we take up the related issue of attribution of responsibility for terrorist attacks, a process that is frequently uncertain. Often those responsible for a particular attack are never known. Sometimes groups incorrectly take credit. In other cases one terrorist group falsely claims that an act was committed by another group. In the aftermath of a deadly terrorist attack there is often tremendous pressure to assign responsibility, understandably, because punishment is impossible without this knowledge, unless a government wishes to take the dubious path of collective punishment. Moreover, attribution can be controversial as well as indefinite, especially if there is the possibility of state involvement or the question of blame has aroused domestic political controversy.

In chapter 6 we assess the difficulties of determining how effective counterterrorism policies are. How can we tell when policies are successful in preventing or diminishing terrorism? How can the costs and benefits of different measures be calculated? Developing metrics for success has proved problematic. In fact, consensus on what success means is lacking. Conceptions of successful counterterrorism have varied considerably in the years since the 9/11 attacks.

In the final chapter of the book we summarize our main conclusions and consider their implications for developing a coherent and

sensible counterterrorism policy. Terrorism can encourage outsized responses whose scope may be greater than they need to be to prevent further attacks. Overreaction by governments has been a stated goal of some users of terrorist tactics, so in these instances a disproportionate response may actually reward terrorists. On the other hand, without credible responses to terrorist threats, the risk of another catastrophic attack could increase to unacceptable levels. Certainly the public demand for an effective response will be almost impossible to resist. Finding a middle path between overreaction and underreaction is a persistent dilemma for the United States—one that is not likely to disappear in this century.

In the remainder of this introduction we provide background for the issues that will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. We begin by providing historical context for the evolution of the terrorist threat in the United States, emphasizing how the general conception of terrorism has developed and how it has come to dominate the American security agenda since the 9/11 attacks. We also clarify some of the conceptual and methodological obstacles to policy-relevant academic research into terrorism and counterterrorism.

The Evolving Threat of Jihadist Terrorism in America and the West

Since 2001 violence associated with Salafi-jihadist variants of Sunni Islamism has been at the center of the American conception of the terrorist threat. The jihadist danger has understandably dominated the counterterrorism agenda, initially as a foreign threat and over time as an internal “homegrown” threat as well.² Domestic right-wing violence has caused more harm to American citizens at home in the same period of time, and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing remains second after the 9/11 attack in terms of lethality within the United States.³ However, the threat of violence from sources such as white supremacists, antifederalists, and the Christian Identity movement does not have the same resonance for the security agenda. Indeed, merely bringing up the issue or defining violence associated with right-wing causes as “terrorism” can produce a firestorm of criticism. Our purpose is not to equate or even compare the two strains of

violence but to note that this dispute demonstrates yet again the contentiousness of trying to define terrorism, one of the obstacles to progress in research that we discuss later in this chapter.

Why the difference in perspective? Whereas much jihadist violence is transnational and poses a threat to national and international security, American far-right violence is a domestic problem. Domestic, localized violence is easier for the American government to control or contain, the ideology behind it is more familiar, it is organizationally and ideologically more fragmented, and in terms of overall destructiveness its effect is minor compared to that of worldwide jihadism. Images of extreme ruthlessness such as videotaped beheadings and immolations, massacres of religious minorities, mass-casualty attacks targeting schoolchildren, university students, or shoppers at a market, and extreme intolerance such as the destruction of historical antiquities and the imposition of harsh punishments for infringements of a rigid code of justice have a powerful effect on mass-media audiences. Those responsible, al Qa'ida and its affiliates and rival offshoots such as the post-2014 self-proclaimed Islamic State (known also as ISIS or ISIL), seek publicity for their deeds and are adept at advertising their message worldwide, with a social media presence that is unprecedented among violent nonstate actors. Their capacity for mobilization and communication appears to outstrip that of most other groups that have used terrorism, even if one holds technological progress constant.

In addition to their expanding transnational reach, jihadist groups undermine the domestic stability of American allies embroiled in civil conflicts. There is a real risk that states in critical regions will either collapse into chaos or come under the control of forces hostile to American interests that rule by principles antithetical to democratic and humanitarian values. This prospect became especially ominous in the summer of 2014, when ISIS moved from strongholds in Syria to seize extensive territory in Iraq, including the city of Mosul. Policy-makers are fearful that jihadist expansionism will jeopardize whatever gains the United States and its allies won in Iraq and Afghanistan and in the global war on terrorism generally. They also fear continued civil conflict involving jihadist groups in Syria, Libya, Yemen, North Africa, Somalia, and Nigeria.

Both jihadist self-promotion and extensive outside media coverage magnify the threat as perceived by the public. Yet with the 9/11 shock

always in the background, definitively framing the issue of terrorism, it is understandable that Americans would fear another devastating surprise attack. It is impossible to ignore the fact that before 9/11 few analysts or policymakers thought that terrorism by small conspiracies truly threatened American national security. The jihadist danger has undoubtedly been exaggerated in some quarters, but there is a sober reality behind the exaggerations, and it continues to be at the top of national and international security agendas in a way that right-wing threats are not.

The association between Islam and terrorism is also a sensitive subject to broach. The proposition that religious beliefs might be a cause of violence is often assumed rather than demonstrated, and we discuss the difficulty of establishing the causes of terrorism in the second part of this introduction. Many Muslims quite reasonably object to the idea that all Muslims should somehow be held responsible for the actions of a tiny minority who claim to be acting in their name but who are not in the least representative. Few people want to hear that their core beliefs are associated with violence, especially if those beliefs are distorted in the process of making a false equation. Yet researchers and policymakers have to deal with the fact that jihadists explicitly justify terrorism in terms of their interpretation of Islam. These adversaries are associated with or claim to act in the name of groups such as al Qaeda or the "Islamic State." There are risks to making the connection, such as unfairly stigmatizing an entire community, but there are also risks to silence, such as neglecting the power of ideological motivations for violence.

How did the threat of terrorism move from irrelevance to American national security before September 11, 2001, to the top of the agenda for the next decade and more? How did it come to pose such an intractable policy problem? The development of the jihadist threat is characterized by a pattern of growth and decline. Each seeming downturn or setback has been reversed when new opportunities for expansion emerged. The threat has proved extraordinarily persistent, mutable, and virulent. It does not take the form of a monolithic movement, although many core ideological principles are shared. Its polycentric organizational structure may actually be a major source of its strength and adaptability, and its kaleidoscopic quality and tenacity impede coherent counterterrorist strategy.

The violent jihadist trend emerged in the context of resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. This history is scarcely news, but the repercussions of that early time period are still very evident. The idea then, as now, was that jihad, interpreted as violent opposition to foreign occupation of Muslim lands, was an individual obligation for all Muslims, wherever they might live. All are considered to be obliged to defend the Muslim community from external aggression. One inspiration was Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian cleric who became a mentor to Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. Bin Laden's narrative is well known, but the crux of the story is that he arrived in Pakistan as a wealthy and pious Saudi to aid Afghan refugees. An Egyptian physician, Ayman al-Zawahiri, also traveled to Pakistan on a humanitarian mission, although what was more relevant was his experience in organizing armed underground conspiracies to overthrow the Egyptian regime. As a result he had spent three hard years in Egyptian prisons. When Azzam was assassinated, Zawahiri apparently replaced him as the dominant influence on bin Laden. The early al-Qa'ida organization was established to keep track of the volunteers in the assistance program.

In retrospect it is ironic that at the time all were legitimate figures in the eyes of the West and certainly in the countries they came from. Both Azzam and Zawahiri traveled to the United States to raise money for the cause. "Foreign fighters" from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, or Egypt volunteered to aid the mujahideen. The Reagan administration generously supported the anti-Soviet resistance, including supplying the Stinger missiles that were lethally effective in defeating the Soviet Union. Pakistan, restored to American good graces after being isolated as a result of its nuclear ambitions, was the conduit for both military and humanitarian aid to the mujahideen.

The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 was a victory for both the United States and the Afghan resistance. But American attention turned elsewhere, and Afghanistan slowly collapsed into civil war. Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia determined to change the Saudi regime—not necessarily to overthrow the monarchy but to induce the country to reject Western influence. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden supposedly volunteered to defend Saudi Arabia and was bitterly offended when his offer was dismissed and American troops

were invited instead. By 1991 bin Laden had become such an irritant that he was expelled from the country.

He relocated to the Sudan, an extremist sanctuary designated by the U.S. State Department as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1993. There bin Laden at first seemed content with managing his business enterprises, including local construction projects that ensured his welcome. Simultaneously, however, his wealth and his far-flung organizational contacts in al Qaeda allowed him to support violent opposition in Muslim territories around the world, in Somalia, the Balkans, Chechnya, and the new former Soviet republics in Central Asia—struggles that were not necessarily anti-American, although bin Laden later claimed to have helped drive the United States from Somalia.

This activism led Saudi Arabia to revoke his citizenship in 1994. In 1996 the Sudanese government was induced to expel bin Laden. It is not clear where bin Laden was expected to go, but the most obvious destination was Afghanistan, a transfer he accomplished just as the Taliban was poised to come out on top in the civil war.

In 1997, from Afghanistan, bin Laden issued a call for jihad against the United States. In 1998 a public declaration of a “Holy War against the Jews and Crusaders” signaled his alliance with Zawahiri’s Islamic Jihad group and the beginning of the terrorist campaign that resulted three years later in the devastating 9/11 attacks. The amalgamated al Qaeda turned its attention from the “near enemy”—local regimes that stood in the way of the Islamist revolution sought by jihadists—to the “far enemy,” the United States and its allies. Without the support of “far enemies,” “near enemies” presumably could not resist the jihadist challenge. The assumption that outside powers blocked change at home was neither new nor unique; in the 1960s and 1970s revolutionaries in third world countries saw the United States as the main obstacle to socialist revolution, and extremist Palestinian factions saw it as the mainstay of Israel.

The August 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania opened the beginning phase of jihadist terrorism against the West. For the next three years neither American nor UN pressure, including sanctions, could compel the Taliban to turn bin Laden over for prosecution. Nor would Pakistan sever its connections with the Taliban. From his sanctuary in Afghanistan bin Laden continued to plot attacks against American interests. In October 2000 a second try

succeeded in ramming an explosives-laden boat into the U.S. Navy destroyer *Cole* in the port of Yemen. Over the summer of 2001 warnings of impending terrorist attacks became more urgent, and several plots were disrupted, but the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon came as a terrible and stunning surprise.

The ensuing defeat of the Taliban and occupation of Afghanistan by American military forces should have ended the threat from al Qa'ida. But the leadership slipped across the border into Pakistan, where bin Laden hid until 2010 and Zawahiri hid until at least 2016. Control from the top weakened, but the movement diffused transnationally. Powerful local and regional affiliates and associates proliferated, especially in Iraq after the 2003 invasion by the U.S.-led coalition. There was no repetition of terrorism on the scale of 9/11, which was an extremely rare event. However, attacks and threats were steady and persistent, including deadly bombings of trains, subways, and buses in Madrid and London, nightclubs in Bali, weddings in Jordan, United Nations headquarters in Iraq and Algeria, tourists in Tunisia and Morocco, and journalists in Paris and Copenhagen. In 2006 the discovery of potentially deadly plots against transatlantic airliners bound for the United States showed that al Qa'ida had not lost interest in mass-casualty attacks against civil aviation.

One reason for the post-2001 resurgence was that the “global war on terrorism” in all its aspects—secret prisons, extraordinary renditions, imprisonment of “unlawful combatants” at Guantanamo Bay, the Abu Ghraib scandal, the use of torture, as well as the preemptive use of military force, developing into a reliance on drones to remove the leadership of enemies even outside of war zones—was easily interpreted by jihadists as a war on Islam rather than a war on terrorism. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided a powerful boost for jihadists—an unintended consequence, to be sure, but not surprising. Now Western military forces occupied a second majority-Muslim country, this time in the heart of the Arab Middle East. Iraq bore no responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. The stated purpose of the invasion, removing “weapons of mass destruction” and later installing democracy, was unpersuasive to the local and transnational constituencies attracted to jihadist causes, especially as the weapons program turned out to be nonexistent. The fact that democracy enabled the Iraqi Shia majority

to prevail over the formerly powerful Sunni minority only reinforced sectarian tendencies, which were exploited by al Qa'ida's Iraqi branch, which formed in 2004.

The core leadership of al Qa'ida was stateless, but the organization's affiliates held local power bases from which they challenged their home governments and sometimes the West. These groups represented the diversity and geographical dispersion of the jihadist movement. The rise of Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan reflected growing militancy within Pakistan as the Taliban remained active and the Afghan conflict spilled over the border. Groups originally formed to fight India in Kashmir became more committed to global jihad. Pakistani militant groups such as the "Pakistani Taliban," known by its acronym TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban), also allied with the Afghan Taliban, or al Qa'ida, or both. In addition, Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria anchored a loosely affiliated anti-Western jihadist alliance in Asia and Africa.

In 2004 and 2005 Western perceptions of the terrorist threat began to shift, largely as a result of the bombings of mass transit infrastructure in Madrid and London, which led to recognition that "homegrown" terrorism and "self-radicalization" of young Muslims living in the West, as opposed to terrorists who attacked from outside, posed a new danger. The Madrid train bombers represented a mix of foreign and domestic backgrounds, which was alarming enough, but the four young perpetrators of the 2005 London bus and subway bombings were British citizens of immigrant backgrounds who to all appearances led ordinary lives. In 2007 the New York Police Department's report on "the homegrown threat" from "unremarkable" citizens or residents signaled American awareness of a changing threat landscape.⁴

In Iraq after 2003 American and allied military forces faced a Sunni insurgency composed of a number of different groups among which the precursor of the post-2014 ISIS, al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), founded in 2004 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was the most ruthless. Its hallmark was suicide bombings of both American and Shia targets; among its most consequential actions were the bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad in 2003 and of the Golden Mosque in Samara

in 2006, the latter leading to a full-fledged sectarian civil war. It distributed videos of the beheadings of hostages, including the American contractor Nicholas Berg, in 2004. However, its chief mandate was driving coalition forces out of Iraq and establishing an Islamic state, not internationalizing the jihadist mission. In 2006 after Zarqawi's death in an American air strike, al Qaeda in Iraq changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Moreover, the combination, in Iraq, of the American military surge in 2007 and a shift of allegiance by some Sunni tribes (the Arab Awakening) led to the marginalization of ISI, whose brutality alienated potential supporters, just as al Qaeda central leaders feared. This split between the two centers widened in successive years, until the final break over jihadist representation in the Syrian civil war.

Over time the al Qaeda affiliate that came to be seen as the gravest danger to the United States was not the Iraqi branch but al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP. In 2009 AQAP was launched in Yemen when a local jihadist group incorporated a Saudi contingent that had failed to gain traction at home. AQAP was distinctive in directing its attention to targets abroad as well as in Yemen. AQAP organized several clever and potentially lethal plots, the most notable of which was its inaugural effort, the attempt to bomb an airliner in Christmas 2009. The convicted bomber, twenty-three-year-old Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was a Nigerian who had concealed plastic explosives in his underwear but had failed to detonate them properly. Although unsuccessful, the fact that al Qaeda had orchestrated an attack on a U.S. aircraft with 290 people on board was extremely unsettling—especially since it seemed to be such a close call. Had the young Nigerian's effort succeeded it would have been the first al Qaeda-directed attack on American soil since 2001. In 2010 AQAP tried to ship explosives-filled packages to the United States and also launched an English-language magazine, *Inspire*, as a tool to recruit Americans to strike at home. Both plots demonstrate that understanding the intent behind terrorism requires analysis of incomplete attempts as well as completed attacks. That AQAP was led by the influential American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki was further evidence of its danger to the United States, and his boldness led to his death in a drone strike in Yemen in 2011. But his ability to reach out to English-speaking

audiences and to inspire acts of terrorism at home lived on after his death in the many videos featuring him that are available online.⁵

With Anwar al-Awlaki's demise American counterterrorism officials undoubtedly breathed a sigh of relief. Withdrawal of coalition troops from Iraq in December of the same year reinforced the optimistic expectation that jihadist terrorism would subside as the war in Iraq and foreign military intervention ended. Unfortunately, also in 2011, another opportunity for jihadist revival presented itself in the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. The Islamic State of Iraq was eager to join the fight to overthrow the Assad regime but found its services rejected by al-Qa'ida in favor of another affiliate, the al-Nusra Front. ISI, however, strengthened sufficiently to sweep back into Iraq, quickly occupying first Sunni areas northwest of Baghdad and then the northern part of the country, including Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. Sunni discontent with the government of Nouri al-Maliki predictably played a part in this success, but the rapidity of the accomplishment was still astonishing. When it moved into Syria, ISI had already grandiosely renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Levant (ISIS/ISIL). In June 2014, in Mosul, the organization declared itself to be the Islamic State and the successor caliphate of the caliphate that had been dismantled after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, became the caliph, and all Muslims worldwide were called on to swear allegiance to him and, in fact, to relocate to the new caliphate. Its establishment increased the ideological appeal and the recruiting power of ISIS. The popularity of ISIS reached new heights—and its break with al-Qa'ida was final. Local and regional jihadist affiliates seemed to be switching loyalties in the power struggle between the two centers of jihadism.

Iraqi security forces proved distressingly incapable of the defense of the country, and when ISIS adopted the tactic of beheading Western hostages and distributing horrifying videos of the killings, the United States was compelled to send a limited number of American special forces troops back to Iraq. The administration also reversed an earlier decision not to arm the Syrian rebel groups who could be considered moderate. Air strikes against ISIS mounted steadily after August 2014, and the United States found itself in the awkward position of being on the same side as Iran and Russia in trying to combat

Sunni jihadists, although on opposite sides with regard to the Assad regime.

In the meantime the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated steadily as the deadline for American withdrawal approached, and Pakistan seemed no more capable than ever of defeating or containing its own militants. The 2008 attacks on civilian targets in Mumbai, led by Lashkar-e-Taiba with the assistance of elements of Pakistani intelligence, showed both the limits of Pakistani government control and the speed with which cross-border terrorism could provoke an international crisis. A Pakistani Taliban attack on school-children in Peshawar demonstrated the Pakistani Taliban's power as well as its ruthlessness. Pakistan promised a mobilization against extremism, but the results were meager. Instability in Afghanistan and in the region led the U.S. government to announce a delay in the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan.

By 2015 jihadist terrorism seemed a more serious threat to Western countries than ever, as the year opened with a devastating attack on a Paris satirical newspaper perpetrated by French citizens of immigrant origin, responsibility for which was claimed by AQAP. At the close of the year, the threat of domestic terrorism inspired or directed by ISIS reached new heights with new attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California. On the evening of November 13, 2015, a team of terrorists coordinated attacks in Paris and a northern suburb, including suicide bomb attacks on a large stadium, followed by suicide bombings and mass shootings at cafés, restaurants, and a concert hall. The attackers killed 130 people and wounded 368 more, many of them seriously. Seven of the attackers also died. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks. The authorities discovered that all the known attackers were EU citizens, and at least one of them was a member of the ISIS organization in Syria who traveled back and forth.

A little over two weeks later, fourteen people were killed and twenty-two seriously injured in a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. The perpetrators, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, a married couple living in the city of Redlands with their six-month-old daughter, targeted a San Bernardino County Department of Public Health training event and holiday party. Farook was an American-born U.S. citizen of Pakistani descent who worked at the health department. Malik was a Pakistani-born lawful permanent resident.

Both were killed in a shootout with police. There was no indication of direct contact with ISIS, although pledges of allegiance to ISIS were discovered in a last-minute Facebook post by Malik.

In March 2016, suicide bombings at the Brussels airport and at a metro stop near European Union headquarters killed thirty-five people, including three of the attackers. ISIS again claimed responsibility, and police investigations in Belgium and France revealed strong connections between those who had plotted both the Brussels and Paris bombings. Both assaults appear to have been directed by ISIS through a complicated underground network that included French and Belgian citizens. Early assumptions that ISIS was focused on building a caliphate and not attacking the “far enemy” were being proved wrong.

Terrorism inspired but not directed by ISIS reached a new level in the United States in June 2016, when an attack in Orlando by Omar Mateen left forty-nine dead and became the deadliest mass shooting in American history. Coming in the middle of the presidential campaign season, it intensified an already rancorous political debate over the dangers of homegrown violent extremism and the links between terrorism and immigration as well as religion. France experienced similar shock and horror on July 14 when a Tunisian immigrant with no apparent ties to any organization drove a heavy truck into crowds watching Bastille Day fireworks in Nice. The result was eighty-four deaths. The fears of Western governments that some of a growing number of foreign fighters—young Western citizens drawn to anti-Assad jihad in Syria or to the defense of the territory defined by ISIS as its caliphate—would return to commit acts of terrorism at home at the direction of a foreign-based jihadist group seemed justified by the Paris and Brussels attacks. The call to jihad, welcomed in the 1980s, when jihad meant attacking the Soviets in Afghanistan, had become a domestic threat. Added to this concern was the fear that terrorists would conceal themselves among the ranks of refugees, as Europe was overwhelmed to the point of crisis by refugees fleeing the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

In conflict zones, terrorism showed no signs of ending. The Taliban appeared to be on the ascendant again in Afghanistan. ISIS also established a presence in Afghanistan, claiming responsibility for deadly terrorist attacks such as the suicide bombing of a protest

demonstration in Kabul in July 2016 that killed scores of people. The Pakistani Taliban or its factions continued to attack civilian targets with impunity.

In the Middle East, Russia entered the war in Syria on the side of the Assad regime, and the United States engaged further by sending more special forces advisers into Syria, in addition to those assisting the Kurds and Iraqi government forces in Iraq. Although ISIS suffered losses in fighting on the ground, its terrorist potential in the region was undiminished. In July 2016, during Ramadan, ISIS claimed credit for the truck bombing of a market that killed over three hundred people, the deadliest terrorist attack in Baghdad since 2003 but only one of dozens of lethal assaults on Iraqi civilians since the declaration of the ISIS caliphate.⁶ Civil war raged in Yemen, pitting Saudi Arabia against Iran, and ISIS gained strongholds in Libya. Tunisia, the only democratic survivor of the Arab spring, suffered two major incidents of ISIS-related terrorism against tourists. Turkey experienced ISIS terrorism in the summer of 2016 as well, including a bombing at the Istanbul airport that killed over forty people. Against the drumbeat of an ongoing set of violent attacks around the world first orchestrated by al Qa'ida and later by ISIS, along with their affiliates, punctuated by a series of domestic plots and attacks by their individual followers in the United States and allied countries, the pressure on American policymakers to fashion effective counterterrorism policies only intensified in the fifteen years after 9/11. Yet the challenges of providing reliable, objective recommendations based on empirical scientific evidence remained daunting. We review the state of policy-relevant research on terrorism and counterterrorism in the remainder of this chapter.

Challenges in Studying Terrorism and Counterterrorism

Research on terrorism and counterterrorism has made considerable progress since the early 1970s, and not only in terms of number of studies undertaken. Despite barriers to the development of basic research that could support sound policy, terrorism and counterterrorism are the subjects of a lively ongoing debate engaged in from many different disciplinary perspectives, including political science, international relations, history, criminology, economics, anthropology,

sociology, and psychology. Here we outline some of the issues in this debate and identify problems that continue to impede research—conceptual and theoretical on the one hand, and empirical and data-based on the other. Since the purpose of this book is to explain why counterterrorism is so difficult to analyze and combat, in the chapters that follow we take up many of the specific obstacles to constructive analysis, but we emphasize some central dilemmas here.

Conceptual Problems in Studying Terrorism

We identify three areas that have proved troublesome for the academic analysis of terrorism: crafting a definition, specifying causes, and evaluating outcomes. The first problem is the absence of a universally accepted and rigorous definition of terrorism that distinguishes it from other forms of political violence. The meaning of the term remains contested and controversial. Rather than using objective criteria, some popular or politicized accounts not only employ a subjective interpretation of the term “terrorism” but also use the more generic appellation “violent extremism.” The Obama administration substituted “violent extremism” for “terrorism” in an effort to distance its counterterrorist policies from the Bush administration’s war on terrorism and perhaps also to avoid the pejorative connotation of the term “terrorism,” but the administration has been criticized in some quarters for singling out Muslims and in others for refusing to refer to Islam in discussing jihadist terrorism.

Clearly, the moral relativism of the commonplace saying that “one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter” further complicates analysis. Rather than rehearsing all the arguments in this debate, we propose that this banal truism confuses ends and means. Our definition of terrorism is “a method or strategy of violence, not tied to any particular political actor or type of actor.”⁷ That is, terrorism can serve different political ambitions; it is not tied to one ideology or group. The end does not necessarily dictate or justify the means. The definition we develop further and use for many of our data illustrations throughout the book emphasizes politically motivated violence or the threat of violence by nonstate actors, although states can also be involved.

It is still useful to think of terrorism in terms of the meaning given to it by nineteenth-century anarchists: “propaganda of the deed.” The act of violence in itself communicates a political message to a watching audience. Because terrorism aims to shock and surprise—and because the number of followers its cause can muster is usually small—it typically targets victims who are unprepared and undefended. It is more symbolic than materially consequential. Thus civilians are chosen deliberately; they are not “collateral damage” incurred when the real target is the adversary’s military potential. The method of attack is also selected in order to be painfully outrageous and disturbing, such as the videoed beheadings by al Qa’ida in Iraq and ISIS in Iraq and Syria and its Libyan imitators. In addition, the term “terrorism” usually implies a systematic campaign of violence, not an isolated act.

The issue is complicated further by the relationship between terrorism and insurgency. Lines quickly become blurred. In the Afghanistan war the United States developed the idea of a distinction between counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN). CT aimed at destroying and defeating the militant organization, for example, via drone strikes against leaders and key operatives. COIN aimed at winning over a population tempted to support insurgents, who presumably both seek and require popular support and material resources that terrorists do not. The assumption is that insurgents must mobilize a population against the government in power, whereas terrorists do not necessarily need popular support in order to challenge the government. In reality the same organization can engage in both terrorism, whether domestic or transnational, and insurgency—the Taliban, ISIS, and AQAP are cases in point. These groups aspire to govern; although they use terrorism they are not stateless transnational organizations or ideological phantoms. They are entities capable of holding territory and imposing their own form of order. They operate openly in the areas they control, so they have a dual identity as an underground conspiracy and an aboveground government. A bifurcated policy does not take this duality into account, although one aim of counterterrorism policy is to deny safe haven to terrorists. In addition, a two-track policy of CT and COIN neglects the fact that actions taken to defeat terrorism (such as drone strikes) can encourage popular

mobilization and buttress an insurgency because civilian casualties are inevitable, however unintentional.

There is a similar lack of agreement on an overarching causal theory of terrorism. Even if there were a standard definition of terrorism, the answers to why are not obvious, and without a diagnosis it is hard for government to find a good remedy. The response many terrorists or militants or violent extremists would give is “We had no other choice,” implying that terrorism is the weapon of the weak, of those who lack power and thus other means of expressing their opinions or influencing the outcome of the political process. But absence of alternatives is by no means a sufficient explanation for some people to become terrorists, even if it is sometimes the case. For example, committed jihadists claim to require violence to fulfill a religious duty—an imperative even if other means to this end are available. Furthermore, terrorism has emerged in political contexts, such as Nigeria, where citizens in opposition to the government have the vote.

One of the first approaches to causation was to look at macro-level societal conditions or the characteristics of the regimes in which terrorism occurs or against which it is directed.⁸ The onset of terrorist campaigns has been linked to poverty, inequality, discrimination, demographics, unemployment, democracy or the lack of democracy, apocalyptic ideologies, fundamentalist religions, the presence of American troops or American economic interests, Western cultural influence, globalization, to name just some conditions that might make terrorism likely. A problem for this line of analysis, however, is that large numbers of people live under or are affected by these conditions, but very few resort to terrorism. As President Obama said in his concluding remarks at the 2015 Conference on Combating Violent Extremism held in Washington, these are conditions that are not necessarily direct causes of violence or determining factors, but they can be exploited by groups intent on fomenting disorder.⁹

Thus underlying conditions considered in the aggregate are not sufficient in themselves to explain terrorism, and it is not even clear that they are necessary. For example, the users of terrorism on the revolutionary left in the 1960s and 1970s were often the children of privilege, and many of those in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada lived in robust democracies with ample opportunity for peaceful expression of opposition. Terrorism was often the spin-off

of protest movements as they subsided. Sometimes it was the work of separatists doomed to be a permanent minority in a majority voting system—still the overwhelming majority of separatists rejected violence. Similarly, most jihadists are not the most underprivileged members of their societies.

This puzzle concerning societal causes of terrorism led other scholars to consider the opposite end of the spectrum of causation: the characteristics of individuals who embrace terrorism. The current interest in radicalization processes falls in this category of inquiry. How do individuals come to favor the use of violence in the service of a cause? Can individuals be converted to radical beliefs through exposure to propaganda contained in Internet communications? Many different motivations influence an individual's decision to use violence. Motivations can range from frustration and disaffection to a sense of romantic adventurism. It is clear that psychopathology is not viable as a cause, and there is often nothing out of the ordinary in behavior or expressed attitudes that would distinguish potential recruits from their peers who are indifferent to the appeal of terrorism. Relatives, friends, and neighbors often express astonishment that persons who appeared mild-mannered and ordinary turn out to be killers. There is no uniform terrorist profile.

Another approach to understanding the causes of terrorism takes the middle level of analysis, focusing on the group within a society. In general, few of the individuals who engage in terrorism fit into the category of so-called lone wolves although the number of individuals acting alone and inspired by jihadism may be increasing. A point of agreement among scholars is that the group dynamics behind terrorism are important, no matter what the ideology—far right, far left, jihadist, separatist, or any other. Often friends and relatives join together, and even if individuals join separately they become bonded to a group—small or large, structured or informal. The contemporary focus on Internet communications, important as they are to publicizing the cause and putting would-be recruits in touch with organizers and each other, should not distract from the reality that there are still tightly knit conspiracies of individuals who have face-to-face contact with each other, as in the Paris attacks in 2015 and the Brussels bombings in 2016, where two of the suicide bombers were brothers. One consequence of this dynamic is that members can come to identify so

strongly with the group that conformity and compliance become paramount values. Peer pressure under conditions of secrecy and danger, added sometimes to the exhilaration and risk of fighting, binds members to each other and to their leaders. Thus the ostensible “cause” of ideological ambition—to establish an Islamic caliphate or independence from foreign occupation, for example—may not be the actual driver of individual behavior. This suggests that a policy response based on the assumption that terrorism is exclusively designed to achieve long-term political objectives rather than short-term emotional satisfaction may backfire. Researchers and policymakers need to understand both aspects of terrorism: the collective reasoning and the cultures of militant organizations.

In either case, whether terrorism is a strategic choice by an organization or a means of maintaining an organization for purposes of social solidarity and collective identity, one of the reasons for choosing it as a method is its apparent effectiveness as a political instrument: it is expected to produce the desired results, thus ensuring group survival. If this is the case, then the best way of dealing with terrorism is to make sure that it does not work. The long-standing U.S. policy of no concessions to terrorist demands is based on this assumption. This is a deceptively simple answer, however.

For one thing, it is extremely difficult to measure terrorism’s effectiveness. Terrorism is almost never the sole method used by any political actor to achieve its aims, so it is hard to specify what terrorism has accomplished as opposed to what other political or social activities have contributed to the outcome. Moreover, it is hard to distinguish the effects of terrorism from those of other outside factors such as government blunders or circumstances beyond anyone’s control. Consider the use of terrorism by the Front de Libération National (FLN) during the Algerian War of the 1950s and 1960s. Mass attacks on civilians are often thought of as a modern jihadist tactic, but the FLN launched the era of urban terrorism during the famous Battle of Algiers in 1956 to 1957. Certainly France withdrew and Algeria became independent, but to what extent did terrorism produce victory? Even some of those sympathetic to the FLN felt that terrorism was counterproductive—it provoked such a harsh repression from the French that the cause of the revolution was set back for years.¹⁰

Consider another more recent case: al Qa'ida in Iraq, the precursor of ISIS. The brutal tactics of its leader, Zarqawi, compelled Zawahiri himself to criticize Zarqawi directly. The harsh methods of AQI alienated other Sunnis and contributed to the tribal resistance that became the Arab Awakening, which in turn supported the success of the surge in American troops. As noted earlier, had the Syrian civil war not given ISIS a new lease on life (and had the Maliki government been more willing and able to incorporate its Sunni citizens) it might have faded away.

Further complicating matters, short-term tactical advantage should not be confused with long-term strategic success. That is, in the immediate aftermath of a major attack terrorism will almost certainly garner publicity, name recognition, "branding," and a place on national and international security agendas. It can also be remunerative; kidnappings by jihadist organizations in the Middle East and Africa have earned large ransoms in recent years. But can the success of terrorism go beyond short-term gains to the accomplishment of fundamental political goals?

In some quarters the answer is "yes." For example, some research has found that campaigns of suicide terrorism compel foreign occupying powers that are democratic, and of a different religion from that of the occupied population, to withdraw from conflicts where they have intervened.¹¹ The reason is supposedly that governments are sensitive to public opinion pressuring them to withdraw. Examples are said to be the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and from Gaza. However, it is not clear that terrorism drove these decisions or why suicide terrorism would be more effective as a form of coercion than other forms of terrorism. It seems logical to think that numbers of victims, destructive impact, or identity of targets would matter more. Also, democracies may not be unduly susceptible to coercion.

Other scholars answer "no": terrorism only pushes democracies to be more resistant to terrorist demands.¹² This view is that by itself, terrorism, particularly against mass civilian targets, cannot produce fundamental concessions. Instead, it hardens public attitudes. In fact, suicide terrorism would be more likely than other forms to produce a hardline response, since its use signals unwillingness to compromise. Indeed, the American and French response to ISIS terrorism has been

military escalation. The provocative quality of terrorism could also explain its usefulness for spoilers in a peace process.¹³ This observation is worth remembering, because if the intent of terrorism is to provoke and antagonize an adversary, then the hardening of the opponent's attitudes is a success.

In conclusion, the issue of effectiveness is more complicated than a simple yes or no answer would indicate.¹⁴ Militant organizations need to survive if they are to profit from the achievement of long-term goals, such as driving out a foreign occupier or establishing a new political order. The group has to win the overall fight and come out on top of a power struggle among likeminded groups who seek the same general goal. Thus, ISIS competed with the al-Nusra Front to be the lead jihadist organization in Syria. Short-term gains are essential to long-term gain. Seen in this light, terrorism can be a form of "outbidding in extremism," because intergroup competition produces an escalation of violence as each actor tries to "outbid" the others for popular support and resources as well as produce the long-term goal. Of course, the assumption that extreme violence rather than moderation attracts the support of constituencies may not reflect reality. As noted with regard to Iraq, militant organizations can overreach to the point of exceeding the bounds of tolerance of their potential supporters.

Data Problems in Studying Terrorism

The premise of this book is that understanding terrorism presents unique challenges for policymakers. We noted the familiar but misleading commonplace "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." The U.S. State Department lists Hamas as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, but many regard it as a legitimate political party that won major democratically held elections. Although many in China regard the ethnic Uighurs who were detained by the United States at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp as terrorists, much of the rest of the world appears to disagree.¹⁵ Indeed, many of the most prominent nonjihadist terrorist groups in the world—including the Shining Path in Peru, the ETA in Spain, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—have conceived of themselves as freedom fight-

ers and had a loyal constituency who might have denounced terrorism but were, indeed, relying on these groups to advance their political agenda. This fundamental difference in viewpoints explains in large part why international organizations such as the United Nations have not succeeded in adopting a universally accepted definition of terrorism.

As noted, defining terrorism is no less complex for researchers than it is for policymakers, and the definition of terrorism represents a data problem as well as a conceptual problem. In an influential survey of terrorism researchers, Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman found 109 different definitions of terrorism.¹⁶ Indeed, the first chapter of many prominent books on terrorism is devoted to exploring and defending competing definitions. The official definition used by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which we rely on for data throughout this book, is “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by non-state actors to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.”¹⁷

We find it useful to use the GTD data to illustrate our arguments, but in fact each part of the definition raises numerous complications when it is applied to real-world phenomena. For example, this definition includes the assumption that terrorism may involve the threatened as opposed to the actual use of violence: individuals who seize an aircraft and say they will blow it up unless their demands are met may threaten violence without actually using it. At the same time, the GTD has never included idle threats such as bomb threats made by phone that turn out to be hoaxes or threats against the life of world leaders that are never acted upon. In addition, the requirement that these events be limited to the actions of nonstate actors to be defined as terrorism means that the GTD excludes the considerable violence and terrorism that is directly carried out by governments or their militaries. Although this exclusion seems justifiable given the practical impossibility of gathering accurate information on the political violence used by states, in practice it is often difficult or impossible to distinguish perpetrators operating entirely as nonstate actors from those intending to support a particular regime or government, from those receiving actual material support from a regime or government. And the requirement that a terrorist act by definition must have a direct political goal means that the GTD excludes ordinary criminal

violence that resembles terrorism. In practice it is often difficult to distinguish political from criminal motivation.

The consequence of collecting terrorism data on the basis of varying definitions and operational coding rules is potentially great. For example, the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS), used between 2004 and 2010 by the U.S. government's National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), took a very inclusive approach, reporting nearly 70,000 terrorist attacks in the seven years from 2004 to 2010.¹⁸ For the same period, the GTD included less than 24,000 attacks. Much of the difference is explained by attacks that claim no casualties. For example, the GTD does not routinely include the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of primitive rocket attacks launched annually from the Palestinian territories toward Israel if those attacks do not kill, injure, or do property damage.

On the other side of the inclusiveness spectrum, the researchers John Mueller and Mark Stewart argue that most estimates of worldwide terrorist attacks as well as attacks on the United States are a wildly exaggerated exercise in what they call "chasing ghosts."¹⁹ They would greatly reduce the number of attacks that are included in the GTD. In particular, they argue that by definition terrorist attacks are infrequent and sporadic; when attacks become extensive and frequent the activity should no longer be called terrorism but rather war or insurgency. For example, Mueller and Stewart would exclude attacks by ISIS because it "occupies territory, runs social services, and regularly confronts armed soldiers in direct combat" and therefore ISIS should be considered an insurgency rather than a terrorist organization.²⁰ They make similar arguments for groups like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and for political violence in Algeria during the 1990s. As we discuss later, a great many attacks included in the GTD are drawn from countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where there is an insurgency or outright civil war. Moreover, the GTD includes a large number of cases from ISIS as well as groups like the LTTE and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria. In fact, our point here is not to offer a definitive resolution to these conceptual differences but rather to highlight the extent to which they complicate counterterrorism policies.

Further, as we will see in greater detail in chapter 3, conceptual issues are also important in terms of defining the success of attacks.

The GTD defines success according to its tangible effects rather than the larger goals of the perpetrators, which are usually unknown. In practice this means that assessing success often depends on understanding the type of attack. For example, in the GTD, an unexploded bomb in a building is considered unsuccessful, whereas a bomb exploding in a building is considered a success even if it does not bring the building down. In order for an assassination to be designated as “successful,” the target of the assassination must be killed. “Unsuccessful” armed assaults are those in which the perpetrators attack but do not hit their targets or are apprehended on their way to commit the assault. And aerial hijackings are “successful” if the hijackers assume control of the craft at any point and unsuccessful otherwise.

Adding to the challenge of arriving at a defensible operational definition of terrorism that is a useful “data container” is the considerable difficulty of collecting valid data on terrorism, however defined. In academic research, data on illegal violence have traditionally come from three sources, corresponding to the major social roles connected to criminal events: “official” data collected by legal agents, especially the police; “victimization” data collected from the general population of victims and nonvictims; and “self-report” data collected from offenders.²¹ Victimization surveys have been of little use in the study of terrorism. Despite the attention it gets in the global media, terrorism is much rarer than more familiar types of violent crime. This means that even with extremely large sample sizes, few individuals in most countries will have been directly victimized by terrorists. Moreover, because victims of terrorism are often random—they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—they are unlikely to know or even encounter the perpetrators, making it difficult to produce details about offenders. And finally, in many cases, victims of terrorism are killed by their attackers, making it impossible for them to relate their experiences. For all of these reasons, terrorism data that rely on the reports of victims are likely to be of limited use.

Self-reported data, where researchers collect information on terrorist acts from those who committed the acts, have been more fruitful than victim data, but they also face serious limitations. Most active terrorists are, obviously, unwilling to participate in interviews. Even if they are willing to participate, getting access to known terrorists for research purposes raises evident logistical challenges. As Ariel

Merari explained some years ago, “The clandestine nature of terrorist organizations and the ways and means by which intelligence can be obtained will rarely enable data collection which meets commonly accepted academic standards.”²² In general, data that rely exclusively on the accounts of perpetrators, even when available, are often biased and incomplete, although they can yield useful insights.

Although governments in some countries have collected official data on terrorism (for example, the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center), data collected by governments are regarded with suspicion by many, either because they are influenced by political considerations or because of the fear that they might be so influenced. Moreover, although vast amounts of detailed official data on common crimes are routinely produced in most countries by the various branches of the criminal justice system, this is rarely the case for terrorism. For example, the majority of offenders suspected of terrorism against the United States are not legally processed for terrorism-specific charges, but rather for other related offenses, such as weapons violations and money laundering.²³ Thus, Dzhokar Tsarnaev, the surviving bomber in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing case, was charged not with terrorism but with thirty individual counts involving the use of weapons of mass destruction, bombing, possession and use of firearms, malicious destruction of property, and carjacking. This case was relatively easy to classify as a terrorist attack because the incredible publicity it received provided an abundance of information, but less well-known cases around the world are often not easy to classify as terrorism on the basis of media reports alone. Even within the United States it is not always possible to get a clear idea of perpetrator intent.

Finally, much primary data collected by officials working for intelligence agencies are not available to researchers working in an unclassified environment. Government secrecy is an impediment to academic research. For example, most of the documents seized in the raid on bin Laden’s residence in Abbottabad remain inaccessible to academic researchers. Congress called for their declassification and release, and some selected documents were made available in the spring of 2015. Similarly, some other primary source documents held by the government have been declassified, translated, and released to researchers, even if not comprehensively. The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and the Conflict Records Research Center at the National

Defense University (which closed in June 2015) are or were sources of documents that the American government captured during the war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq. Admittedly the government recognizes its tendency to overclassify as secret and is working to reduce the number of documents that are classified, but progress appears to be slow.²⁴

Another impediment to primary research, such as interviews with actual or former terrorists, is located within the institutions of academia, in the form of institutional review boards (IRBs). These university bodies are charged with seeing that researchers at their institutions do not endanger or violate the rights of individuals who might be interviewed or surveyed or about whom information might be collected. Prison interviews—where they can be obtained, not an easy task—are particularly problematic. IRB concerns are not without foundation. The Boston College Belfast Project was a case where researchers promised confidentiality to interviewees but could not protect their sources when the courts intervened.²⁵

In response to the limitations of data from victims, self-reports or primary accounts, and official data on terrorists and terrorist attacks, for nearly half a century researchers have relied on open-source, unclassified terrorist-event data. Terrorism event databases generally use news reports from electronic and print media to collect detailed information on the characteristics of attacks.²⁶ This dependence on media coverage obviously has drawbacks: underreporting in some parts of the world, overreporting in others, and possible biases of various sorts.

The Global Terrorism Database is currently the most comprehensive of the event databases used by researchers. The GTD relies entirely on unclassified sources, primarily electronic media articles, to identify and systematically record the details of terrorist attacks. These include individual news outlets such as the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence-France Presse, the BBC, and the *New York Times*, as well as existing media aggregators such as Lexis/Nexis, Factiva, and the Open Source Center. At present, the data collection process begins with a universe of over 1.6 million articles published daily worldwide, in order to identify the relatively small subset of articles that describe terrorist attacks. The GTD team accomplishes this using customized search strings to isolate an initial pool of potentially relevant articles,

followed by more sophisticated techniques to further refine the search results. In order to maximize the efficiency of the data collection process, they use natural language processing techniques to automatically identify and remove duplicate source articles by measuring similarities between pairs of documents. In addition, they have developed a machine-learning model using feedback from trained GTD staff that classifies the remaining documents as either likely or not likely to be relevant to terrorism. This model is continually refined using input from the research team regarding the accuracy of the classification results. At present, 10,000 to 15,000 articles are manually reviewed to identify attacks for each month of data collection. Once the attacks have been identified, domain-specific research teams record data on over 120 variables pertaining to the location, perpetrators, targets, weapons, tactics, casualties, and consequences of each attack.

As we discuss in more detail in chapter 3, the GTD excludes planned plots or conspiracies that were thwarted by officials before the perpetrators took kinetic action to carry out the attack. The GTD team refers to this as the “out the door rule”: events are only eligible for inclusion in the database if the perpetrators were out the door and on their way to execute the attack. The GTD also excludes planned attacks that were never actually initiated, for example, if the would-be perpetrators abandoned the plot before it was executed or the bomb makers died in an explosion while building the bomb. This latter scenario is fairly rare, but has happened on several occasions, including the 1970 explosion at a townhouse in Greenwich Village in New York City, where a bomb under construction in a basement blew up, killing three members of the Weather Underground.

Conceptual and Data Problems in Studying Counterterrorism

Although we discuss counterterrorism in greater detail in subsequent chapters, we consider here some of the general problems of studying it with standard scientific methods. Counterterrorism is a highly contentious political issue, even more so than terrorism itself. It is thus hard to address without making implicit or explicit value judgments, something scholars typically want to avoid. It became especially controversial and partisan after the launch of the “global war on terrorism” by the Bush administration in 2001. Other difficulties are related to

the problems of studying terrorism itself, which we outlined earlier. For example, the lack of a widely accepted explanation for the causes of terrorism makes it difficult to propose solutions.

Another complication for research, as well as for public understanding, is the expansive scope of actual and potential counterterrorist policy. As we consider in more detail in chapter 6, many diverse measures can be considered counterterrorism, from restricting financing, to winning hearts and minds and “countering radicalization” through delegitimizing counternarratives, to “decapitation” of groups by killing leaders by means of drone attacks, to preemptive military force and invasion and occupation. This expansiveness can lead skeptics to ask what government activity is *not* counterterrorism in a post-9/11 world. In addition, counterterrorism has a place on both domestic and foreign policy agendas, which is appropriate considering the nature of the threat, and it falls under the jurisdiction of multiple agencies at all levels of the American government. It is a problem for international cooperation and foreign assistance programs as well as for local policing and transportation security. Join to this complexity the political temptation to add the label “counterterrorist” to almost any regulatory or legislative proposal, and the result is a mishmash of policies and institutions. In chapter 2 we analyze some of the notable changes made to the organization of the U.S. government for the conduct of counterterrorism in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Scholars also disagree about the nature of the strategic interaction between governments and terrorist challengers. A concern is whether scholars are asking the right questions, such as whether a “substitution effect” operates. That is, if governments harden their defenses against particular forms of terrorist attack, will terrorists adapt and shift to softer, unprotected substitute targets, or will they keep trying against the same hard targets even if they repeatedly fail? How well do terrorists learn from their mistakes and their successes? Evidence can be found for both propositions, and the debate remains inconclusive.

Similarly, what are the effects of the use of military force against terrorists? On balance, is the utility of drone strikes in dismantling organizations (removing leaders, impeding communication, or discouraging recruits) greater than their disadvantage in alienating publics? This dilemma is related to the distinction between terrorism and insurgency mentioned earlier in this chapter. As we shall see, academic

analysis can be found to support either side in this debate. A related issue is whether terrorism can be deterred, either by denial or by the threat of retaliatory force. Instances of retaliation are actually rare, but scholars still struggle to understand the effect of military force on the calculus of extremist organizations. We refer in chapter 6 to some of the problems of empirical research in this area, due as much to data issues as to theoretical gaps.

Other unresolved questions have more relevance to conciliatory policies. When is it helpful to negotiate with terrorists? Will public opinion in democracies accept such initiatives? If scholars are right that terrorism only hardens public attitudes, rather than inducing concessions, how is compromise possible? Under what conditions should governments give in to ransom demands in hostage-taking situations? Do concessions always encourage more terrorism?

For all these reasons, scholarly studies of the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies so far have been limited in providing specific guidance for policymakers. Researchers lack a standard of what constitutes success and failure in counterterrorism as well as objective measures of progress toward goals. The search for convincing metrics of effectiveness has not yet yielded usable results. In addition, it is clear that the effects of all counterterrorism measures are highly context-dependent, making it difficult to generalize or to predict outcomes in specific cases. It is hard for scholars to be definitive. All alternatives seem to have serious risks and downsides; unintended consequences may be the rule rather than the exception.

Thus many accounts of counterterrorism policy offer either descriptive surveys or polemical treatises. Most commonly, these studies provide either a narrative history of policy (informative if objective and unbiased) or a condemnation or defense of policy, especially post-9/11 policy. Some researchers may be too driven by the policy agenda, while others may resist studying counterterrorism precisely because it is such a hot topic. There are periods of excessive attention to one aspect of policy in the news or controversies such as the components of the global war on terrorism or counterradicalization or effects on civil liberties rather than an effort to identify and evaluate options for a comprehensive and balanced policy. It is tempting to focus on highly salient and contentious issues such as intelligence failures. There are serious studies of intelligence failures especially with regard

to the 9/11 surprise attack, but they offer little advice as to how such mistakes (if they were avoidable mistakes) could be corrected in the future.²⁷ Being critical of government is of course part of what many scholars regard as an obligation if one is to be independent.

Academic studies are beginning to move beyond critiques of specific policies and institutions to consider counterterrorism in terms of broader theoretical and comparative frameworks.²⁸ There is an interesting parallel: bureaucracies dealing directly with terrorism, such as what is now the State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism, were rarely part of the policymaking process when it came to high-profile threats before 9/11. Terrorism was considered something of a *sui generis* phenomenon. And this compartmentalization was also the tendency in academia.

In many ways obtaining accurate data on counterterrorism measures is even more difficult than collecting valid data on terrorism. Whereas the organizations that employ terrorism are often actively looking for open-source media attention, and indeed obsessively and adroitly disseminate information about themselves through multiple media channels, governments are rarely so forthcoming. Governments are especially secretive about their covert operations with regard to terrorism, and their reactions are often classified and unavailable to the public. Following the 9/11 attacks, levels of secrecy on the part of the U.S. government have been especially high. For example, even though President Obama promised more transparency about the drone program, it remains highly secret. The public knows little about the criteria for target selection. Even documents taken directly from open sources by government agencies such as the FBI are frequently classified "For Official Use Only," making them off limits for academic research intended for public dissemination. Given this reality, it is hardly surprising that no worldwide data on government responses to terrorism currently exist.

Conclusion: Policy Challenges of Countering Terrorism

In this introductory chapter we have provided historical context for the evolution of the terrorist threat that has dominated the American security agenda since the attacks of 9/11. We also outlined conceptual

and empirical obstacles to policy-relevant academic research into terrorism and counterterrorism. In the remainder of this book we dissect the unique characteristics of terrorism and counterterrorism to explain why there are no simple solutions in this policy arena. We begin this explication in the next chapter by considering one of the defining features of mass-casualty terrorist attacks—their rarity.