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# The Origin and Evolution of the RAND Corporation's Terrorism Databases

## Defining and Building a New Field of Knowledge

**A**s the phenomenon of terrorism continues to evolve, new threats arise, policy concerns shift, and new strategies are needed. Such changes invariably raise new questions about the definition of *terrorism* itself—always contentious ground—and what a redefinition could mean not only for policy and strategy but also for data collection and analysis:

- What kinds of information are needed to address new issues and support new initiatives?
- How are the new data to be collected and assembled?
- Are the data complete enough?
- What gaps still exist?
- How are judgments to be made about inclusions or deliberate omissions?
- Are there biases?

Designing sound policy and strategy requires attending to such database-level questions.

In light of such concerns, in late 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) asked the RAND Corporation to assist in a review of DHS's needs for data on terrorism and targeted violence. Specifically, DHS's Science and Technology Directorate tasked the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center, a federally funded research and development center that RAND operates for DHS, to review DHS needs for data on terrorism and targeted violence (Eyerman et al., 2021). As part of that inquiry, RAND drew on its own experience from more than a half century of research on terrorism, including RAND's creation of one of the first terrorism databases.

The questions asked in 2020—questions still being asked today—were not new territory. Many of these same issues came up decades ago, in the early 1970s, when RAND began developing its first terrorism database. It was not called a database then but was referred to as “A Chronology of Incidents of International Terrorism.” It was soon supplemented with what became a second feature of RAND's emerging database: a series of case studies.

Collection began in 1972, immediately after RAND was asked by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Defense to initiate a research project to

examine the terrorism threat and respond to the government's specific policy concerns. As terrorists continued to pose a threat, RAND expanded its research in the late 1970s, and even more in the 1980s, in order to address additional policy issues, new target sets, evolving trends, and potential future threats. This effort has continued into the present.

Today, as the United States pivots from an almost-exclusive focus on foreign-based terrorist groups to the challenges posed by domestic violent extremists, requirements for data collection and analysis face new difficulties. But some of the underlying methodological issues remain.

A review of RAND's early efforts to create a solid base of empirical data for terrorism research might, therefore, be instructive for looking ahead.

It is not our intention here to write a history of RAND's research on terrorism but rather to recount how we first defined the research domain, created the organization's terrorism chronology, and assembled a body of case studies to support its research efforts. Both of us were involved in this project from the beginning. We rely heavily on our own personal recollections, as well as revisits of selected older RAND publications that illustrate some of the issues discussed. Our recollections focus on the foundational phase of RAND research on terrorism in the 1970s and into the 1980s.

### Abbreviations

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CODA	Concept Organization and Development Aid
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
IS	Islamic State
IT	information technology

## In the Beginning: The Emergence of a New Mode of Conflict

When RAND's research on terrorism began in late 1972, terrorism was hardly a new phenomenon. Indeed, terrorist bombings and assassinations were first viewed as an

international problem in the late 19th century. Long before then, Napoleon Bonaparte's minister of police Joseph Fouché referred to those behind an attempted assassination of Napoleon in 1800 as "terrorists." They were believed (as it turned out, wrongly)—to be diehard Jacobins, the extremists who, in 1793 and 1794, had been responsible for the "Reign of Terror"—the mass roundups and executions of those accused of being enemies of the French Revolution (North, 2019; see also Lignereux, 2012). And thus, the word *terror* first entered the political lexicon, although we can find acts of violence from long before that would meet today's definitions of *terrorism*.

Terrorism in its most recent form emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as urban guerrillas in Latin America, Palestinian organizations in the Middle East, and ideologically driven and separatist groups in Europe, Japan, and North America turned to assassinations, bombings, airline hijackings, kidnappings, and attacks on diplomats and executives of foreign corporations. Political extremists figured that these terrorist tactics would attract worldwide attention to themselves and their causes and enable them to coerce governments to alter policies, release comrades in prison, pay ransoms, or make other concessions.

Contemporary technology has provided terrorists not only with new targets but also with new capabilities. Commercial jet aircraft, besides being dramatic (and nationally labeled) targets, offered terrorists unprecedented mobility that allowed them to strike anywhere in the world. Television, radio, and the press afforded terrorists almost-instantaneous worldwide exposure. The exposures arising from modern society's increasing dependence on vulnerable technology afford terrorists opportunities to create greater disruption. At the same time, increasing access to

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firearms, explosives, and the technology for small, compact bombs has increased terrorists' capacity for violence.

By the beginning of the 1970s, the United States had already dealt with a growing volume of bombings, airline hijackings, and kidnappings and killings of its diplomats abroad. These events, occurring in various parts of the world, suggested the emergence of international terrorism as "a distinct and significant new mode of armed conflict" (Jenkins, 1974; Jenkins, 1983, p. 8). On its own, RAND had initiated a reconnaissance effort in early 1972 while proposing that the U.S. government consider the implications of this trend for U.S. policy and strategy.

Two especially shocking events served to galvanize government attention. One was the Lod Airport massacre. The attack occurred at Tel Aviv's international airport on May 30, 1972, when three members of the Japanese Red

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Combating the new wave of attacks in the 1970s required international cooperation, which, in turn, required agreeing on a common definition of *terrorism*.

Army, which was allied with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, arrived on a flight from Rome, removed automatic weapons and hand grenades from their checked luggage, and opened fire on other arriving passengers, killing 26 and wounding 80. Most of the dead were Puerto Rican pilgrims on a visit to the Holy Land. The episode ended only when Israeli security forces shot and killed two of the attackers and seriously wounded the third. It was not simply the carnage that attracted attention; it was the complexity of the event. People asked, How is it that Japanese come to Israel to kill Puerto Ricans on behalf of Palestinians?

This was followed a few months later in 1972 by the Munich incident, which occurred during the Summer Olympics in Munich, where members of a Palestinian terrorist group, Black September, murdered two members of the Israeli team and took nine others hostage. The episode

ended with a bloody shootout that resulted in the deaths of five terrorists and all the remaining hostages—with much of the incident televised and broadcast around the world.

These two events acted as a catalyst for governments around the world to pay more attention to international terrorism. In October 1972, President Richard Nixon created the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism in order to better coordinate U.S. counterterrorism efforts abroad. Shortly after, the Departments of State (through its Office of External Research) and Defense (through its Advance Research Projects Agency) requested that RAND initiate a research program to inform and support government counterterrorism policy. Its purpose would be to provide the newly created Cabinet Committee and other departments and agencies directly concerned with the problem with a better understanding of the theory and tactics of terrorism, particularly because these could affect U.S. national security and the safety of U.S. government officials and other U.S. citizens abroad.<sup>1</sup>

### Early Policy Concerns: Definitional Debates

In preliminary discussions with RAND staff, government officials identified an array of concerns. The Department of Defense was interested in how terrorist tactics might affect future wars. Officials at State were concerned about the spread and potential normalization of terrorist tactics.<sup>2</sup>

Like many governments in Europe and Latin America during the 1970s, Washington confronted domestic terrorism campaigns waged by a variety of ideological and other kinds of groups in their home countries. Although these local campaigns were considered reflections of the mounting global terrorism phenomenon, the U.S. government

did not consider its own law enforcement efforts, or those of other nations, to be an international matter. Incidents in which groups attacked their own government or residents in their own territory were matters for those governments.

But in some cases, this new wave of terrorism spilled over into the international domain, when terrorists attacked foreign diplomats or foreign corporations, went abroad to carry out attacks, or hijacked airliners and flew them to other countries. Such incidents created complex international political crises. Combating them required international cooperation, which, in turn, required agreeing on a common definition of *terrorism*. This proved difficult to achieve.

*Terrorism* is both a pejorative and emotive term that criminalizes certain forms of political violence as particularly heinous. Branding one's foes as terrorists therefore offers moral and political advantages. Governments of more-authoritarian countries tended to label all manifestations of political opposition as terrorism. Other governments recognized the legitimacy of political protest and even armed opposition under certain circumstances, but they sought to outlaw specific tactics—for example, taking hostages or attacking diplomats.

Meanwhile, governments of former colonies that had only recently gained their independence and whose leaders had, in some cases, been the targets of repressive colonial antiterrorism laws, saw things differently. They feared that outlawing terrorism might tarnish their own legitimacy and worried that new antiterrorism conventions could disadvantage allies who were still fighting against “colonial, racist and alien régimes” (Ad Hoc Committee on International Terrorism, 1973, p. 1). These governments sought

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exceptions on the basis of cause—as the saying went, one's terrorist was another's freedom fighter.

But that raised fears that allowing such exclusions would erode the rules of war that had been achieved over many centuries and could even legitimize terrorist tactics. Of concern to the United States and other governments were efforts led by a group of nonaligned countries to add Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts), broadening the definition of *privileged combatant*. The Geneva Convention limited *privileged combatant* to participants in interstate wars. The nonaligned nations, many of which were former colonies, wanted to extend the protection to those involved in internal conflicts (Mallison and Mallison, 1978). The Department of Defense was interested in this issue.

No one argued that participants in internal conflicts should not be protected against execution without due process, torture, or other forms of inhumane or degrading treatment. The question was whether such groups as

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the Irish Republican Army, the Red Brigades in Italy, or the Red Army Faction in Germany should also be able to claim legitimate status as “combatants” privileged against criminal prosecution. And, if so, would this not lead to greater acceptance, even a kind of normalization, of terrorist tactics? Definition thus became a critical battleground. RAND offered no advice on the complex legal arguments, but the definition of *terrorism* became part of the battleground.

At the same time as U.S. officials sought RAND’s assistance in addressing these broader issues, Department of State officials also wanted RAND to conduct research that would assist it in dealing with incidents in which Americans were held hostage by terrorists abroad. What tactics were most advisable in bargaining for human life? The White House, because it too had to deal with such incidents, conveyed its own concerns about this issue. Bargaining tactics raised knotty questions about U.S. policy for dealing with hostage situations—notably, whether to negotiate with terrorists. By the early 1970s, this had become a topic of intense debate among Department of State officials and Foreign Service officers.<sup>3</sup> We return to this matter in “Foundational Points for Policy and Strategy” later in this Perspective.

## RAND Researchers Enter the Definition Debate

Reflecting these policy concerns, we immediately began by compiling a list of international-terrorist incidents. The objective was to simply define the domain of our research. Putting aside the polemics that dominated discussions of terrorism at the international level, when we talked about terrorism, what were we talking about? An empirical base was essential.

We sought to remove the definition of *terrorism* from politics altogether. *Terrorism* meant creating “fear and alarm,” but the intentions of the perpetrators to produce psychological effects alone seemed insufficient as the basis for defining *international terrorism*. And, in any case, that particular attribute was not what drove the debate. Instead, governments argued about who the terrorists were, what they were trying to achieve, and the legitimacy of their tactics.

We concluded that it was *essential to define* international terrorism *in terms of the quality of the act, not the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of their cause*. Whereas *terrorism* in general can be defined as “a campaign of violence designed to inspire fear . . . generally carried out by an organization . . . devoted to political ends” (Jenkins, 1974, p. 2), we defined *international terrorism* as “acts of violence or campaigns of violence waged outside the accepted rules and procedures of international diplomacy and war” (Jenkins, 1974, p. 2).

Terrorist actions were “often designed to attract worldwide attention to the existence and cause of the terrorists . . . [T]he violence is carried out for effect. The actual victim or victims of terrorist attacks and the target audi-

ence may not be the same; the victims may be totally unrelated to the struggle” (Jenkins and Johnson, 1975, p. 3).

All terrorist attacks are crimes in the traditional sense—murder, kidnapping, or armed assault, for example. Many would also be violations of the rules of war, if a formal state of war existed. This violence or threat of violence is generally directed against civilian targets. The perpetrators often claim credit for their attacks. Terrorist acts are intended to produce effects beyond the immediate physical damage they cause (Jenkins, 1980b).

Because the primary policy concern at the time was the spillover of violence into the international community, we also required that the acts we included in our chronology have a clear international component. Our chronology would

include only those events in which guerrillas or terrorists went abroad to carry out their attacks, deliberately selected victims or targets that had connections with a foreign state—embassy personnel, diplomats, foreign businessmen, even tourists—in order to gain international publicity or greater political leverage over their local government, attacked lines of international commerce, or created international incidents by other means. In other words, the chronology includes only those incidents with clear international repercussions, those potentially involving two or more governments. It does not reflect the internal terrorism carried out by governments against their own citizens and by terrorists operating within their own country and against their own nationals. (Jenkins and Johnson, 1976, p. 1)

This gave us a list of objective criteria that could be applied to any act regardless of the ideology or ultimate

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political goals of the perpetrators. It would still demand judgment, of course, but the judgment would be based primarily on tactics, targets, and circumstances, not on political agendas. This way, our discussion of definition aimed to assist U.S. Department of State officials in international discussions, as well as to arm them with quantitative data.

We had an additional goal: to distinguish our research on terrorism from the purely polemical debate by emphasizing actual events. (To subtly underscore that RAND research was based on empirical data, we portrayed bar charts and trend lines in briefing slides and some reports as three-dimensional blocks instead of flat, two-dimensional depictions.)

Meanwhile, agreeing on a definition of *terrorism* remained beyond the reach of international diplomacy, but a measure of international consensus was ultimately achieved by avoiding a general definition of *terrorism*

altogether and focusing on specific tactics and target sets (much as we had decided to do). Although nations might differ on definitions of *terrorism*, they could sign on to international conventions aimed at halting airline hijackings and, later, sabotage of commercial airliners—a mutual concern to all. They could also agree to a new international convention that diplomats were not legitimate targets of violence. Over a period of years—actually nearly three decades—a corpus of international agreements was expanded tactic by tactic, target by target, to cover most of the terrorist repertoire.

## Database Development and Analysis: Early Phases (1970s–1980s)

With the research domain thus defined, we turned to data collection and analysis. Initially, this meant compiling a chronology of incidents, along with preparing detailed case studies of hostage incidents. That was our main focus during the foundational phase in the 1970s. Late in the 1970s and beyond, additional databases were developed as RAND's terrorism research addressed new concerns.

During these early years of terrorism research, RAND quickly became a leading source of authoritative analysis.<sup>4</sup> A variety of reasons account for this—among them, the fact that events seemed to confirm our hunch that a wave of international terrorism was about to emerge as a new mode of conflict, the formation of a team of keen staff,<sup>5</sup> and a string of publications—several dozen in the 1970s. Another reason was the compilation of a pioneering database of terrorism incidents, along with gradual production

of case studies of hostage incidents—early in a decade when hardly any other terrorism databases existed.

## The RAND Chronology of Incidents

We did not initially refer to our chronology as a *database*, a term that would not gain currency until the late 1970s. The chronology we had begun was just that—a chronology. In its very first version, the information about terrorist incidents was recorded on 3- by 5-inch index cards kept in long wooden boxes similar to what one would find in a library at the time. In the 1980s, as its proportions grew and technology improved, it was moved onto RAND's mainframe computer, where it could be coded and subjected more easily to systematic quantitative analysis.

The chronology reflected the information available at the time, which was often limited. The chronology depended heavily on news media accounts, which was not that much of a shortcoming because major terrorist events received extensive coverage in the international news media and were easily noted. However, smaller-scale events in remote parts of the world were likely to be missed. To broaden our net, we scanned unclassified reports issued by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. But we had no illusions that the chronology captured every event—in discussions with government officials, we described it as illustrative rather than comprehensive.

The chronology was first published in Brian Jenkins and Janera Johnson's *International Terrorism: A Chronology 1968–1974* (Jenkins and Johnson, 1975). It provided an incident-by-incident listing, for a total of 507 incidents arranged in terms of geography, date, and group name.

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Later, in periodic supplements, the chronology grew to well over a thousand incidents (more than 1,500 by 1980).

We used this chronology to select and examine 77 international hostage episodes, mostly kidnappings and barricade-and-hostage situations. From this, we came up with a quantitative analysis of tactics and trends involving hostage-taking, as published in Brian Jenkins, Janera Johnson, and David Ronfeldt's *Numbered Lives: Some Statistical Observations from 77 International Hostage Episodes* (Jenkins, Johnson, and Ronfeldt, 1977).<sup>6</sup>

Another spin-off from the chronology provided an analysis of 48 incidents in which terrorist attacks sought to seize control of embassies and consulates—the buildings as well as their staffs. Of these 48, the terrorists were successful in 43 cases but unsuccessful in five cases. Our detailed analysis appeared in Brian Michael Jenkins's *Embassies Under Siege: A Review of 48 Embassy Takeovers, 1971–1980* (Jenkins, 1981a).

## Case Studies of Hostage Incidents

As mentioned previously, hostage issues were a major policy concern; our government sponsors wanted to know more about the theory and tactics of terrorist kidnapping and hostage-taking. The chronology helped us (and them)

understand patterns and trends and explore policy alternatives, but deconstructing the dynamics of hostage situations and identifying possible bargaining tactics for obtaining the safe release of hostages required more-detailed case studies.

We embarked on a series of case studies of hostage situations, including U.S. and foreign officials who had been held hostage by terrorists.<sup>7</sup> The studies, which became the most-detailed accounts of these cases, were fashioned around published media accounts, reconstructions of embassy and other cable traffic, and extensive interviews with U.S. and other government officials who participated in the episodes, with officials of other governments, where possible, and, in many cases, with the hostages themselves.

The case studies followed a common format. Each discussed the political context in which the kidnappings or hostages seizures occurred, the local government's existing policies regarding hostage situations, developments within the government during the episode, the bargaining tactics employed, proposals and demands made and deadlines set by the parties, the disposition and activities of the local security forces, the terrorists' perceptions of the events, the means of communication, the use and role of public information and news media, the experiences of the hostages,

and the outcome and aftermath of the episode. Each study included an analysis of the episode's policy implications.

The results of this research appeared in a series of briefings and published reports. Examples that received the most notice were Margaret Krahenbuhl's *Political Kidnappings in Turkey, 1971–1972* (Krahenbuhl, 1977), David Ronfeldt's *The Mitrione Kidnapping in Uruguay* (Ronfeldt, 1987),<sup>8</sup> and Eleanor Wainstein's *The Cross and Laporte Kidnappings, Montreal, October 1970* (Wainstein, 1977).

The case studies enabled us to provide overview observations and policy recommendations in reports and briefings. A general discussion of the hostages' experiences appeared in Brian Michael Jenkins's *Hostage Survival: Some Preliminary Observations* (Jenkins, 1976).

Our findings were then rolled into a major report about all our work on international terrorism up to then (1981): Gail Bass, Brian M. Jenkins, Konrad Kellen, and David Ronfeldt's *Options for U.S. Policy on Terrorism* (Bass, Jenkins, Kellen, and Ronfeldt, 1981). It reflected the findings and recommendations we had derived from both the chronology of incidents and the case studies of hostage situations.

## Additional RAND Databases in This Phase

As research advanced into other areas, RAND added more-specialized databases to supplement the original two. One in particular extended from RAND research on terrorist incidents: In the late 1970s, the U.S. Department of Energy asked RAND for assistance in postulating the kinds of threats, in the form of incidents, that the department could use to design and assess measures to protect U.S. nuclear programs from terrorism (DeLeon et al., 1978). The

request, which came through Sandia National Laboratories, reflected two sets of security concerns:

- One resulted from growing antinuclear protests at U.S. nuclear facilities involved in nuclear weapon fabrication. Officials feared that more-determined opponents of nuclear programs might break through barriers and other security systems to penetrate sensitive areas.
- The second concern reflected fears that terrorists might attempt to go nuclear—that is, steal nuclear weapons or fissile or other nuclear material to fabricate a crude nuclear bomb or dispersal device.

There was (fortunately for the world at large) no rich history of attacks on nuclear facilities to develop a database specifically about what kinds of adversaries engage nuclear targets, what attributes they possess, and what tactics they use. So we created a database of analogous events: non-nuclear incidents of industrial sabotage, high-value criminal heists, terrorist bombings and assaults, and wartime commando raids. The various arrays of adversaries and attack modes found in these nonnuclear events allowed us to explore likely (and unlikely) combinations of capabilities for which security offices should prepare (deLeon et al., 1978). We also examined the kinds of ideological, economic, and personal motivations that might lead to attacks. Findings were detailed in *Motivations and Possible Actions of Potential Criminal Adversaries of U.S. Nuclear Programs* (Bass, Jenkins, Kellen, Krofcheck, et al., 1980).

Later in the 1980s and 1990s, following government research requests, we also constructed separate chronologies for incidents involving chemical or biological weapons, plus a separate chronology of terrorism incidents in the

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United States. The resulting reports warned that, among other possibilities, threats from U.S. domestic right-wing groups might emerge.<sup>9</sup>

Although the work on nuclear terrorism began during the first decade of RAND research, it did not quite fit that phase, for it was not exactly about international terrorism. Nonetheless, this new topic, and the development of its specialized database, showed that RAND's foundational efforts were beginning to attract requests for additional research on new topics. Moreover, the work on nuclear terrorism delved, more systematically than any prior RAND terrorism research, into terrorists' evident ideological, economic, and political motivations, laying the groundwork for further work on this topic in later phases. New kinds of databases would have to be constructed to include more than the tactics and targets that had defined international-terrorism research during the 1970s.

### **Bringing the Databases into the Computer Age**

The growth of terrorism as a phenomenon occurred just as the digital information age began to emerge, bringing significant advances in computer technology. RAND's terrorism research program did not have the resources to support the infrastructure or expertise required to vault its efforts into the computer age. Nonetheless, it benefited from having access elsewhere in RAND to researchers who were on the cutting edge of information technology (IT). Fortunately, they became interested in using the terrorism chronology as a test bed for applying computerization to social science projects aimed at addressing practical policy problems.

In particular, RAND's information science researchers wanted to see how computerized heuristic modeling techniques could be applied to the analysis of terrorist events. At the time, 50 years ago, this was a highly experimental and advanced undertaking (Bowie, 2012, p. 17) and turned out to be "one of the earliest examples of the application

of computing to terrorism research” (Bowie, 2012, p. 20). Although the experiment pointed the way for more-sophisticated approaches to analysis that would come in the future, its immediate effect was to sharpen the skills of analyst-users when interacting with the prompts provided by the machines (Waterman and Jenkins, 1977).

William Fowler joined the terrorism research team at the end of the 1970s and took the lead in studying how computerization could further advance terrorism analysis. In 1980, his *An Agenda for Quantitative Research on Terrorism* (Fowler, 1980) showed how numeric databases could support the application of quantitative methods to terrorism analysis. Computerization not only facilitated the retrieval of data but could also enable the terrorism research team “to model or manipulate the data to form an empirical foundation for further quantitative research” (Bowie, 2012, pp. 24–25). This became a hallmark of RAND research in the field of terrorism.

Terrorism research further benefited from RAND’s development of the Concept Organization and Development Aid (CODA), which was sponsored by the Air Force. CODA provided a data storage and retrieval system aimed at the specific needs of an individual researcher or small group of researchers (Dewar and Gillogly, 1984). CODA was adapted for the terrorism database in the early 1980s.

## Foundational Points for Policy and Strategy

Looking back, we can see that compiling a chronology of incidents as a database, even before the case studies were done, enabled us to provide valuable empirical observations and implications to policymakers, at a time when most terrorism discussions were fraught with political biases and

polemics. Among our more-notable early findings were the following:

- Terrorism—specifically, the terrorist tactics of seizing hostages for bargaining or publicity purposes—is far from being irrational, mindless, ineffective, or necessarily perilous.
- Terrorist hostage-takers tend to be deliberately calculating about the likely benefits, costs, and risks of different tactics (for example, whether to seize hostages for a barricade situation or to kidnap and take them into hiding).
- Many terrorists seemed satisfied with the extravagant public attention they could amass from hostage-taking, making it difficult to tell whether they were more interested in concessions to specific demands or in public recognition and front-page publicity.
- It was unclear whether a U.S. no-concession policy had much effect on the choice of U.S. officials as targets. (This became a particularly contentious RAND finding because the United States had, in March 1973, adopted a “no-negotiation, no-concession” policy in dealing with the abduction of U.S. officials abroad. We did not argue that such a policy was wrong—simply that there was little empirical evidence to support the assumptions on which the policy was based.)

The findings in this early phase endured as RAND research moved into later phases. We use the term *phases* with caution, however. There was clearly a foundational phase, but there was no clear defining line between it and subsequent “phases.”

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Next came a period, starting sometime in the 1980s, when terrorism itself morphed into a more dangerous, widespread, and sophisticated threat, organizationally as well as technologically. It was still focused primarily on geopolitical matters, but it was also starting to operate more in terms of ideological, cultural, religious, and other ideational concerns. This meant that policymakers and strategists would soon need to reconsider the definition of *terrorism* once again.

RAND's adaptations to this changing environment for terrorism research are addressed in the next section.

## **Later Databases and Design Challenges (1980s and Onward)**

The foundational phase of RAND research was characterized by a specific kind of threat: international terrorism. Terrorist groups at the time were mostly small and separate from each other, operating with limited resources, and pursuing agendas that were mostly about each one's particular country and government. Furthermore, the policy

environments in Washington and other capitols around the world generally prioritized geopolitical concerns in which international terrorism figured to a degree, but not nearly as much as Cold War matters.

That remained pretty much the case into the 1980s. Yet it was all going to change, although some of the changes were not until the 1990s.

In general, several terrorist groups grew larger and became more formally organized—even militarized. Some spread to other countries around the world. They interconnected more, quickly learning to use the new digital information and communication technologies showing up on the world's market. They started operating more like peer-to-peer networks than like hierarchical ones (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001). They increasingly wanted their actions to create ideational “soft power,” as well as geopolitical “hard power,” effects. Terrorism escalated as some groups became more violent, especially in Middle East areas where Hezbollah and later al Qaeda and the self-styled Islamic State (IS) operated.

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In the 1970s, RAND terrorism research focused on incidents but then evolved to focus on terrorist groups, then on those who made up those groups, and finally on the mindsets of those people.

All this meant that governments had to face up to far more–dangerous threats to security. The primary concern of the United States in the early years of international terrorism was the spillover of terrorist tactics into the international domain. Americans were victims by happenstance or targeted because foreign groups sought to increase their leverage over local governments by kidnapping U.S. officials. However, later in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, political extremists and fanatics inspired by ideologies based on religion increasingly defined the United States as their principal foe. This required looking at hostile and potentially hostile groups that would attack the United States directly.

The seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979, the bombings of the U.S. embassy and U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut and later Kuwait in the early 1980s, the

sabotage of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988, and the massive bombings of American targets in Saudi Arabia and Africa in the 1990s were manifestations of this new development. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh, the 9/11 attacks in 2001, and actions by homegrown jihadists in the 2000s underscored the fact that devastating attacks could also occur in the U.S. homeland.

These events obliged RAND to expand its databases beyond their original primary focus on incidents. Over time, from the 1970s onward, RAND terrorism research has evolved from being concerned initially with terrorists' actions (i.e., incidents), then with the types of groups that committed those actions, then with the attributes of people who made up those groups, and then with the nature of the mindsets that motivated and characterized those people. In a sense, RAND terrorism research began with a focus on “hard” matters (i.e., physical acts) and then added ever “softer” matters for analysis—the softest being the attributes of mindsets.

Each phase in that progression required a different kind of database and a more sophisticated analytical ability to use each individually, yet also to use them together (especially as the databases became computerized). Each step also required adjustments to the definition of *terrorism* that we used, not in a fundamental epistemological sense but in an operational sense.

Meanwhile, it should be noted, RAND itself was increasingly operating in a changing research environment, both nationally and internationally. Just as terrorism was proliferating, so were the number and variety of research efforts, programs, and databases, at home and abroad. This would afford RAND access to new expertise and new partnerships. But it would also prompt occasional

outside criticisms of one aspect or another of the definitions and databases we developed.

## Databases About Group Attributes Added in the 1980s

The RAND chronology might have been the first, but it certainly was not the only database on terrorism. Indeed, many databases were initiated in the 1970s, inside and outside government. Their criteria for inclusion varied according to their purpose. Although the RAND database focused on attacks that had an international component, other databases included all events, not just international ones; still others focused on specific target categories—such as attacks on diplomatic targets or attacks on U.S. citizens. Almost all of these early databases were incident-based.

At the time, U.S intelligence efforts remained focused primarily on Cold War issues. When it came to terrorism, the government was not so concerned about compiling information on foreign terrorist groups in general, although certain groups were of particular interest to the intelligence community because they posed a specific threat to U.S. citizens or interests. But from Washington's perspective, dealing with terrorist groups was the responsibility of foreign governments. That began to change in the 1980s.

The kidnapping of BG James Dozier, an American general assigned to a North Atlantic Treaty Organization installation in Italy, was a turning point. In 1981, Dozier was abducted by Italy's Red Brigades, a group that had already kidnapped, killed, or, in many cases, "kneecapped" Italian government officials and corporate executives. Its

most spectacular attack was the kidnapping and murder of a former Italian prime minister in 1978.

The Red Brigades, however, rarely attacked foreign targets, and, as a result, the chronologies maintained by U.S. government agencies contained only a handful of entries on the group.<sup>10</sup> It is important to remember that this was the height of the Cold War, and the primary focus of U.S. intelligence agencies was still the Soviet threat. Collection of information on local terrorist groups was far down on the list of intelligence priorities.

General Dozier's kidnapping propelled an effort to assemble more information about the terrorist group, its leadership, and its modus operandi. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) asked RAND to quickly prepare a primer on the Red Brigades (Jenkins, 2008). Dozier was ultimately rescued by Italian commandos 42 days after his capture, but the incident pointed to the need for new databases and analyses of terrorist organizations, not just terrorist events.

To address the need for more-comprehensive information, the CIA created the Office of Global Issues in 1982 to examine international developments beyond Cold War matters, including terrorism. Subsequently, RAND was asked to develop an analytical framework for studying the characteristics of terrorist groups and to illustrate how that framework could be used to address broad questions about terrorists and their actions.

The team's report—*A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Terrorist Groups* (Cordes, Jenkins, and Kellen, 1985)—examined 29 terrorist groups, according to 150 key attributes that were sorted into ten major categories:

- organization
- leadership

- demography
- ideology, doctrine, and goals
- psychology, mindset, and decisionmaking
- funding and logistics
- operations and modus operandi
- communications
- external relations
- environment and government response.

Fortunately, IT had advanced significantly since RAND began its chronology on terrorist incidents in 1972. We were thus able to codify the data according to 281 specific computer-searchable attributes.

The purpose of this endeavor was to see how such a database might be constructed and used for analysis. Preliminary testing, which took the form of a series of case studies of individual groups, showed that it offered promise for comparing terrorist groups with each other and for assessing probabilities that a specific group might be more or less prone to perpetrating a particular kind of attack against an American target.

## Databases Added About Individual Attributes

Application of the term *terrorist* presumes an understanding of the perpetrator's motive. People are complicated. As Jenkins and Johnson noted in 1975, "The borderline separating political motives from highly personal motives and purely criminal motives is not always clear" (Jenkins and

Johnson, 1975, p. 11). This is often still the case. Accordingly, in compiling the original incident chronology, we

tried to exclude those incidents where the motives were clearly personal profit, such as a hijacking in which the sole demands were cash ransom and a means of escape. Where all of the details of an incident were not known, it was included if it had the earmarks of an international terrorist incident. (Jenkins and Johnson, 1975, p. 11)

Even though there had always been some government interest in the "root causes" of terrorism (e.g., whether poverty or oppression gave rise to terrorist campaigns), the motivations of individual terrorists simply were not relevant to U.S. counterterrorism policies until the early 21st century. Although we wrote about terrorist motivations in the 1970s and 1980s, we did not systematically collect data on individual leaders or members of terrorist organizations (Kellen, 1979; Kellen, 1982). Indeed, doing so then probably would have been viewed by many in the United States as an inappropriate line of inquiry.

Elsewhere, research conditions were more amenable, especially in nations where governments confronted domestic terrorism campaigns. Why, for example, were western European countries, with democratic governments, advanced economies, and well-developed social security nets, plagued by terrorists, especially when eastern European countries had (and still have) almost no local terrorist threats? Did the answer lie in Europe's history? Was a proclivity toward extreme violence a reflection of ideological conviction, a particular personality type, or a form of mental disorder?

The government of Germany collected detailed information on members of the Red Army Faction to produce

a detailed four-volume study of their backgrounds and psychological profiles (Jäger, Schmidtchen, and Süllwold, 1981). Franco Ferracuti, a noted Italian psychiatrist and criminologist, compared the psychological profiles of left- and right-wing terrorists in Italy (Ferracuti and Bruno, 1985). Research later carried out by Ariel Merari in Israel examined in detail the backgrounds and psychological profiles of suicide bombers (Merari, 2010), and later, with Boaz Ganor, of individual assailants (Merari and Ganor, 2020).

The United States certainly was not immune to domestic terrorism. The decade of the 1970s saw terrorist (primarily, bombing) campaigns by an array of groups propelled by New Left and anti-Vietnam War sentiments—notably, the Weather Underground, the Red Guerrilla Family, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and the New World Liberation Front. Continuing racial tensions were reflected in the terrorist campaigns of such groups as the Black Liberation Army and the George Jackson Brigade. The Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party continued to carry out killings in the name of white supremacy.

Anti-Castro Cuban émigré groups, such as El Poder Cubano and Omega 7, carried out bombings targeting countries and corporations doing business with Cuba. The Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional waged an intensive bombing campaign for independence for Puerto Rico. The Jewish Defense League and the Jewish Armed Resistance bombed Soviet diplomatic targets and businesses connected with the Soviet Union.

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Then the 9/11 attacks fundamentally changed U.S. outlooks and policy concerns. Although al Qaeda was a foreign terrorist organization, the 9/11 operatives had entered and lived under cover in the United States for months before the attack.

The mass roundup and illegal detention of suspected al Qaeda infiltrators and accomplices immediately after 9/11 was an overreaction and uncovered no terrorists. But the possibility of infiltration by al Qaeda operatives from abroad, as well as the possible existence of a jihadist underground in the United States, increased efforts to identify would-be terrorists before they could carry out attacks. This led to increased coordination of U.S. intelligence activities, manifested by the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center and interagency pooling of data about terrorists' identities. Names and information about them

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# Preventive programs required some knowledge about the process of radicalization and, if possible, the ability to identify those who might be on the path.

were shared in a central repository, the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment; this was an intelligence community program, not a policy research database.

Al Qaeda's later efforts to actively inspire so-called homegrown jihadists and remotely recruit them to carry out acts of terrorism in the United States raised new policy concerns. Under intense public and political pressure to intervene before terrorists could assemble their forces and commit violent acts, U.S. authorities pushed upstream, asking whether they could intervene in order to stem radicalization and recruitment (increasingly self-recruitment) even before they engaged in terrorist plots.

Countries in Asia and the Middle East were already crafting programs for not only deradicalizing apprehended terrorists but also preventing individuals from radicalizing in the first place. These programs spread to Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States in the 2010s. The notion that potential terrorists—"persons of concern"—could be identified and dissuaded from following a destructive (and self-destructive) path had great appeal. It was an attractive alternative to apprehension and incarceration.

Preventive programs required some knowledge about the process of radicalization and, if possible, the ability to identify those who might be on the path. Could research discern patterns of radicalization and recruitment to ter-

rorism? Could it identify indicators of radicalization, or even people who were most likely to be recruited to violence? How could the effectiveness of preventive programs be measured? What should be the metrics? These became topics of intensive research in the 2010s as al Qaeda and IS, which emerged after 2012 from the Syrian Civil War as al Qaeda's rival, both sought to remotely recruit followers and inspire homegrown terrorist attacks.

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University developed a database of Americans who traveled abroad to join IS (Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, 2018). We produced several reports examining the individual characteristics and collective demographic profile of homegrown jihadist plotters and travelers (Jenkins, 2017; Jenkins, 2020a; Williams, Chandler, and Robinson, 2018). The Center for a New American Security, Peter Bergen and his colleagues at New America, and Charles Kurzman at the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security have also compiled databases containing background information on American jihadists (Bergen and Sterman, 2021; Kurzman, 2021). Like the RAND database of homegrown jihadists, most of the individual-based databases include demographic data. Information about motivation remains anecdotal except where researchers have had the opportunity to systematically interview sub-

jects and even persuade them to participate in standardized psychological tests. Generally, this has not happened in the United States.

## Discussions (but Not Databases) About Mindsets

Team members were always aware that the nature and attributes of terrorist mindsets mattered and would be worthy of separate research and analysis. And the areas we wanted to explore would have required new databases. But we never had the opportunity to make a separate concerted effort to do so on this topic.

Nonetheless, several RAND publications and one event are noteworthy regarding our interests in mindset analysis. Brian Jenkins called early attention to the topic's significance in his paper *The Terrorist Mindset and Terrorist Decisionmaking: Two Areas of Ignorance* (Jenkins, 1979). He urged further research, in part because “we cannot say with confidence that we have penetrated the terrorist's mind” (p. 1). David Ronfeldt and William Sater, drawing from historical data about dynamite terrorism a century earlier, produced a report titled *The Mindsets of High-Technology Terrorists: Future Implications from a Historical Analog* (Ronfeldt and Sater, 1981). In addition to identifying types of mentalities that might be attracted to high-technology weaponry, the authors warned that “[t]he most dangerous mindset would probably emphasize a combination of vengeful punishment and millennial destruction” (p. vi)—a warning pertinent today.

In 1980, RAND hosted the International Conference on Terrorism and Low-Level Conflict, with invitees from around the world (Jenkins, 1982). Its “Session 2: Terror-

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“The most dangerous mindset would probably emphasize a combination of vengeful punishment and millennial destruction.”

ist Mindsets and Their Implications” substantiated that new research was advisable but also cautioned that it could prove analytically and methodologically sticky to accomplish, partly because of the lack of advanced models for mindset analysis. The session's summary, written by Konrad Kellen and David Ronfeldt, concluded rather cagily that, “in the end, the mindsets of the sympathizing audience and the government officials who must respond to the terrorist threat may be equally significant for the course and conduct of terrorism” (Jenkins, 1982, p. 68)—yet another point from past RAND analyses that might apply today.

The conceptual framework we proposed in 1985 for analyzing terrorist groups included a category for attributes about “psychology, mindset, and decisionmaking” (Cordes, Jenkins, and Kellen, 1985), as noted earlier—but without much elaboration. Later RAND publications would also discuss mindset matters, especially in regard to al Qaeda's and IS's behaviors in the Middle East and elsewhere in the 1990s and 2000s. But these discussions still remained

embedded within the frameworks for the databases about groups and individuals.

Looking ahead, we sense that mindsets are reemerging as a topic for database construction, research, and analysis. Research projects at RAND and elsewhere have made considerable progress on this topic,<sup>11</sup> but, in our view, data-backed research and analysis are still insufficient, as is an analytical framework, for advancing this area of inquiry.<sup>12</sup>

### Updating RAND's Definition of *Terrorism*

Against this background—the progression in RAND database development from incidents to groups to individuals and prospectively to mindsets—the operational definition that RAND research used went through some modifications. Throughout, we knew that terrorism in general depended on creating fear and alarm. But, as discussed earlier, we also knew that international terrorism was a much narrower phenomenon—database entries for RAND's earliest chronology of incidents were subject to a definition that was strictly about the nature and circumstances of the terrorist attack.

Although this definitional stance has endured as RAND research progressed through the phases noted earlier, it has added new kinds of databases along the way. We also refined and clarified the operational scope of our definition somewhat. Accordingly, Karen Gardela and Bruce Hoffman's write-up for *The RAND Chronology of International Terrorism for 1986* (Gardela and Hoffman, 1990) defined *terrorism* as follows:

In Rand's continuing research on this subject, *terrorism* is defined by the nature of the act, not by the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of the

cause. Terrorism is violence, or the threat of violence, calculated to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm. These acts are designed to coerce others into actions they would otherwise not undertake or refrain from taking actions they desired to take. All terrorist attacks are crimes. Many would also be violations of the rules of war, if a state of war existed. This violence or threat of violence is generally directed against civilian targets. The motives of all terrorists are political, and terrorist actions are generally carried out in a way that will achieve maximum publicity. The perpetrators are members of an organized group, and unlike other criminals, they often claim credit for their acts. Finally, terrorist acts are intended to produce effects beyond the immediate physical damage they cause: long-term psychological repercussions on a particular target audience. (Gardela and Hoffman, 1990, p. 1)

As for specifically international terrorism, its definition then read as follows:

This study of trends in terrorism is concerned with international terrorism, defined here as incidents in which terrorists go abroad to strike their targets, select victims or targets that have connections with a foreign state (e.g., diplomats, foreign businessmen, offices of foreign corporations), or create international incidents by attacking airline passengers, personnel, and equipment. It excludes violence carried out by terrorists within their own country against their own nationals, and terrorism perpetrated by governments against their own citizens. (Gardela and Hoffman, 1990, p. 1)

This is essentially the definition that RAND terrorism research continues to use today.

## Looking Back: Achievements, Challenges, Limitations, and Criticisms

A 1983 analysis of terrorism literature described the RAND chronology of international terrorism as “one of the most analyzed databases” (Reid, 1983), while another review of the early period in terrorism research noted that “[t]he RAND Chronology developed by Brian M. Jenkins and his associates has been the prototype for most other chronologies of incidents” (Schmid and Jongman, 1984, p. 252).

These observations were gratifying, but, in our view, the biggest benefit of the chronology was that it enabled us to conduct policy-relevant research supported by the weight of empirical evidence. It helped move policy debates out of the realm of purely political posturing.

Discussions with Department of State officials, along with their continued encouragement of the research, indicated that they viewed RAND’s efforts to define the domain of international terrorism as helpful in their efforts to build the consensus that was a prerequisite to international cooperation. Without accepting the parameters of our definition, officials in other nations were

interested consumers of the research that derived from the chronology.

Ultimately, and partly because of influences stemming from RAND research, international cooperation was achieved not on the basis of a universally agreed-on definition, but on defining specific tactics and targets sets on which agreement could be gained. For example, although they differed on the definition of *terrorism*, the nations of the world could agree that hijackings and sabotage of commercial airliners had to be discouraged. And not surprisingly, the world’s diplomats could agree that diplomats were not legitimate targets. Little by little, a slice at a time, the continued diplomatic effort gradually created a corpus of international conventions that covered most of what terrorists did. Subsequently, the United Nations was able to denounce terrorism and engage in internationally supported efforts by referring to the body of existing conventions as a definition.

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## Maintaining and Sustaining RAND's Database

Securing the funds necessary to keep the chronology up to date was a chronic problem. Government funding for research on terrorism in general tended to be episodic. U.S. government agencies sought research assistance in the wake of spectacular attacks that raised new concerns, but funds dried up when terrorism was out of the news. Unlike the Cold War, nuclear proliferation, or other top national-security issues, terrorism lacked long-term traction and tenure.

Thus, after RAND's initial startup, subsequent research projects were often narrowly defined with limited funds to address a specific topic. Agencies sought to benefit from the existence of RAND's database but without contributing to its long-term maintenance. RAND addressed this problem by "taxing" each project a small amount for its use of the database, but most of the necessary "bridge funding" to maintain the chronology between projects came from RAND's own funds.

Even within RAND, the terrorism research projects had to compete for not only funds but also computer space as the chronology was computerized. (This was back in an earlier period when storage space on computers was extremely limited and therefore a precious commodity.) According to Karen Treverton, who was then in charge of the databases, the growing terrorism database had the highest costs for storage of any data set on the RAND server. To solve the problem, we had to persuade RAND's skeptical IT department to acquire a Sun Microsystems stand-alone server/computer system (a high-end piece of hardware at the time). Our backers in IT intervened,

explaining that the CODA software they had developed specifically for the terrorism database required a Sun—it made a critical difference in our ability to pull statistics. Once the new system was in place, we started receiving so many requests for information from government agencies that RAND considered the idea of charging a fee to fulfill their requests.<sup>13</sup>

Internal RAND support could go only so far. RAND sought, in the long run, to save the chronology by combining forces with the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews in Scotland and later with the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism in Oklahoma City, a non-profit organization supported by federal grants after the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. In 2009, RAND resumed responsibility for the chronology, renaming it the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents. The return of the database to RAND was accompanied by a description of its contents, including how the information was coded—in a sense, the outline of a user's guide, although it did not specify how coding decisions were made. RAND maintained the database until 2009.

The funding issue was not unique to RAND. Funding uncertainty inhibits long-term data-collection efforts, which means that new research projects often begin anew, leaving behind valuable history in abandoned databases.

## Maintaining Consistency

Maintaining consistency in data collection is always challenging. Narrative accounts allow analysts to describe individual events, employing the full vocabulary of the language. In contrast, databases require precise boundar-

ies for inclusion and categorization. As RAND's William Fowler pointed out, "The problem is one of balancing the desire to be comprehensive with the necessity for rigor and relevance of the data" (Fowler, 1981, pp. 19–20). There is always tension between striving for analytical rigor and not wanting to become mired in punctilious purism or exclude potentially useful information or outlier events that could become trends. Databases used for basic research strive for rigorous definitions consistently applied. Databases used for making intelligence estimates or for examining broader policy questions might not want to dismiss data that lie at the edge or outside the selection criteria.

We dealt with this issue in a variety of ways. One was to create new databases to explore different domains without cluttering up the international-terrorism chronology. Over time, the adjudication process—always a collective effort—became more formalized. From the beginning, we informed readers that the chronology included some cases that looked like terrorism but for which the motives of the perpetrators were unclear and not necessarily political. But then we would set these problematic events aside when we focused on issues for which these cases might not be relevant to the research question.

When the computerized database was later made accessible to the public, the more-problematic events were excluded from the public version but remained in separate files at RAND. (RAND also maintained a hard file for every entry in the chronology, in which newspaper accounts and other print material, not easily computerized, were stored and updated as additional information became available.)

We strove for consistency, all the while realizing that this was more of a goal rather than something that could be

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Our efforts at consistency made the database “one of the most reliable sources on terrorist attacks.”

guaranteed. It made the database “one of the most reliable sources on terrorist attacks” (Dugan et al., 2008, p. 15).<sup>14</sup>

## Responding to Criticisms of RAND's Incident Chronology

Challenges invariably arise in any effort to create databases about complex phenomena, such as terrorism. Our definition of *international terrorism* meant that decisions to include or exclude an event were straightforward in perhaps 90 percent of the cases. Judgments were required in the remaining cases. Comparing RAND's chronology with other contemporary databases showed similar degrees of variation. The judgments were often informal, but not casually made. This leads us to one self-criticism: We did not document each such decision; in retrospect, we probably should have.

Limiting the chronology to international incidents made sense from a policy perspective, but the limited scope made it more perilous to support broader conclusions about terrorism in general. As noted in the foreword to

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Our chronology was explicitly limited to international incidents and therefore omitted government actions directed at their own populations and carried out in their own countries. Where governments sent assassins or carried out abductions abroad, they were included in the RAND database.

Lesser et al., *Countering the New Terrorism* (Lesser et al., 1999),

One has to remember that international terrorist incidents constitute only a narrowly defined component of all terrorist incidents, which in some cases comprised all of the political violence taking place in a country . . . but in other cases comprised only a small component of a much larger conflict. In civil war situations, like that in Lebanon [in the 1970s and 1980s], separating incidents of terrorism from the background of violence and bloodshed was both futile and meaningless. Measuring the volume of international terrorism—the thickness of a thin crust atop a very deep pie—would tell us little about the root causes of terrorism or the nature of societies that produce terrorism. (Jenkins, 1999, p. vii)

Identifying and isolating incidents of terrorism in conflict zones, where there are high levels of ongoing violence, remained a challenge. Was it relevant to measure terror-

ism in the middle of a war? The concern is not simply that some incidents might be missed in the fog of war. It is also that high levels of terrorism during some armed conflicts could dramatically increase the number of incidents and overwhelm all other statistics in the database, thereby distorting conclusions.

Some outsiders criticized the RAND chronology of international terrorism as ideologically biased because it did not include incidents of state terrorism or government terror (e.g., disappearances, murders by death squads, or torture of prisoners that sought to eliminate or intimidate opponents of a government). This clearly was not our intention. As stated in a discussion of definitional problems, “Governments, their armies, their secret police may also be terrorists. Certainly, the threat of torture is a form of terrorism designed to inspire dread of the regime and obedience to authorities” (Jenkins, 1980b, p. 3).

As we pointed out in a 1980 report, there were few incidents of state terror in our chronology, not because it was

“considered less heinous, but because such terrorism tends to be internal rather than international” (Jenkins, 1980b, p. 3). Our chronology was explicitly limited to international incidents and therefore omitted government actions (as well as those committed by nongovernment groups) that were directed at their own populations and carried out in their own countries. Where governments sent assassins or carried out abductions abroad, they were included in the RAND database.<sup>15</sup>

There were also outside criticisms that our chronology was biased against far-left groups. The perceived “bias,” however, was simply a reflection of the fact that most of the groups responsible for the actions in Latin America and Europe in the late 1960s and 1970s were carried out by groups that subscribed to a variety of Marxist ideologies.<sup>16</sup> The chronology did, in fact, include international incidents involving far-right extremist groups; there simply were fewer of them operating internationally at the time. Events were the focus. We did not include or exclude events based on ideology. Ideological assessments are precisely what we were trying to avoid. Moreover, later RAND research did indeed attend to far-right extremism.

In terms of completeness, we never had illusions that RAND research was capturing all the incidents that occurred, although we were confident that the chronology included all the *major* events. We were aware of the likelihood that the volume of incidents would increase over time as collection efforts improved, largely owing to increased reporting and advances in IT.

This created a different methodological challenge: how to separate actual growth in the number of incidents from apparent growth resulting from improved reporting. To do so, we would compare the trajectory of overall growth

in the number of incidents with the trajectory of growth in the number of incidents that caused fatalities. Improved reporting might catch lower-level incidents, but it was unlikely that larger-scale incidents with multiple fatalities would have been missed in earlier collection efforts. Events with fatalities or multiple fatalities would be less affected by improved reporting. Not only did the comparisons confirm that terrorism actually was increasing in volume; the increased number of incidents with multiple fatalities indicated that terrorists were also escalating their violence.

The worst incidents of terrorism in the 1970s caused in the tens of fatalities. In the 1980s, this ascended to the hundreds of fatalities. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 brought it to the thousands of fatalities. However, instead of ascending another order of magnitude to the tens of thousands, as many in the dark shadow of 9/11 anticipated, the deadliest events in the 2000s and 2010s reverted to pre-9/11 levels.

## Frequent Pressures to Push Definitional Boundaries

So long as the term *terrorism* carries moral weight and emotive power, pressures can arise to push definitional boundaries for political purposes. In our case, such pressures did sometimes appear, not so much as specific criticisms of our chronology or other terrorism databases but rather as attempts to alter our definition. Some countries argued that our database should include all terrorist attacks as defined by their governments. Doing so would have required RAND to broaden its definition of *terrorism* to encompass any act of violence carried out by foes of a particular government. In contrast, other countries wanted to be perceived as peaceable kingdoms, without internal dis-

sidence, and objected to actions within their borders being described as terrorism. RAND held fast against both kinds of politicized effort to alter the definition we used.

As databases proliferated elsewhere over the years, RAND aimed to keep control over the data it used to support its research. Accordingly, the organization kept maintaining its own chronology in spite of the creation of government databases dealing with terrorism. Unlike government databases, some of which were understandably unavailable to the public, the RAND chronology was transparent and accessible. Besides, we were aware of pressures from international diplomacy and domestic politics to influence government statistics, and we wanted to keep independent control over our data. An issue of concern was the government's habit of reclassifying past incidents or extending the definition (e.g., "break-in theft"), thereby expanding the database.<sup>17</sup>

For example, a controversy arose in 1981 when it was reported that the statistics on terrorism reported by the U.S. government would be expanded to include terrorism threats, in addition to actual acts of violence. This applied exclusively to U.S. government databases, not the RAND chronology—for a variety of reasons, we did not include prospective threats. In particular, we knew how seemingly minor changes in criteria can have significant effects.

Although a threat of violence fits within the definition of *terrorism*, threats themselves are slippery to assess and therefore hard to count: If authorities raiding a terrorist hideout discover dozens of scenarios for possible terrorist attacks, is each of these a distinct threat? Or must threats be communicated, and to whom? How is their credibility to be judged? Bomb threats—by terrorists and terrorist pretenders—are a common occurrence. Should each be

counted as a terrorist incident? The fact that a threat is voiced does not mean that it qualifies for inclusion in a RAND database about incidents.

Indeed, Ambassador Anthony Quainton, director of the Department of State's Office for Combatting Terrorism from 1978 to 1981, observed that including threats in terrorism databases "would approximately double the number of terrorist incidents counted by the United States in the last 12 years" (Pluchinsky, 2020, pp. xxxii–xxxiii). A *New York Times* article discussing the potential inclusion of threats noted that Democrats in Congress feared that this proposal was motivated by the Reagan administration's desire to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy (Mohr, 1981). As one critic of this shift put it, CIA analysts were being pushed to expand the definition of *terrorism* to include "all acts of violence intended to impact a wider audience" (Pluchinsky, 2020, p. xxxiii).

Today, political pressures to expand or delimit the concept of terrorism might be about to rise anew as one domestic political actor or another aims to designate this or that far-right or far-left extremist group as terrorist.

## Looking Ahead: Lessons Learned and Their Future Implications

The global phenomenon of terrorism continues. Tracking it will require continual collection efforts aimed at identifying new trends and tactics and learning how best to counter them. Homegrown jihadists still pose a threat; therefore, databases to support preventive and deradicalization programs will have to continue. At the same time, growing concern in both North America and Europe about threats posed by domestic violent extremists is raising new

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policy issues, which, in turn, will require the creation of new databases. This informal history of RAND's work illuminates some lessons learned and cautionary implications for building databases to support government (and other) policy needs in this ever-evolving environment:

- The content and structure of databases reflect policy concerns prevailing at the time of their initiation. If and as circumstances and policy concerns change over the life of a database, modifying it to reflect the new concerns might be necessary. This, in turn, could give rise to difficult questions about how much of the data requires modification while continuing to maintain valid statistics that allow comparisons with the past.
- Criticisms of omissions or biases in a database could reflect the fact that, over time, the original reason for the database has been forgotten, leaving subsequent users in the dark about why certain cases or contents were included or excluded or, alternatively, leading them to misunderstand results in light of new concerns. User guides that document the original purpose of a database and decision criteria are essential to prepare.
- Databases reflect data-collection capabilities at the time. Improvements in collection capabilities due to technological advances or higher levels of interest, especially incident-based databases for which the data source is the news media, could raise questions about whether a phenomenon is actually increasing or whether an apparent increase reflects enhanced collection capabilities or the amount of attention being paid to the problem.
- To meet new policy concerns, new databases will be required in many cases. This, in turn, will require defining the phenomenon of concern. Analysts will have to be wary of actors inside and outside government who might seek to alter or broaden a definition in efforts to advance their own particular agendas. Even slight changes in criteria can create the appearance of dramatic growth. Achieving a common understanding of the definition of *terrorism* was always difficult; it remains so, especially where views of what should be counted as terrorism shift or remain contested over time (Smart and Schell, 2021).

- Although protecting certain information is essential, government databases should strive for as much transparency as possible. In the past, government officials have made broad—and occasionally misleading—claims based on inaccessible data. Statistics and other data derived from opaque sources lack credibility and provoke suspicion.
- Past RAND terrorism research ran the gamut from focusing first on the attributes of terrorist actions, then on the groups committing those actions, then on the individuals making up those groups, and later on the mindsets motivating those groups and individuals. It seems clear that terrorism analysts will have to continue attending to all these dimensions, perhaps especially to the nature of mindsets.

Terrorism research, like terrorism itself, continues to be a contentious area in which policy decisions—even those about the use of the term *terrorism*—are matters of intense debate. Attempts to define the phenomenon objectively and dampen the polemics have never entirely succeeded. In many respects, the increase—or, one should say, the resurgence—of ideologically driven domestic terrorism in the current politically polarized environment has only intensified the arguments. In some respects, the field seems to be back where it began, faced with real threats but unable to agree on how to legitimately address them. Yet, even as researchers must continue to heed the lessons learned from past efforts, they should also prepare to adapt to what could turn out to be a very different environment for strategy and policy in the years ahead.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Personal recollection of discussions between Brian Jenkins and officials at the Advanced Research Projects Agency and Department of State, November–December 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Personal recollection of discussions between Brian Jenkins and officials at the Advanced Research Projects Agency and Department of State, November–December 1972.

<sup>3</sup> See the preface to Krahenbuhl, 1977; see also Miller, 1976. However, Miller was incorrect in writing that the Department of State asked RAND to review U.S. hostage policy seven months after the March 1973 Khartoum incident. There was a growing debate in the Department of State over its policy, dating back to the kidnapping and subsequent murder of Dan Mitrione in Uruguay in July 1970. The kidnapping of the U.S. ambassador and consul general in Haiti in January 1973, shortly after RAND began its research on terrorism, added further urgency. By the time the U.S. ambassador and deputy chief of mission were held hostage and murdered in Sudan in March 1973, RAND's research on hostage situations had already begun.

<sup>4</sup> As a poignant aside, dim in our memories, we recall the nascent database being helpful in a court trial sometime in 1973 or 1974, when we had barely started compiling an incident chronology. Brian received a call from an attorney about an elderly woman who had been kidnapped by two amateur ransom-seekers. The woman was released and the kidnappers caught, and a trial ensued in which the kidnappers and their attorney alleged that the hostage was actually in on the whole thing—even helped plot it. Their so-called evidence—much to the consternation of the victim, her husband, and their attorney—was that she had been very nice, agreeable, and compliant during her brief captivity. By then, we had compiled a small number of incidents in which all hostages had “cooperated” with their captors, probably including the 1973 Stockholm syndrome incident that was barely known at the time, maybe also the 1973 Leonhardy kidnapping in Mexico. Brian could not go to testify and asked David to go, which he did after double-checking with not only Brian but also demographer-statistician Peter Morrison about how reliably our little database assured that hostages cooperating with captors was quite normal. Following Peter's confirmation, David flew back and assured the victim, her husband, and her lawyer about all this. He then testified in court while inadvertently shuffling bits

of paper that (he was later told) seemed to intimidate the kidnapers' lawyer from questioning his testimony. It helped convict them, to the immense relief and thankfulness of the victim and her husband. This was, of course, not an official RAND activity, but it was an early energizing success for our new undertaking, albeit just a footnote.

<sup>5</sup> RAND staff who worked on developing and analyzing the RAND chronologies, case studies, and other databases during the 1970s and 1980s included Brian Jenkins, first as project leader and later as program director; Gail Bass, Bonnie Cordes, Peter DeLeon, William Fowler, Karen Gardela, Bruce Hoffman, Janera Johnson, Mario Juncosa, Konrad Kellen, Margaret Krahenbuhl, Joseph Krofcheck, Marvin Lavin, Sue Ellen Moran, Joyce Peterson, Geraldine Petty, Susanna Purnell, Robert Reinstedt, Daniel Relles, David Ronfeldt, William Sater, Ralph Strauch, Peter Tripodes, Eleanor Wainstein, and Sorrel Wildhorn. Janet DeLand, and Bernadine Siuda also provided needed support. In retrospect, it might be noteworthy that the terrorism program and its projects evidently offered women more employment, research, and publication opportunities, as researchers and research assistants, than any other national-security program at RAND at the time (1970s and 1980s). We did not realize this at the time and were surprised when incidental thanks appeared subsequently.

<sup>6</sup> *Numbered Lives* garnered enough public interest that it became one of the more cited and reprinted writings from the terrorism project.

<sup>7</sup> Text in this section is drawn partly from the preface of Margaret Krahenbuhl's *Political Kidnappings in Turkey, 1971–1972* (Krahenbuhl, 1977). Also helpful was the preface of David Ronfeldt, *The Mitrione Kidnapping in Uruguay* (Ronfeldt, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> We do not know the extent to which these case studies might have served research elsewhere. But we do know that the Mitrione report, after being declassified and publicly released in 1987, and then posted on George Washington University's Digital National Security Archive website in 2010, proved useful as a source for Pablo Brum's *The Robin Hood Guerrillas: The Epic Journey of Uruguay's Tupamaros* (Brum, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> An early—and the best—example is Hoffman, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Personal recollection of discussions between Jenkins and officials in Washington, D.C., December 1981.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Atran, Sheikh, and Gomez, 2014; Brown et al., 2021; Disley et al., 2012; Gunaratna and Hussin, 2018; Kruglanski, Bélanger, and Gunaratna, 2019; Pape, 2006; and Sageman, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> For an approach to mindset analysis that would rest on analyzing people's space, time, and agency cognitions, see Ronfeldt, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Personal correspondence with Karen (Gardela) Treverton, one of the original members of RAND's terrorism research team, April 30, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> This report was prepared under a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice in 2008 by researchers from the University of Maryland and the RAND Corporation when the two institutes were collaborating to develop the Global Terrorism Database.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other organizations concerned with government abuse of human rights issue annual and country reports, which are based on data collection. It would be interesting to see how they handle data, but that assessment lies beyond the purview of this report.

<sup>16</sup> Urban guerrilla groups in Latin America were inspired by the Cuban Revolution and could be described as Marxist or Maoist, although some were Trotskyists or anarcho-syndicalists. Groups in Europe and Japan, such as the Red Army Faction in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre in Spain, and the Japanese Red Army, were Marxist-oriented. Even such groups as the Provisional Wing of the Irish Republican Army were Marxist. The Basque separatists Euskadi Ta Askatasuna in Spain adopted an increasingly Marxist outlook. Some of the Palestinian organizations were purely nationalist, while others were Marxists, as were most of the national liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the groups in the United States were products of so-called New Left and anti-Vietnam War sentiments.

<sup>17</sup> This is discussed in Reid, 1997.

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## About the Authors

**Brian Michael Jenkins** is a senior adviser to the president of the RAND Corporation. He has authored numerous books, reports, and articles on terrorism-related topics and conducts ongoing research on terrorism. He has an M.A. in history.

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## About This Perspective

Following release of its *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) asked the RAND Corporation to conduct an independent review of DHS needs and existing databases in order to identify possible gaps in data-collection and analysis efforts necessary to support the new strategy.

Because RAND researchers have been involved in the analysis of terrorism since the early 1970s and developed one of the first databases to address the phenomenon, we also looked at the history of our own data-collection efforts and how these evolved over the years in response to changing policy concerns. Initially, the focus was on international terrorist events—cases in which terrorists attacked foreign targets or carried out attacks abroad, creating international crises. As some foreign terrorist groups began to attack the United States and U.S. interests more directly in the 1980s, RAND researchers created new databases to support more-detailed analyses of terrorist groups. Remote radicalization and recruiting of homegrown terrorists in the early 2000s prompted increased research attention to the demographic attributes, mindsets, and motivations of terrorists as individuals.

A lesson to be drawn from this history is that, in order to understand the collection domain and analytical framework of terrorism databases that were initiated years ago, it is necessary to understand the policy imperatives at the time of their creation: Changing policy concerns create demands for new analytical frameworks and new databases. This review of RAND's own experience also shows how foreign sensitivities and domestic politics were sources of objections and pressures to distort or otherwise alter the definition of terrorism, include or omit certain events, or count them in different ways.

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