

The Debate Over “New” and “Old” Terrorism

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Presenter

Martha Crenshaw is Senior Fellow at Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI) and Professor of Political Science by Courtesy, at Stanford University. She was the Colin and Nancy Campbell Professor of Global Issues and Democratic Thought and professor of government at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn., from 1974 to 2007. Her current research focuses on innovation in terrorist campaigns, the distinction between "old" and "new" terrorism, how terrorism ends, and why the United States is the target of terrorism. She has written extensively on the issue of political terrorism; her first article, "The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism," was published in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* in 1972. Her recent work includes "Terrorism, Strategies, and Grand Strategies," in *Attacking Terrorism* (Georgetown University Press), "Terrorism and Global Security," in *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World* (United States Institute of Peace Press), and "Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review Essay," in the journal *Security Studies*. She is also the editor of a projected volume, *The Consequences of Counterterrorist Policies in Democracies*, for the Russell Sage Foundation in New York.

Theme

Since 9/11, many policy makers, journalists, consultants, and scholars have become convinced that the world confronts a “new” terrorism unlike the terrorism of the past. Thus the government and policy elites have been blamed for not recognizing the danger of the “new” terrorism in the 1990s and therefore failing to prevent the disaster of 9/11. Knowledge of the “old” or traditional terrorism is sometimes considered irrelevant at best, and obsolete and anachronistic, even harmful, at worst. Some of those who argue for the appearance of a “new” terrorism think that the old paradigms should be discarded entirely and replaced with a new understanding. Other analysts, primarily from the academic community, have challenged this interpretation. Professor Crenshaw examines the logical and empirical foundations of the “new terrorism” argument and concludes that it is weak on both grounds.

Crenshaw analyzes the propositions of the “new terrorism” school concerning the goals, methods, and organizational structure and resources of groups practicing terrorism. It attempts to clarify the debate and situate current terrorism in its appropriate historical context. In the end, Crenshaw argues that the “new” terrorism does not differ in any significant way from “old” terrorism. The key difference is in capabilities, which does not lead to any revolutionary policy change.

Audience

The audience consisted of approximately 40 people. Audience members came from multiple academic units across campus including Department of Sociology, Political Science, the Jackson School and the Evans School. Faculty, graduate students and undergraduate students were all represented.

Questions

Questions from the discussant, Ashley Thirkill-Mackelprang, a PhD student in political science, as well as from the audience revolved around several themes. One key question was whether the study of terrorism would be better off, by using tactics (or type of attack) as the unit of analysis instead of type of group. Another important question was how we could distinguish between rhetoric and the real aims or motives of the groups. There were also many questions regarding the difficulty of studying terrorism, and especially in terms of collecting reliable data. Finally, audience members wondered about the policy implications of her argument.

Implications for National Security

The main policy implication is based on Crenshaw’s view of terrorism as a tactic and nothing else. By viewing terrorism as a tactic it makes “war on terrorism” nearly impossible. The change that has occurred during the last few decades lies in the capabilities of the groups using terrorist tactics, and policy should focus on limiting groups’ access to highly lethal weapons.