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The science of fighting terrorism : the relation between terrorist actor type and counterterrorism effectiveness

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Intermediate conclusion II: how to fight nationalist terrorism

As in the first cluster, both cases have been examined to see which counterterrorism principles were applied and what effects were achieved. When we take the findings of this exercise back to the research question whether counterterrorism principles have similar effects when applied against similar terrorist groups or movements, it is safe to say that a relation between actor type and effectiveness may indeed exist. When comparing the outcomes of the various counterterrorism principles applied against ETA and the Provisional IRA, there are several similarities that hint at a relation between counterterrorism effectiveness and terrorist actor type. Moreover, there are counterterrorism principles that worked against both groups, so we may even be able to see the contours of a common approach that may work against terrorist groups that resemble ETA and the Provisional IRA.

The first observation that can be made in this regard is that violations of the principles 'restraint in the use of force' and 'rule of law' in both cases had detrimental effects. Especially in the early stages of their campaigns, ETA and Provisional IRA were well-entrenched in local communities, where both groups were viewed as legitimate actors and champions of the nationalist cause. Consequently, many Catholics in Northern Ireland and many Basques perceived the poorly targeted police and army attacks against the terrorist groups as attacks against themselves. ETA and the Provisional IRA drew considerable strength from the popular outrage against state use of force, and from measures and legislation that would later be declared illegal. The performance of the state drove many people to actively support ETA or the Provisional IRA, a development that greatly contributed to the organisational clout that both groups could bring to bear against their perceived oppressors. In this sense the two groups confirm the reservations that many authors have about the use of force in counterterrorism.

Another point that shows that the two cases are similar is the outcome of the stream of arrests that the British and Spanish police managed to secure. The expertise and manpower of both terrorist groups were limited by raids by the security forces. ETA's attacks became less and less sophisticated after the police in France started closing in on the group's leadership in the French part of the Basque Country. The group was no longer able to carry out precisely targeted attacks, and the innocent victims who were killed in ill-conceived car bombings contributed further to the waning of the group's already declining popularity. In the 1990s ETA had to resort to ordinary street violence and vandalism to further its political agenda, which did little to improve the group's public image. The pace of arrests increased in the 2000s, and ETA's operational capabilities were eroded to the point where the remaining *etarras* were hardly capable of committing any terrorist attacks at all. The numbers of attacks and victims went into a steep decline until the group announced the end of the armed struggle.

The Provisional IRA, too, was badly affected by the arrest or liquidation of highly-qualified operatives. The group reached the limits of its capacity to inflict violence on the UK, and saw its plans to escalate their campaign fall to pieces after a weapons shipment from Libya was intercepted by the French police. Later the Army Council calculated that the Provisional IRA to force the British out of Northern Ireland by taking the fight to the British mainland, as the British government would be more sensitive to casualties and damage in England. The group successfully carried out some 'spectaculars' in London and Manchester, but when the cells that were waging this campaign were arrested, it became clear that this line of action was not sustainable. The group's operational capabilities were further undermined by the extensive infiltration by British intelligence agencies. An increasing number of terrorist attacks had to be called off because the operational details had leaked to the British security forces, which brought some in the Provisional IRA to question whether the armed struggle was really going anywhere. This brings us to the next counterterrorism principle that worked out in much the same way in both cases.

Both groups cultivated the use of violence as an almost sacred duty for those who had the interests of the Basque or Irish people at heart. For many members, being a Provo or an *etarra* meant being part of a long line of selfless fighters who had been willing to put their lives on the line. For adherents of this tradition, prominent in both groups, it was unthinkable that the sacrifices of those who had been killed or arrested would turn out to be in vain. But even so, both groups eventually fell victim to battle fatigue. In the Provisional IRA as well as in ETA, some high-ranking members began to speak out against a continuation of the armed struggle. In spite of the sanctification of terrorist violence, a rational assessment of means and ends led in both cases to a cessation of the armed struggle. The Provisional IRA found it was forced to participate in negotiations and settled for a compromise in which it got only a watered down version of their desired end state in return for a complete decommissioning. ETA's defeat was even more pronounced, as the group laid down its weapons without receiving anything in return.

If we would have to derive a formula for countering groups like the Provisional IRA and ETA from these findings, it would centre on the following three points. First, the use of kinetic means can be operationally effective against terrorist groups that are well-entrenched in the population, but more importantly, will lead to strategic success in the longer run. Second, in order to turn operational success into strategic success, a state needs to keep the terrorist organisation under pressure for a long time and must not give in to any demands. Eventually, at least some in the terrorist group will come to the realisation that violence is going nowhere. Third, given the level of integration of groups like ETA and the Provisional IRA in the societies in which they are active, it is important to precisely target the use of force in order to avoid escalation of the conflict and an increase of the group's popular support.

It should be clear, though, that the two cases also diverge in several respects. The most important difference was that ETA, more so than the Provisional IRA, gradually became isolated from its support base as a result of state policies. The more discriminate use of force by the Spanish

police and the degree of autonomy granted to the Basque Country signalled to the Basque nationalists that armed struggle was not, or no longer, necessary. Also, the cooperation between France and Spain was a major factor in the dismantlement of ETA. The Provisional IRA posed a similar challenge, as it developed and stored arms in the Republic of Ireland, which it also used as a safe haven for their operatives. Ireland, however, did not have the resources or the stomach to put a stop to Provo activity in the border area, so the potentially fruitful cooperation between the UK and Ireland never took off. The counterterrorism principle 'international cooperation' could well have had the desired effect had it been implemented adequately, which goes to show that the differences in the outcomes of in the cases of ETA and the Provisional IRA do not necessarily suggest that the two cases should be handled differently. It is possible that the similarity between the two cases would have gone beyond the approach that was outlined in the previous paragraph, had the 'international cooperation' principle been adequately applied in the fight against the Provisional IRA. However, as we have to limit ourselves to the evidence drawn from these two cases, a more elaborate counterterrorism profile than the one outlined above would have to be based on speculation.