

The Geographic Nature of Terrorism

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Abstract

Typically, one might think that a set of all geographic entities in the world—a geographic ontology—would include things such as mountains, rivers, and streams, or perhaps cities, buildings and more abstract things like nations and their boundaries. It is reasonable to believe that no one would consider terrorism to be a part of such an ontology, but in this paper I will argue that this reluctance stems from a mistake in the understandings of both terrorism and geographic entities. It is my hope that with some introspection we can begin to see how the two coincide in reality in such a manner as to be inseparable from one another. And thus, since a good ontology does nothing more than catalog what exists in reality, a geographic ontology should catalog terrorism as a spatial entity, though one of a peculiar and special sort at the limits of what could properly be called “geographic”.

Introduction

In light of recent events, one may claim that there is a new geography of terrorism, and we must create a new map of potential targets anywhere on Earth. Given the way we typically think about geography this is not a wholly inaccurate description, however it is not the best way either. We used to think of terrorism as an isolated phenomenon, occurring at various trouble spots around the world, but limited to several particular areas such as the Middle East or areas of Ireland and England. We spoke of terrorism as if it were merely an event whose occurrence *simply coincided* with certain regions of space and places on maps. However, in this paper I will argue that this notion is dangerously incorrect. In its place I propose is a reductionist account of terrorism, where geography or geographic entities form the primary level of focus upon which all other aspects of terrorism are built.

Defining Terrorism

We have, especially in recent times, attempted to define terrorism and to assign it an appropriate place the world—either as a simple crime, or an act of war, a war crime, or as a crime against humanity, etc. Typically, when defining terrorism, we have examined two of its most salient aspects: its methods, and its “ideology”¹. Consider the following definitions, one from the United States Code, and two from people who either study geopolitics or who were actively involved in aspects of public policy.

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The term “terrorism” means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.

¹ I do not mean a specific groups’ ideology, such as radical Islamic fundamentalism, but rather the more general ideology *of* terrorism which is a set of beliefs and actions centered on causing death and terror within a civilian population for a certain Cause.

David Fromkin²

Terrorism is violence used in order to create fear; but it is aimed at creating fear in order that the fear, in turn, will lead somebody else—not the terrorist—to embark on some quite different program of action that will accomplish whatever it is that the terrorist really desires.

Brian Jenkins, former W.H. advisor³

All terrorist acts are crimes...all involve violence or the threat of violence, often coupled with specific demands. The targets are mainly civilians. The motives are political. The actions generally are designed to achieve maximum publicity. The perpetrators are usually members of an organized group, and unlike other criminals, they often claim credit for the act. (This is the true hallmark of terrorism.) And, finally, it is intrinsic to a terrorist act that it is usually intended to produce psychological effects far beyond the immediate physical damage. One person's terrorist is everyone's terrorist.

It should be obvious that all three definitions center on what could be called the “ideology” of terrorism which is essentially an analysis of its method—that of inflicting maximal socio-psychological damage through acts of severe cruelty against a civilian population as a means of altering public policy. Yet by concentrating on this type of definition, we have overlooked something in the intrinsic nature of terrorism. And so far, it seems that we have never understood that terrorism is by nature *about* geography and not merely *related* to it. When we consider the geography of terrorism, we assume that the actual areas where it occurs are only accidental or contingent upon the presence of some specific groups with certain ideologies; thus the IRA is responsible for various crimes in England only by virtue of being Irish, and not, it is thought, because there is any true correlation between them and the land itself. We only see an opposition between IRA soldiers and British troops. We understand that these fanatic groups live within, control, or seek control of a set region of space and that they use terrorist methods to pursue political agendas for “purely” political/social/religious reasons.

But what we fail to see is that it is their desire to acquire *space* that is the driving force behind their actions. Furthermore, we fail to recognize that their ideological rhetoric is merely, or at least mostly, a masking of this desire for land. Perhaps even they are too caught in their political or religious dogma to notice the underlying ambition to dominate *geography*.

The “Missing Link”

What most definitions of terrorism lack is the connection between the two critical elements of geography and ideology. Terrorist *A* does action *X* for cause *Y* with the ultimate goal of acquiring territory *Z*⁴. The terrorist may claim his actions are motivated by a social, political, or religious cause, perhaps something like getting US troops out of the Holy Land because they are infidels and his beliefs will not tolerate this state of

² “The Strategy of Terrorism”, *Foreign Affairs*, July 1975

³ “Introduction to International Terrorism”, 1987, taken from Global Terrorism: the Complete Reference Guide, 2001

⁴ “Territory” is here used in a general sense, but it could also include a *specific* region of space, or perhaps even a specific geographic-scale entity, object or icon. Examples of the last two would include such things as “the Holy Land” and “Lebensraum”, or The World Trade Center and Mt. Rushmore.

affairs. But his religious “cause” centers on the notion of removing certain people from a certain *location*. He is seeking control of a particular piece of geography and is using religious rhetoric merely as a means to his geographic ends. Outside of any legitimate authority the terrorist is attempting to dictate restrictions on how land can and can not be used, or who can have access to it.

By this line of reasoning we can see that terrorism is not merely a coincidental event that occurs at some place in the world, but instead terrorism is *by nature* intrinsically directed at dominating geographic space. In one regard terrorism can now be compared to conventional warfare, for it is also an attempt to acquire, influence, or control spatial regions of the world. The differences between the two center on the role of legitimate authority over land use/possession, and the methods involved in acquisition. The *ideology* of controlling, gaining or expanding territory is the same in both.

Two Principles, One Geo-spatial Entity

It is this “geographic principle”, combined with a “methods principle” that unifies all the dissimilar terrorist groups together. Though each one may profess a distinctly different Cause, all terrorists are ultimately identical in their basic desire to acquire and control land. By understanding that the geographical nature of terrorism is the one unifying aspect to global terrorism we should be better able to predict and counteract terrorist threats worldwide. We do not need an in-depth understanding of a certain terrorist groups’ dogma, we need only to examine what *geography* is vital to them—we must determine what land they use as a base of operations, what land(s) they seek to control, and what country currently stands in their way.

Then, within that opposing country we must find what parts of its geography are most vulnerable to attack or those that are considered to be icons of its power and identity. By looking more at geography and less at ideology (in a group-specific sense) we should have a better ability to find these threatened areas because we now see all of them as targets of *every* terrorist group. Instead of trying to determine which specific group threatens a particular area, we combine the areas into one complete threat-map. From there we can more easily coordinate and unify our efforts at prevention while we take action against the now-unified threat of all terrorist agencies combined.

If this dual-unification of global targets and global terrorists is accomplished, then we should be able to have a clearly divided map with something like “minimal-threat zones”, “maximal-threat zones” and “zones of current activity” are clearly delineated. So, instead of showing us national boundaries, we could have a map of *terrorism* because terrorism is not as concerned with nation states *per se*, it is primarily concerned with *areas* of influence and control—and these may have little to do with international borders. The Holy Land or Hitler’s Lebensraum are geographic concepts that ignore existing boundaries to satisfy some other notion of “appropriate” geographic constraints. These constraints may connect to a specific philosophy like “manifest destiny” or to the mindset of an individual or a particular group, such as Saddam’s ‘Line of Death’ in the Gulf War. For some, like Osama bin Laden and his Al Queda network, this notion may encompass an entirely Muslim world, where all geography is united and controlled by one man, or at least those sharing his religious view. For terrorists with more focused goals, perhaps they are only concerned with controlling only a certain piece of the world, like Northern Ireland. Regardless, all we should have to do is plot out all the regions that

are either currently in conflict or are “required” by some sect, and distribute our forces accordingly. We can now focus on those areas of significant overlap, places with the highest levels of interest by multiple or competing groups and thus areas where terrorism should be most prevalent; and we can plot areas of safety or support and supply for terrorism. These two types of geographic entities, regions of threat and regions of support, will form the core of our anti-terrorist efforts and require significant deployments to eliminate. The penumbral regions, those of lowest interest to terrorists can be kept under careful watch, but left until later as lower-priority targets. In this way, we do not fight the War on Terror piece-meal, but rather in a unified, orchestrated manner that squeezes all groups simultaneously with multiple deployments on a broad front, and yet through observation, prevents one group from occupying a vacuum left by another’s demise.

Terrorism’s Ancestry

Now, the idea that terrorism is centered on geography may seem new and controversial, but throughout history we can clearly see that most conventional wars have been over territorial disputes or for reasons of either “natural” or “necessary” expansion. The continuing struggles in the Balkans can all be tied back to disputed claims of territory, while the taming of the Wild West into states can be seen as a case of natural expansion (to complete the country by reaching from natural boundary to natural boundary; “sea to shining sea” as we sing it). Lastly, both the Empire of Japan and Nazi Germany claimed that their seizures of land and resources were necessary for the continued survival and well-being of their nations (both had moved to secure oil reserves and other necessities for continued economic and military growth). Furthermore, conventional wars have never been satisfied by the restructuring or gerrymandering of land, but have always come down to attempts to seize *all* of the land within some geometric shape, or all the land that conforms to natural borders (and thus complete the “whole” of a country). In this way terrorism seems no different, for neither the PLO nor Israel want to share the land, or intermingle their holdings; they seek absolute control over a “complete” parcel of the landscape, one with no perforations, intrusions, or other deformities.

This idea that shape dictates sovereignty is so deeply entrenched within us that we can find it included in the very *definition* of ‘sovereignty’, as follows:

sovereignty A condition of final and absolute authority in a political community...Since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which codified this modern international politics, sovereignty has been invested in states, which have authority over the land and people in their territories...Although an integral part of international law for providing an order to international relations, in practice state sovereignty has been a source of conflict. Unlike earlier polities and their frontiers, sovereign states *have to be precisely delimited by boundaries*. Disputes over boundaries have been the major cause of wars in the inter-state system.⁵

Terrorists, of course, do not count as sovereigns in any legitimate way, but it is reasonable to believe that they carry out their activities with just such a goal in mind—they believe that if they can carve out a single piece of land and make it their own, then

⁵ The Dictionary of Human Geography, 4th Edition, pp.766-7; *emphasis mine*.

not only can they control what happens within that territory, but they can use the very nature of that *whole* piece of real estate as justification that they are entitled to *sovereignty* and thus their regime and its goals become (*de facto*) legitimate authority.

Here, then, we can see yet another reason that terrorism is centered upon geography, not simple in ideology; it is their desire to become legitimate global entities in the same manner in which *states* gain sovereignty, by defining clear spatial boundaries. Thus, the terrorist believes, if they gain territory that “fits” what a nation looks like, and then they can claim legitimacy in the same way any other nation would, and by the rules of international politics as a sovereign nation they would be free from outside interference in their domestic policy. This need for sovereignty defies the ideological-motivation model because shape and borders would not matter if a terrorist was simply after the hearts and minds of the people. Religious and political philosophies already defy modern borders, and can be found within “closed” states like China. Since thoughts and ideas can spread without violence through diverse cultures as they disperse around the world, then all the ideological terrorist would have to do is push his message *without* pushing for associated territory. If people were the goal, and gaining followers the perceived ends, then we would not have terrorism as we know it, but rather we *would* have the ideologically-motivated terrorism we *think* we have.

Clearly, if this terrorism-for-ideology version was accurate, then terrorists would be after *people* and would take followers regardless of where they lived or how that affected the shape of their region’s boundaries. It would be enough for them to have more followers for their ideology, and there would be no need to have one singular boundary around a “whole” region. Yet *that* is precisely what the terrorist wants. They will not share or intersperse or co-mingle their lands, they want separate and detached political entities.

When national borders in the modern sense first began to be established in early modern Europe, non-contiguous and perforated nations were a commonplace. According to the conception of the shapes of nations that is currently preferred, however, nations must conform to the topological model of (approximate) circularity; their borders must guarantee contiguity and simple connectedness, and such borders must as far as possible conform to existing topographical features on the ground. The striving to conform to this model can be seen at work today in Quebec and in Ireland, it underpins much of the rhetoric of the P.L.O., and was certainly to some degree involved as a motivating factor in much of the ethnic cleansing which took place in Bosnia in recent times.⁶

These need for borders to “close” land ties in with the ability to own, control and *rightfully* possess it. As homesteaders fenced off areas of the Wild West to stake their claims, so too terrorists attempt to politically fence off regions of space and make them their own. Consider the following as support for the “geocentric” view of terrorism:

The crucial importance for political affairs of landed...has been eloquently summarized by Rousseau: The first person who, having fenced a plot of ground, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. (1992, p. 44).

⁶ “*The Cognitive Geometry of War*” Barry Smith, (1997).

There are two aspects to Rousseau's view that deserve special attention; one concerns geography, the other ontology; more precisely the ontology of social reality. First, the act of fencing off need not, in the context of this passage, be restricted to the case where some physical boundary is constructed. ***It can be seen as including also the establishment of fiat boundaries.*** (Smith, in this volume.) To fence a plot of land is to create something new. The land itself, of course, exists before the parcel is plotted, ***but the act of fencing off nonetheless creates a new object.*** Second, the act of fencing alone is not sufficient for such object-creation. The latter requires also the existence of what John Searle calls collective intentionality (Searle 1995), that is, ***it requires that other persons (simplymindedly or not) believe that the land is indeed the property of he who fenced it off. Only then can a property right be said to arise.***⁷

Terrorists demand “national borders” in order to gain international legitimacy as a nation state. They seek nationhood merely as a means to quell “outside” international interference in their own public affairs. Much like the Taliban or Saddam, they use this shield of “legitimate authority” by sovereignty to protect themselves from international intervention as they grow more terrorists or build weapons of mass destruction. All of which is merely a means to claim more *land* in order to increase their social, political, economic and military might. Again, in this regard they are very much like the nation states they terrorize and oppose; they wish to establish themselves as legitimate authorities in the geo-political realm, and as such they are controlled by the same sense of sovereignty as shape which dominates the rest of the modern world.

Terrorism as a Geographic Entity?

When researching the body of entities within geographic ontology, I feel safe in claiming that no one would expect to find ‘terrorism’ next to ‘mountain’ and ‘river’ in a list of subjects’ responses:

This paper reports the results of a series of experiments designed to establish how non-expert subjects conceptualize geospatial phenomena. Subjects were asked to give examples of geographical categories in response to a series of differently phrased elicitations. The results yield an ontology of geographical categories—a catalogue of the prime geospatial concepts and categories shared in common by human subjects independently of their exposure to scientific geography. When combined with nouns such as *feature* and *object*, the adjective *geographic* elicited almost exclusively elements of the physical environment of geographical scale or size, such as mountain, lake, and river. The phrase *things that could be portrayed on a map*, on the other hand, produced many geographical scale artefacts (roads, cities, etc.) and fiat objects (states, countries, etc.), as well as some physical feature types. These data reveal considerable mismatch as between the meanings assigned to the terms ‘geography’ and ‘geographic’ by scientific geographers and by ordinary subjects, so that scientific geographers are not in fact studying geographical phenomena as such phenomena are conceptualized by naive subjects. The data suggest, rather, a special role in determining the subject-matter of scientific geography for the concept of *what can be portrayed on a map*.⁸

⁷ “The Metaphysics of Real Estate”, Smith & Zaibert (2001), *Topoi*, 20(2): pp. 161-172; emphasis mine.

⁸ “Geographical categories: an ontological investigation” Mark & Smith, *Int’l. Journal of Geographical Information Science*, 2001, vol. 15, no. 7, pp.591—612.

And, not surprisingly, no one did. Perhaps now, in the *Post-September world* someone would, but again I am dubious. However, the most interesting thing from the quote is that for scientific geography, areas of terrorism, like many other “geographic” entities, could certainly be portrayed on a map.

I am not saying that *areas of terrorism* are the same thing or type of thing as *actions of terrorism*, but they are not far removed either. Unlike a mountain or river, you can not point to any natural boundaries⁹ of terrorism; you can only look for areas of “activity”. What ‘activity’ means here is that at you must look for a certain type of person—a terrorist—who is about to perform a certain type of action at some *place* which will have repercussions in both the physical world, as energy is expelled from an explosive device, and matter displaced or re-arranged; and in Searle’s world of social reality and collective intentionality—the “real” world where terrorism exists as *terrorism*.

In the geo-spatial, merely-physical world, terrorism cannot exist, but it is in the everyday world we human beings inhabit—the world of Starbucks coffee, Dan Rather, “Mother”, God, and Santa Claus that we find terrorism. Not as an *ideology*, but rather as a disease or a plague exists, embodied in individuals such that when taken as a collective inclusive of each member plus his or her actions and intentions, the collective yields what Barry Smith calls an “agglomeration”, in this case it is the sum of terrorism. But perhaps we should briefly clarify this term before I try to use it so lever terrorism into geographic ontology.

Agglomerations are aggregates of entities that are dispersed through space on geographic scales. Examples include: plagues, biological species, major world religions...An *agglomeration* is an aggregate whose members are activities, objects, features, competencies or conditions that are dispersed through space in this sense. They are aggregates of geographic scale...

Agglomerations have a principle of unity (a principle of connectedness or mutual relevance of their members) by which they are held together as agglomerations and distinguished from other agglomerations...The principle of unity of an organization might be a hierarchical structure of authority with a single head. Other principles of unity are exhibited by those types of agglomerations we call *avatars*(Damuth 1985), *tribes*, *demes*, *colonies*, *communities*, *corporations*, ...populations of beliefs... populations of common religious affiliation...and other large-scale agglomerative phenomena...Agglomerations are wholes whose parts are concrete realizations of given activities, objects, features, competencies or conditions at *given times*...But agglomerations will also have histories; they may grow and develop and have a beginning and an end.

Agglomerations are, ontologically speaking, *spatial objects*. Their lives or histories are *spatio-temporal objects*...hosted by determinate but typically changing aggregates of human beings...Agglomerations may evolve. They may merge and split, and they may spawn further agglomerations. Agglomerations are spatial objects which inherit their spatial properties from the spatial properties of the relevant members or participants. The agglomeration called ‘antisemitism’ (a certain population of beliefs and attitudes of human beings) is in a given spatial region because there are people in that region with those beliefs and attitudes.¹⁰

⁹ I will leave aside all discussion of whether it is actually possible to locate the boundaries of mountains, etc., since it is far beyond the scope of this paper and will simply be tacitly assumed instead.

¹⁰ “**Agglomerations**”, Barry Smith. In C. Freksa, ed., *Spatial Information Theory. International Conference COSIT '99*.

Like anti-Semitism, terrorism “is in a given spatial region because there are people in that region with those beliefs and attitudes”. Thus it too can be seen as an agglomeration, and therefore it is a spatiotemporal object, and can sit comfortably within, or at least on the borderline, of an ontology of geographic entities.

“The New Geography of Conflict”¹¹

Within this newly expanded ontology, we can find, a new geography of conflict—the geography of asymmetrical conflict that now defines both international terrorism and our new War on Terror. WWII and the Cold War allowed us the luxury of a simple “Us-Them” dichotomy, and our geography mirrored the sentiment. The world was divided along the clear borders of nation states, separated by their political ideology and loyalty to either capitalism or communism. It is no longer either clear-cut or simple. The new map of Post-September 11th is messy, filled with vaguely defined regions that do not fit neatly into national borders, and extremely fluid in content, as regimes rise and fall, or loyalties quickly shift.

The focus can no longer be on protecting the borders of nation states from invasion, as was out Cold War plan. We can not count on the “civilities” of open, conventional warfare where troops mass at borders, signaling their intentions with enough lead time to prepare a response. We are now in a world of instant war, a clandestine and covert war where we may not even recognize our foes until they fly planeloads of civilians into skyscrapers.

In light of this new shift in the method and conduct of war, it is only wise that we shift from a world view of tiled nation-states, to one of overlays of natural resource locations, demographic distributions, zones of dispute or border tension, and possible areas of threat and security for terrorist organizations. No longer is our attention solely on the edges of the Iron or bamboo curtain, now we must plot out a new map and develop a new strategy.

Behind this shift in strategic geography is a new emphasis on the protection of supplies of vital resources, especially oil and natural gas. Whereas Cold War-era divisions were created and alliances formed along ideological lines, economic competition now drives international relations—and competition over access to these vital economic assets has intensified accordingly...All of these phenomena—increased competition over access to major sources of oil and gas, growing friction over the allocation of shared water supplies, and internal warfare over valuable export commodities—have produced a new geography of conflict, a reconfigured cartography in which resource flows rather than political and ideological divisions constitute the major fault lines...In short, contemporary world affairs defy exclusively political, security-related, and economic definitions.¹²

And, in a similar way, current events in international terrorism defy exclusively ideological, political, religious, socio-economic and security-related definitions. Instead,

¹¹ This is the title of an article by Michael T. Klare, which appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80. No. 3; and I use it here to show how we can use his approach to understand how terrorism as intrinsically tied to geography both in relation to geographic entities such as natural resources, and in relation to geographic aids such as maps and other representations.

¹² “The New Geography of Conflict”, Klare.

we must develop the geographic definition, which is more able to combine, overlay, and sift through each of the previous definitions; allowing us to focus on each one separately, or simultaneously allowing us to zoom-out and see the entire global picture in one glance. “Such a map, if properly designed, would truly delineate the places where armed combat is most likely to erupt in the years ahead.¹³” Only with this new way of thinking about terrorism as geographically-centered can we go about the business of removing terrorism *from* our picture of the world.

Conclusion

To briefly recap; I have attempted to show that the “geocentric model” of terrorism is a plausible alternative to the exclusively ideological definitions of terrorism. Ideological definitions seem able to account only for explaining the methods used or describe general terrorist behavior or intentions; models which work best when applied retro-actively. I have further argued that a geographically-centered definition could potentially be both a more accurate predictor for regions of threat and safety, and also could be more “accurate” (in a realist/reductionist account) because it more closely resembles the underlying reality where terrorist motivation is not solely incomprehensible religious or political dogma, but rather is firmly rooted in *terra firma* and the desire to possess it and the resources it contains. This is probably not only more accurate, but since the desire to possess land seems to be universal, it may give us a better understanding of how to prevent terrorist threats by intervening before land-issues become critical. We may never be able to properly read the Koran, as it is claimed that it can never be translated, but we can certainly translate how another’s greed for resources may motivate him, and what the likely courses of action will be. Lastly, I have shown that terrorism is an agglomeration, and as such it *is* a spatial entity, though of a special type.

We are in a new century, and for it we will have to alter our notions of terrorism, geographic ontology, and even cartography, for the new face of conflict is radically different than the old one, but we also have new and better tools to deal with it.

¹³ “The New Geography of Conflict”, Klare.

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