

WHAT IS A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION? A CASE FOR RE-CONCEPTUALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The problems of defining terrorism have been widely discussed for decades within the academic community, political decision-makers, and legal scholars and practitioners alike. While some elements in the definition are more or less agreed upon, for example, political motivation and violence or the threat thereof, others are still disputed. Among these is the issue of perpetrators of terrorism, in several ways. One of them is certainly the question, “Can a state commit acts of terrorism?” More pressing, taking into account transformations of terrorism in the 21st century, may be the need to explore whether individuals can commit terrorism, or is the presence of an organization as a perpetrator a necessary feature of the very definition of the concept. The primary aim of this paper is to re-examine the concept of a terrorist organization and its implications for both the theoretical understanding of terrorism and the practical countermeasures against this threat. This will be done primarily, but not exclusively, from the perspective of political science.

Design/Methods/Approach: Drawing from an abundant body of scholarly literature on terrorism and terrorist organizations, this paper will endeavor to answer three separate research questions:

1. What constitutes a terrorist organization, that is, when is it justified to qualify a group as a terrorist organization?
2. Was there ever a scholarly consensus about the defining features of a terrorist organization, and has it changed in the 21st century?
3. Is the presence of a terrorist organization behind the act of violence a necessary component of the definition of terrorism?

Findings: The main finding of this paper is that there is no universally accepted definition of a terrorist organization, nor is it clear that only acts of violence perpetrated by organizations can or should be designated as terrorism. The evolving nature of terrorism itself, perhaps accelerating in this century, suggests that the concept of terrorist organization and its relation to the concept of terrorism must be re-examined and re-conceptualized, for two main reasons. The first is the shift in the landscape of Islamist terrorism after 9/11 and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, from tightly knit and hierarchical organizations such as al-Qaeda to more or less decentralized groups sharing ideology and goals but not operational data (increased accessibility and parallel evolution of the Internet has played a significant role in this). While the concept of leaderless resistance was not invented by Islamists, it was widely adopted by them, as well as by violent groups with very different ideological backgrounds and political objectives. The other reason is the emergence and increase of so-called lone wolf terrorism, that is, a growing number of attacks perpetrated by individuals with no obvious link to any organization.

Originality/Value: The theoretical conceptualization of the terrorist organization as a distinct phenomenon is somewhat lacking, with empirical research and case studies accounting for the vast ma-

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jority of scholarly literature on the subject. However, the answer to the question “What counts as a terrorist organization in the 21st century?” is not of strictly academic interest. Given that many national penal codes list membership in a terrorist organization as an offence per se, it has serious practical implications. Moreover, to efficiently counter contemporary terrorism, it is necessary to understand its actors and the ways in which they organize and operate.

Keywords: terrorism, terrorist organization, lone wolf terrorism, terrorists online.

About the author

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PURPOSE

The problems of defining terrorism have been widely discussed for decades within the academic community, political decision-makers, and legal scholars and practitioners alike. Although Laqueur (2002) famously claimed that a clear definition of terrorism is neither possible nor necessary for scholarly research of this phenomenon, this position is not widely held. It seems, however, that after half a century of terrorism research (Haghani et al., 2022), the only consensus reached seems to be the one about the absence of a universally accepted definition.

While some elements of the definition are more or less agreed upon, for example, political motivation and violence or the threat thereof, others are still disputed. Among these is the issue of perpetrators of terrorism, in several ways. For one, the scholarly debate on the difference between terrorism and *terror*, and more generally, on the possibility of a state being perpetrator or supporter of terrorism, is still far from resolved (see, for example, Simeunović, 2009).

More pressing need, taking into account transformations of terrorism in the 21st century, may be an exploration into whether *individuals* can commit terrorism, or the presence of an organization as a perpetrator is a necessary feature of the very definition of the concept. Whatever the answer to this question may be, it also implies the necessity of determining what the terrorist organization (or group, network, or perhaps movement) actually is.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to once more consider these issues, with the primary aim of re-examining the concept of a terrorist organization and its implications for both the theoretical understanding of terrorism and the practical countermeasures against this threat. This will be done primarily, but not exclusively, from a political science perspective.

DESIGN/METHODS/APPROACH

Within an abundant body of scholarly literature on terrorism, there are few systematic attempts to conceptualize terrorist organizations, and even fewer endeavours to theorize them adequately. It is therefore hard to find a single theoretical framework for understanding what constitutes a terrorist organization and how changes in terrorism itself affect the concept. However, there is more than enough research on specific terrorist organizations and different aspects of their internal structure and/or dy-



namics, ideologies, strategies, and tactics, as well as scholarly literature on the transformations of terrorism in the 21st century, to enable further investigation into the nature of terrorist activities today. Building on this significant body of published academic research, this paper will endeavor to answer three separate research questions:

1. What constitutes a terrorist organization, that is, when is it justified to qualify a group as a terrorist organization?
2. Was there ever a scholarly consensus about the defining features of a terrorist organization, and has it changed in the 21st century?
3. Is the presence of a terrorist organization behind the act of violence a necessary component of the definition of terrorism?

FINDINGS

The main finding of this paper is that there is no universally accepted definition of a terrorist organization, nor is it clear that only acts of violence perpetrated by *organizations* can or should be designated as terrorism. The evolving nature of terrorism itself, perhaps accelerating in this century, suggests that the concept of terrorist organization and its relation to the concept of terrorism must be re-examined and re-conceptualized, for three main reasons. The first is the shift in the landscape of Islamist terrorism after 9/11 and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, from tightly knit and hierarchical organizations such as al-Qaeda to more or less decentralized groups sharing ideology and goals but not operational data (increased accessibility and parallel evolution of the Internet has played a significant role in this). While the concept of *leaderless resistance* was not invented by Islamists, it was widely adopted by them, as well as by other violent groups with very different ideological backgrounds and political objectives. The second reason is the emergence and increase of so-called *lone wolf terrorism*, that is, a growing number of attacks perpetrated by individuals with no obvious link to any organization. Finally, some of the most notorious organizations designated as terrorists by national governments and international organizations alike - such as al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, or Islamic State - are consistently engaged in many other forms of political and social activities. Their own self-identification, but more importantly, the totality of their operations, calls into question the accuracy as well as the usefulness of reducing them to terrorist groups.

State of the art: conceptual confusion

Ongoing scholarly debates about the definition of terrorism necessarily reflect on the conceptualization of terrorist organizations. The most obvious and the most intuitive definition, that the terrorist organization is an organized group engaged in planning and execution of terrorist acts, depends heavily on the way one defines terrorism itself, thus plunging the discourse back into that conceptual minefield (Saul, 2019). Furthermore, the terminology used by researchers differs, with terms such as *terrorist organization* and *terrorist group* sometimes used interchangeably.² Unsurprisingly, the interest in terrorist organizations (see Figure 1) has grown steadily since the second half of the 20th century, reaching a peak after the 9/11 attacks and during the height of the War on Terror (2001-2010). Relevant to the purpose of this research is also the slight decline in interest in recent years.

2 This is also the way those terms will be used in this paper. However, it could be argued that the organization is more of a formal entity.



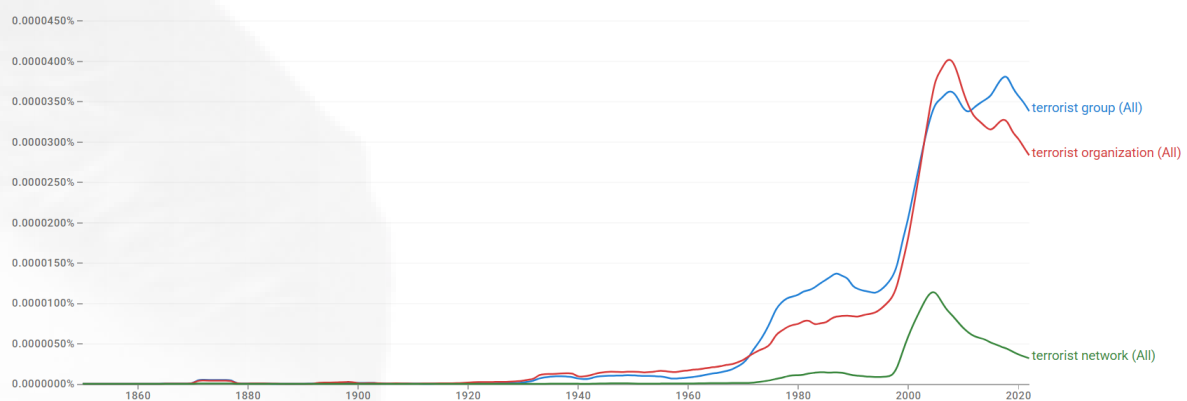


Figure 1: *Terrorist groups, organizations, and networks in the English language corpus.*
(generated by Google Ngrams: <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>)

Figure 1 also shows that the term “terrorist network” first appears in the 1970s and gains traction in the 21st century, coinciding with the widespread adoption of personal computers and the Internet. The seminal work on this topic was conducted by Zanini and Edwards (2001), as well as Sageman (2008), and will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

The problems of defining terrorist organizations are not exclusively academic. Similar to definitions of terrorism, attempts to define a terrorist organization can be categorized as administrative and academic (see Simeunović, 2009). Administrative definitions can be further classified as *legal* definitions that can be found in national or international legal documents, and, for lack of a better term, *administrative* definitions in a stricter sense - those made by and for government (or international) bodies and agencies.

The importance of legal definitions is paramount, since many states, including the Republic of Serbia (see Bodrožić, 2017), have made membership in a terrorist organization a criminal offence *per se*. These legal provisions, however, are not without their own problems. Some national legislations work under the assumption of the existence of formal terrorist organizations (Sageman, 2008, p. 169). Other legislators opt to define terrorist groups within the law itself, but the definitions vary in scope and precision. It could be argued that these definitions are the most pertinent from the perspective of counter-terrorist efforts. Still, a more comprehensive analysis of legal definitions is beyond the scope of this research paper, and they are of limited use in scholarly research on terrorism as a socio-political phenomenon.

Some of the administrative definitions are also codified in legislation. They are usually tied to lists of designated terrorist organizations maintained by governments or international organizations, such as the United States Department of State³, the European Union⁴, or the United Nations⁵. These definitions are also not necessarily consistent among themselves, and are tailored to serve the specific needs of the entities issuing them. Sometimes they are only implied: for example, the United Nations does not have an explicit definition of a terrorist organization.

The United States Department of State Foreign Terrorist Organization list (usually referred to as the FTO list) is an interesting example, being frequently used by scholars as a sample for their research (see Phillips, 2015) but also being itself a subject of academic inquiry (see, for example, Hinckson, 2017). It was established in 1997 as a response to three terrorist attacks: the World Trade Center

³ List available at <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations>

⁴ The latest list is available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02001E0931-20250201>

⁵ The list of individuals and entities under UN sanctions is available at: <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/un-sc-consolidated-list>



bombing in 1993, the Oklahoma City bombing⁶, and the Aum Shinrikyo attacks in Tokyo in 1995. The process of listing (and delisting) of organizations is complicated, prescribed criteria are broad, and different political interests are sometimes involved (see Loertscher et al., 2020). From an academic perspective, however, the Foreign Terrorist Organizations list “is a very specific subset of terrorist groups” (Phillips, 2015, p. 236), and the same is true for other similar national or international lists.

The deficiencies of the administrative definitions underscore the need for a sound academic definition as a foundation of empirical research. Indeed, ever since the beginning of the terrorism studies as a distinct field of social science in the 1970s, the terrorist group has been considered “the primary unit of analysis in studies of terrorism, in line with the common assumption that acts of terrorism are mainly carried out by members of formal, identifiable terrorist organizations” (Berger Hobson & Moghadam, 2024, p. 568). And yet, the scholarly debate over the definition of a terrorist group (or organization) has been much smaller in scale compared to the discussion of the definition of terrorism. The study of terrorist organizations is still primarily empirical in nature, and a significant number of researchers abstain from explicitly defining what they consider to be a terrorist group. Although the number of published papers discussing the issues of definition has increased in recent years (Berger Hobson & Moghadam, 2024; Phillips, 2015; Young & Dugan, 2010), the question of what counts as a terrorist organization is far from settled. For example, Silke (2001, p. 3) has included the question “What makes a group a *terrorist* group?” among the fundamental questions the field has not answered in a satisfactory manner. Similarly, McCormick (2003, p. 474) sees “the definition of a terrorist group or terrorist organization, in contrast to a group or organization that sometimes employs terrorism” as one of the contested issues in terrorism research.

Quarter of a century later, the situation in the field mostly remains the same. The only somewhat systematic analysis of the literature on terrorist groups, provided by Phillips (2015, p. 228), finds that “there has been little analysis of the concept, and basically no consideration of implications of different definitions. Most studies of terrorist organizations have tended to either avoid defining the concept or offer a definition without justification or discussion. Either of these choices ignores contrasting definitions in the literature, and related questions of how different definitions might affect inferences.” Reasons for this, Phillips argues, are twofold. Either they believe the concept is essentially contested and can therefore not be defined, or they see terrorism as a tactic and consequently an inadequate qualifier to describe a group, as it can be used by anyone. The latter position was later labeled by Berger Hobson and Moghadam as *rejectionist*, since “it rejects the logic and utility of the idea of the ‘terrorist group’ as a distinct actor category” (Berger Hobson & Moghadam, 2024, p. 569).

Among the existing definitions of terrorist groups or organizations, Phillips distinguishes between *inclusive* and *exclusive* definitions. Inclusive definitions are essentially those that consider every organization that uses terrorism to be a terrorist organization. The problem with this type of definition is that it is harder to operationalize, and, as was already pointed out, it inherits all the problems related to the definition of terrorism. Exclusive definitions, on the other hand, insist that the label should be applied only to those organizations that use terrorism *primarily*, *regularly*, or *significantly* (Phillips, 2015, p. 232). A vital distinction some authors draw between terrorist and guerrilla groups concerns the control of territory, although this position is also contested.

Even though there is no consensus among the researchers, the terms terrorist group and terrorist organization seem to be used in a fairly consistent way in the scholarly literature. There are certain elements of the definition that are generally seen as unproblematic, at least among those who do not subscribe to the rejectionist approach: subnational character, political motivation, and the use of ter-

6 Interestingly, and perhaps paradoxically, the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh is one of the most recognizable instances of lone-wolf terrorism.



rorism as a highly symbolic form of violence (Phillips, 2015). For most of the 20th century, and even today, it was assumed that terrorist groups “have formal organizations with a coherent command and control structure” (Sageman, 2008, p. 31). Nevertheless, the lack of explicit definitions and underconceptualization remains a serious unresolved issue of research on terrorist organizations.

Terrorists of the 21st century: decentralized, diversified, dispersed

Three trends that started in the late 20th century have continued and gained traction after 9/11, reshaping the nature of the terrorist threat: the rise of leaderless resistance, lone-wolf terrorism, and the hybrid organizations. Taken together, they are seriously challenging the assumptions and conventional wisdom on the actors of terrorism, and the usefulness of the very concept of a terrorist group or organization.

The concept of *leaderless resistance* was born as a “mark of despair” (Kaplan, 1997) of the white supremacist organizations in the United States in the face of increased suppression by the government. Although, as Kaplan notes, it was part of the *zeitgeist* and a subject of internal debate on the extreme right since the 1960s, it was formally introduced by Louis Beam’s eponymous essay published in 1983 and then again in 1992. He himself attributes the concept to a former intelligence officer Ulius Louis Amoss, and describes it as “[a] system of organization that is based upon the cell organization, but does not have any central control or direction [...] Utilizing the Leaderless Resistance concept, all individuals and groups operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction or instruction, as would those who belong to a typical pyramid organization” (Beam, 1992).⁷ The idea of leaderless resistance was further popularized by William Pierce’s novels *The Turner Diaries* and *Hunter*.

Some still consider the threat of leaderless resistance a mere nuisance, but there seems to be a growing scholarly consensus that, due to both technological and social changes, this type of terrorist operation is now taking over in terms of frequency, scope, and destructive potential (Michael, 2012). This is reflected in the increased volume and depth of scholarly research on the phenomenon. Still, the definition, as well as its relations with other, similar concepts, remains contested. Sweeney’s (2019) analysis of the scholarly literature on leaderless resistance points out that there are differing views on the distance between individuals engaged in this type of violence and the organizations they may identify with. The strong version of the argument is that, in order to be recognized as a leaderless resistor, one must not belong to or identify with the organization. However, the more moderate approach, which postulates the absence of functional links with the organization as a requirement, seems more operationally useful.

While it remains the favorite practice (as well as theory) of right-wing extremists, the idea of leaderless resistance as a viable tactic against government has spread from the extreme right to other parts of the political spectrum in the 21st century. It was, since then, utilized by eco-terrorists, animal rights groups, and antiglobalists alike (Michael, 2012). Most importantly, it was, especially after 9/11, embraced by Islamists worldwide. According to Sageman (2008), the adoption of the leaderless resistance doctrine, enabled by the Internet, was the key factor in transforming al-Qaeda into a social movement.

A concept of lone-wolf terrorism⁸, similar to and sometimes conflated with leaderless resistance, was also popularized by the American extreme right in the late 1990s, even though it can be traced back to the anarchists of the 19th century and is now adopted by proponents of different ideologies (Bakker

7 The full text of Beam’s essay is available online at: <https://www.louisbeam.com/leaderless.htm>. Beam was also, in another essay, “the first to propose - and attempt to institute - the use of computers as a tool of radical right communication and recruitment” (Kaplan, 1997).

8 It should be noted that there are suggestions that other terms, such as solo-actor terrorism or freelance terrorism should be used to avoid glamorizing the phenomenon and its actors.



& De Graaf, 2011). According to Feldman (2013, p. 271), in the 21st century this variety of terrorism “is on the rise by all accounts, and by every indicator”. However, the scholarship on the subject is still undecided on the definition. The boundaries of the concept remain “fuzzy and arbitrary” (Spaaij, 2010). The key issue, especially with distinguishing between lone-wolf terrorism and leaderless resistance, seems to be focused on the concept of a group. Namely, there is a disagreement among scholars whether attacks by very small groups - consisting of two or three persons - count as lone-wolf attacks or leaderless resistance. Spaaij thus proposes a narrow definition, drawing a clear line between the two phenomena. In his view, the label of lone-wolf terrorism should be applied only to “attacks carried out by persons who (a) operate individually, (b) do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network, and (c) whose *modi operandi* are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy” (Spaaij, 2010, p. 856).

As the fourth, religious, wave of terrorism, which started with the Iranian revolution in 1979 (Rapoport, 2013), continues into the 21st century, Islamist terrorism remains the most serious threat (see, for example, Sageman, 2008). Islamist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Hamas, are perceived as the major terrorist groups. Each of them, not necessarily in the same way, challenges the assumptions about what a terrorist organization looks like. Traditionally, such groups are believed to have a hierarchical, pyramidal structure, not unlike modern corporations, which consists of: “a leader (president); an inner circle of senior members (vice presidents); individuals who oversee tasks such as fundraising or bombing (product managers); and, operatives (workers)” (Garfinkel, 2003).

While the terrorist violence is undoubtedly a part of their tactic, and therefore they do fall under an inclusive definition of terrorist organizations, as discussed by Phillips (2015), none of these groups fits exclusively or entirely within the notion of a hierarchically organized formal subnational group that engages primarily in terrorist violence. Interestingly, even before the 9/11 attacks, at the end of the 20th century, Zanini and Edwards had identified Hamas, Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda as belonging to a new type of terrorist organization. “In these loosely organized groups with religious or ideological motives,” they write, “operatives are part of a network that relies less on bureaucratic fiat and more on shared values and horizontal coordination mechanisms to accomplish its goals” (Zanini & Edwards, 2001, pp. 32–33). Together with the Islamic State, they can rightfully be, despite their differences, classified as *hybrid organizations*. The term originates from the work of Ganor (2012), who describes hybrid terrorist organizations as “standing on three legs” - (para)military, political, and social welfare.

Even though al-Qaeda was undoubtedly a hierarchical organization with formal membership (Garfinkel, 2003), even at its beginnings, new members did not pledge allegiance to the organization but to Osama bin Laden personally (Sageman, 2008). After the leadership (as well as a portion of the first generation membership) was decimated in the aftermath of 9/11 and subsequent intervention in Afghanistan, its operation was significantly constrained. However, it has almost immediately evolved into a decentralized, practically leaderless network, a social movement, and/or ideology (Sageman, 2008; Simeunović, 2009). While it did diminish the leadership’s operational control, this development increased the group’s reach.

Hamas, founded after the failure of the first Intifada in 1987 by Ahmed Yassin, has in the meantime undergone many transformations (for a detailed discussion, see Baconi, 2022). Without a doubt, the organization routinely engaged in violence, including terrorist violence targeting civilians. It has achieved notoriety since 1994, by deployment of suicide attacks, which were widely studied (see, for example, Chen, 2012; Gupta & Mundra, 2005; Singh, 2013). At the same time, true to its roots within the Muslim Brotherhood, it maintained charitable operations (Roy, 2016) and was, similarly to al-Qaeda, sometimes defined as a social movement (Robinson, 2004). In 2006, it won the election in Gaza and emerged victorious from the following civil war.



Hezbollah was founded in 1982 as a primarily Shia movement responding to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. However, it has also evolved into a legitimate political actor in Lebanese internal politics, and its operations and tactics transcend the usual range of terrorist groups. It also consistently engages in different welfare endeavors (Azani, 2013). Both Hamas and Hezbollah have already been identified by some scholars as hybrid organizations, “active across a broad range of domains including politics and negotiation, socio-economic development projects, welfare networks and paramilitary armed resistance” (Lecocq, 2020, p. 1071).

Islamic State (also known as ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Daesh) is a hybrid organization of a different type. It started out as al-Qaeda in Iraq and was certainly engaging in terrorist attacks. However, it evolved into a large armed force, effectively controlling a spacious territory, capable of financially supporting itself without the need for donations. At the same time, it had employed new digital technologies and built an efficient propaganda machine (Atwan, 2015; Stern, 2016), successful in both recruiting fighters for its Middle East military operations and “franchising” its ideology to independent cells and individuals in Europe, the United States, and Australia. Already by 2015, scholars were calling into question both the accuracy and usefulness of reducing the Islamic State to a terrorist group (Cronin, 2015; Maan, 2015).

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The conceptual confusion and unresolved definitional problems remain the key issues of scholarly research on terrorist organizations. Conceptual papers dealing directly with the topic of definition and systematic literature reviews are few and far between, and they seem to offer no final answer to the question “What is the terrorist organization?” Even though both terrorism itself and academic research on terrorism have undergone profound transformations since 9/11, their effect on the defining features of terrorist organizations is still underconceptualized. While there is already a significant body of research on terrorism in the 21st century, it does little to clarify the prevailing conceptual confusion. Furthermore, the notions of *leaderless resistance* and *lone-wolf terrorism* are not entirely separate⁹, are sometimes used interchangeably, and are neither adequately conceptualized nor operationalized (Michael, 2012; Sweeney, 2019). In addition, the notion of *homegrown terrorism* is frequently used to denote, essentially, the same phenomenon. The main reason is this type of actor’s hesitation to operate outside national borders, mainly due to the ever-increasing border security after 9/11 (see Sageman, 2008, p. 133).

There is, however, one feature of 21st-century terrorism that is widely recognized as influencing both organizational structures and tactical choices. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks has coincided with the broader spread of the everyday use of the Internet, and terrorists (and would-be terrorists) have, arguably, made the most out of the affordances¹⁰ the new technologies have provided. While the concept of leaderless resistance was developed in the pre-Internet era, it was dramatically popularized and otherwise affected by the increased availability of Internet tools and later platforms. Soon after 9/11 and subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, scholars have noted that the leaderless resistance is no longer “an admission of failure of traditional terrorism” (Sageman, 2008, p. 143) but also that the lone wolves actually do belong to the pack, although a virtual one (Weimann, 2015). Furthermore, both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have proved to be quite adept at using the Internet for the dissemination of their ideology and know-how, and otherwise for “franchising” their brand. Future adaptations by terrorists may include the use of artificial intelligence tools as part of a broader socio-political transformation driven by this technology (Awasthi, 2025; Damnjanović, 2025).

⁹ It is indicative that concepts both of leaderless resistance and lone-wolf terrorism are absent from Thackrah’s Dictionary of Terrorism (2004).

¹⁰ *Affordances* are defined by Tufekci (2017) as opportunities and possibilities offered by new technologies. For further discussion on different theoretical perspectives on technology and politics, see Damnjanović (2018).



ORIGINALITY/VALUE

In conclusion, Phillips's (2015) remark that "the boundaries of group membership and identity are worthy of continued research" still stands a decade later, and seems especially relevant in the light of perpetual changes that terrorism goes through in response to government counter-terrorist policies and practices, social climate, and technological developments.

The answer to the first research question is perhaps the hardest to answer unambiguously. There are many definitions (although they are fewer than it could be expected), and they are different. The dilemmas are many: what counts as a group; is it justified to label a group as a terrorist if it engages in terrorism only rarely or occasionally; what degree of formal organization is required? The only points of consensus are subnational character and engagement in terrorism (no matter how terrorism may be defined).

In contrast, the second research question is fairly easy to answer. For half a century of terrorism studies, there has never been a scholarly consensus about the definition of a terrorist organization. However, some of the assumptions on the subject are challenged in the 21st century. Among them is the notion that terrorism is necessarily a form of collective political action, which answers the third research question. The trends shaping terrorism in this century suggest that terrorist attacks can be, and are, perpetrated by groups and individuals alike.

More importantly, the usefulness and accuracy of the very concept of a terrorist group or organization are contested, and for good reasons. Some authors outright reject it, while others point to the transformations such groups have undergone, rendering the concept insufficient to describe the nuances and complexities of 21st-century terrorism. Thus, Ganor (2012) writes about hybrid organizations, Medina and Hepner (2008) convincingly show that modern terrorist networks can and do include both hierarchical core and leaderless cells, and Berger Hobson and Moghadam (2024, p. 578) argue "in favor of adopting more value neutral labels to describe militant actors operating in recent years".

Finally, it bears reminding that the answer to the question "What counts as a terrorist organization in the 21st century?" is not of strictly academic interest. Given that many national penal codes list membership in a terrorist organization as an offence *per se*, it has profound practical implications. Moreover, to counter contemporary terrorism effectively, it is necessary to understand its actors and how they organize and operate.

This shift in the nature of terrorism in the 21st century, namely an increase in lone-wolf terrorism and diffuse movements, ideologies, and "franchises" (see, for example, Ojo, 2024; Roy, 2023), has serious implications for terrorism research and for counter-terrorism policies and practices. As Sageman noticed, considerations of strategy, tactics, leadership, membership, recruitment, and division of labor apply only to organizations, not movements or ideologies. Nevertheless, he stresses that lone wolves "are terrorists with full responsibility for their actions even though they do not belong to a formal terrorist organization" (Sageman, 2008, p. 31). Some of the counter-terrorist tactics, however, such as targeted assassinations of the key members of the organization - as practiced by both the United States and Israel - may not be as effective when used against loosely organized groups or independent cells (see, for example, Sageman, 2008). The sound conceptual and theoretical understanding of terrorist actors, even if it means reconceptualizing the notion of terrorist organization or abandoning it completely, is *sine qua non* not only of quality research but of successful counter-terrorist efforts.



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