

Terrorism's Persistence as a Historical Paradox: A Personal Recollection of Developing the Research Problem and its Methodological Resolution

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Abstract

This research note recollects the beginning of the author's interest in understanding the paradoxical phenomenon of persistent terrorism, intriguing because of its continued existence, though historically rarely achieving the central goals of its practitioners. It describes how empirical observations of enduring terrorism in Pakistan and around the world ultimately led to its investigation as part of a larger methodologically driven systematic study, culminating in a PhD and later in a book. The research note aims to inspire readers to engage with the topic as a potential contribution toward addressing the terrorism problem. Further, it implicitly highlights a methodological process for the developing scholars and potential researchers studying political violence.

Contextualising Research Interest

I had not heard about the durability of terrorism as a specific social phenomenon until I witnessed it take root, grow, and spread throughout Pakistan during the last two decades. What has been more amazing, bewildering in fact, is that the phenomenon has proliferated despite heavy odds, and in certain cases, armed groups have contended without a clear prospect of winning (Staniland, 2024). My interest in exploring the puzzle grew in time, and as I watched similar episodes unfold globally. A structured exposure to a vast array of historical, archival, and empirical materials at Queen's University, UK, during my PhD study (2018-2022) illuminated more nuanced dimensions of the problem. What the extensive study of the interdisciplinary literature and discussion with the experts in the field of terrorism studies revealed was that, rather than terrorism's endurance as a contentious occurrence, far more intriguing was the continuity of this genre of violence despite the evidence to suggest that it has consistently failed to achieve the central objectives of its practitioners. This observation is supported by events of the last two centuries, even though recognising that terrorism has significantly shaped international politics. But inexplicable was the fact that existing scholarship, except for an odd contribution (English, 2015; Hoffman, 2011;), did not adequately address the issue.

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The Literature Studied

Nevertheless, before this observation is assimilated, a conceivable lack of insights on the subject in existing scholarship, an acknowledgement is in order. That is, there does exist a scattered body of publications related to the topic under review. Foremost are the theories and frameworks explaining metastasised terrorism located in the political violence, terrorism-specific literature. These precepts include the powerful waves theory of global terrorism by David Rapoport (2022), its equally compelling conceptual challenger, the strain (virus) framework by Parker and Sitter (2016), and the use of “successful [historical] uses of terrorism and similar violent strategies” that inspire recurrence of violence (Sedgwick, 2007). These renditions weave an unpatched global canvas of unrelenting terrorism spanning the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. There is a wide variety of other pieces of research that advance sustaining causes of terrorism e.g., due to exaggerated confidence in the illusion of terrorism and counter terrorism (English, 2015), terrorism as a malignant cancer (Price, 2019), contextual causes and dynamics, including the external stimuli i.e., regional volatility that injects complexity which in turn prohibits its wholesome grasping and analysis (Crenshaw, 1981; English, 2016; Merari & Elad, 1986). Some mainstream terrorism scholars like Aerial Merari (1999) have also posited that international terrorism is comparatively controllable (debatable though) by applying a coercive regime of sanctions that do not work against homegrown groups and their varied motivations.

These explanations were historically grounded and well argued, but did not unravel the terrorism inefficacy-persistence paradox. Also, not only have these iterations been rather universal and generalised than contextual, their unit of analysis has been terrorist groups and organisations, which explains why the problem was not explored within a single larger context, such as a state. This scholarship also does not highlight the difference between the longevity of the terrorism phenomenon and the lifecycle of militant movement, but rather has sometimes conflated the two. Conflict studies investigating the intersection of civil war and terrorism, have also foregrounded rationale of a protracted terrorist campaigns caused by frequent use of terrorist tactics in civil war which then last even longer by complicating peace processes, and increasing tolerance and the support for terrorists due to alienation arising from atrocities committed during inter-faction rivalries and the governmental repression (Derouen Jr, 2014; Fortna, 2015). The findings are variable-specific and thus substantively narrowly focused. Dissatisfaction with the extant literature warranted a more thorough study that directly engaged the enigmatic nature of organised violence.

The Research Focus, Innovative Methodology, Findings, and Dissemination

The curiosity became the basis of core questions of my doctoral study, specifically (1) how do we explain terrorism's persistence, given its seeming strategic

inefficacy? (2) What are the dynamics of persistent terrorism in Pakistan, and how does terrorism's persistence-inefficacy process/explanation function in this important case study? That is, how can those dynamics singularly or complementarily explain this paradox? (Feyyaz, 2022). The decision to select Pakistan as the original case was based on the decades-long tenacious violence in this country despite an overwhelming military opposition. The methodological peculiarity of the investigation was the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), which is suited to the study of open-ended, complex, fluid, and uncharted waters. The amount of data gathered during a nearly one-year-long fieldwork in Pakistan was enormous. The information-rich body of materials, 62 original interviews, included the underrepresented voices of the former militants as well as those of ideologues and the marginalised and vulnerable social groups. Following institutionally based ethics approval, the research followed a systematic analytical process guided by CGT conventions (Charmaz, 2014) and a few other tools to naturalise qualitative data, such as a transcription protocol. It resulted in a set of provocative findings that clearly defy a simple, straightforward and linear explanatory hypothesis.

Mainly, the thesis concluded that persistent terrorism in Pakistan or similar decolonised states is an outcome of the implications of a post-colonial skewed state-building project that has not been able to manage dissent and differences. It also offers a distinctive methodological approach and a set of theoretical underpinnings explaining why terrorism endures. More specifically, the thesis found that persistent terrorism in Pakistan and under similar conditions elsewhere can be understood through the lens of three substantive theories, inductively derived from empirical data. More broadly, these are a) Manoeuvring ideological framework that the concerned actors deploy to nurture, impose and implant own interpretation of existing religious, ideological and historical discourses to commandeer the existing discourses and the society, b) Terrorism is persevering as a survival interest embodying encouragement and exploitation of violence for sociopolitical and geopolitical survival and c) there occur in a contextualised setting terrorism-rebreeding lifestyles and subcultures to perpetuate coexistence and thriving by affective groups and communities. The case study also effectively resolved the persistence-inefficacy puzzle by finding that deterministically, terrorism's efficacy is relativist, without necessarily being linked to the historicity of its failure or success.

The thesis will be available shortly as a book, *Terrorism's Persistence in South Asia and Pakistan* (2026), being published by Routledge. It makes two significant contributions: it fills a critical, empirical, methodological, and theoretical gap in understanding the paradoxical persistence of terrorism, while also underscoring the need for specific recognition of this violence genre as a distinct sub-phenomenon warranting dedicated study. While there has been remarkable progress in research on terrorism with several new dimensions and disciplinary perspectives coming to light (Phillips, 2023), terrorism's persistence as a contextualised and autonomous phenomenon continues to

elude the attention of broader social inquiry, even though its impact on international and national politics and societies is profound. Only a sustained focus can remedy the snag.

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