The Link Between Terrorism and Military Conflict
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This paper was written for Dr. John A. Tures’ International Politics course.

During the past few years the War on Terror and the War on Iraq have seemed to be lumped into one category by the American media and public. Our newspapers and newscasts are filled with Middle Eastern terrorist acts that are being committed against our soldiers and the policies we are attempting to implement in Iraq. In fact, in Chapter 11 of World Politics: Trend and Transformation it is stated that there are: “three primary ways that armed conflict most often occurs: wars between states, civil wars between states, and terrorism” (Kegley 400). The book also points out that, “terrorism is a tactic of the powerless against the powerful” and that state-sponsored terrorism is the, “formal assistance, training, and arming of foreign terrorists by a state in order to achieve foreign policy goals” (Kegley 430). Because of the transformation of terrorism into a more organized and state-sponsored affair, along with the emergence of the United States as a hegemonic power, terrorism is becoming a more integral part of military conflict.

As the lines between military action and terrorism begin to be blurred the question is raised, does terrorism cause war, or war cause terrorism, or is there any correlation at all? When debating this question, I, like many Americans, believed that there is a strong correlation between terrorism and military conflict; after all, the War on Iraq and War on Terror have been ongoing throughout the past few years. With number of ongoing military conflicts as the independent variable and the amount of terrorist attacks as the dependent variable I decided to take a look at the facts. There is a reasonable argument for both a positive relationship and negative relationship between these two variables. I personally hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between the two variables, meaning that as the amount of military conflicts rises so does the terrorist activity. However, I felt that my opinion may have been altered by the world that we are living in today and I felt an urge to seek more concrete facts.

The graphs below represent the data I obtained after compiling the number of terrorist attacks and the amount of military conflicts throughout the years of 1979-2003. The data relating to terrorist attacks came from the Encyclopedia of Terrorism and was compiled by Dr. Tures, myself, and the rest of our International Politics class, while the military conflicts data was obtained from the Center for Systemic Peace. The first two graphs show the number of ongoing military conflicts and the number of terrorist attacks, respectively. The final graph shows the two sets of data in comparison to each other, and each graph runs from the year 1979-2007. The chart simply shows all of the data in numerical form.
Number of ongoing military conflicts

Year

Number of Terrorists attacks

Year
Frequency of Terrorist Attacks and Military Conflicts

- Number of ongoing military conflicts
- Number of Terrorists attacks
A correlation in the data can be seen, considering the peak in terrorism and military conflicts occur at similar times. However, the number of military conflicts is a more stable number, and the number of terrorist attacks has a larger variance, because the amount of terrorist attacks is simply a smaller number. To simplify the analysis of the data, consider that from the years 1979-1986 the average number of military conflicts that were ongoing was 167.5, and the average number of terrorist attacks was 30.875. From 1987-1994 the military conflicts were at an average of 148.375 and the number of terrorist attacks was at an average of 16.125. From 1995-2003 the military conflicts were at an average of 99.44 per year, and the terrorist attacks were at an average of 19.22 per year. This data supports the theory that there is a positive relationship between the two variables, and identifies the transformation of armed conflict from more military based into a terrorist based system.

As mentioned before, this data continues to support the idea that as we move into a more unilateral global system the amount of military conflict decreases. So possibly the best way to look at this data is not through 7-8 year periods but simply Cold War era data vs. Post Cold War era data. Throughout the Cold War years that are represented in this data, which are the years 1979-1991, the average number of military conflicts is a staggering 171.77 ongoing conflicts per year, and terrorist attack levels are at 25.85 per year.
year. In Post Cold War times, from 1992-2003, the number of ongoing military conflicts dropped to 111.58 per year, and it should be noted that throughout this time period the amount of military conflicts dropped every year. In this same time period the average number of terrorist attacks per year was 16.67. What is even more amazing is that when the number of Cold War military conflicts is divided by number of Post Cold War military conflicts, and likewise for Cold War terrorist attacks and Post Cold War terrorist attacks, the ratios are 1.54 and 1.55 respectively. This data provides even more evidence that there is a positive relationship between these two variables, but it should be noted that in the year 2002 the number of terrorist attacks rose to 31, the highest amount since 1986. This sudden spike could be in reaction to the United States threat to use military force in the Middle East, since, “Terrorism is a tactic of the powerless against the powerful” (Kegley 430). However, it should be noted that in 2003 the amount of terrorist attacks fell to nine, which was the lowest level since 1994. This statistic could possibly help support the decision of the United States to invade Iraq in March of 2003 and the declaration of war against Al-Qaeda in the War on Terror in the fall of 2001.

Clearly the data collected during this time period suggests a positive relationship between the two variables but there is an argument for both a positive and negative relationship. A positive relationship could be explained simply by the theory that terrorism is in reaction to the occupation or military conflict that is ongoing in the country, because, like stated before, terrorism is an act of the powerless against the powerful. In other words, the terrorist activity could be a form of guerilla warfare. Another reason could be because of the diversion of intelligence from the terrorists to the militant enemy, allowing the terrorists to operate with less resistance and carry out attacks without as much opposition.

A negative relationship between the military conflicts and terrorist attacks could be explained by the simple fact that during non-war times there are more weapons available to terrorists. This theory can be supported by occurrences in the recent past and are even represented by a present television show. As the Cold War came to an end the Soviet Union was left with stockpiles of weapons that they no longer had any use for, so in response the Russian government has begun selling weapons to other nations, militant leaders, and possibly even to terrorist cells. In fact, during the War of Iraq, Russia came under fire for illegally dealing arms to Iraq, after American troops reported the use of Russian weapons by the enemy (Pravda). Such an example can be seen in the recent season of Fox’s show “24”. Throughout the season the Counter Terrorism Unit is in pursuit of a Middle Eastern terrorist cell leader as well as an ex-Soviet General that are working together to carry out attacks on U.S. cities with Soviet made nuclear bombs. Another theory that could explain a negative relationship is that the terrorists simply take the initiative of violent acts when the leaders of the countries are hesitant to.

After examining all of the collected data it is safe to conclude that there is a positive relationship between levels of military conflict and amounts of terrorist attacks, but there are many levels that my study only scratched the surface on. For example, the location and the motivation of the terrorist attack should be known, and what is the location of or the parties involved in the military conflict. However, as we move into a more unilateral global system, with the United States emerging as a dominant power, the evidence suggests that the world is becoming more stable in respects to both terrorist
activity and military conflict. Hopefully as we move into the future the relationship will remain positive and the United States can manage to lower the level of each.

Works Cited

