

'OLD' VS. 'NEW' TERRORISM IN FRANCE: ACTION DIRECTE AND ISLAMIC STATE A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States gave rise to an academic debate on "old" versus "new" terrorism. On one hand, proponents of "new" terrorism argue that the rise of this type of terrorism actively replaced the elements of "old" terrorism. On the other hand, skeptics view "new" terrorism simply as an evolutionary continuation of "old" terrorism. To explore the debate further, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of Action Directe (AD), a French far-left "old" terrorist group from the 1970s and 1980s, and the Islamic State (IS), a "new" Jihadi terrorist organization that has been executing terrorist activity across France since the 2010s. Applying Martha Crenshaw's (2008) framework, this paper compares the goals, means, and organizational structures of AD and IS taking into account the shared French context. The conclusions from the comparative analysis underline that, while an immense transformation of terrorism is undeniable, the rise of "new" terrorism is a radical extension of "old" terrorism rather than its replacement.

KEYWORDS: terrorism, France, comparative approach, Islamic State, Action Direct

INTRODUCTION

Broadly, the nuances of modern terrorist activity encompass four distinct waves. A "wave" of terrorism is a time-bound cycle of terrorist activity characterized by a common ideology (Rappoport, 2003). A series of transformative political events or phenomena create a prolific zeitgeist for a "wave" to emerge.

Since the late 1800s, terrorist activity has been driven by four core ideologies: Anarchist, Anti-Colonial, New Left, and Religious "Waves," respectively (ibid.). Arguably, religion, the fourth "wave" of modern terrorism, represents the birth of "new" terrorism (Simon and Benjamin, 2000: 59). The unprecedented terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 (9/11) in the United States displayed novel elements of terrorism that emerged during the 1990s (Gofas, 2012: 18). The ongoing debate vis-à-vis the conceptualizations of "old" and "new" terrorism is convoluted, making the conceptual definitions of "old" and "new" terrorism fluid. This debate reflects two pertinent schools of thought. On one hand, proponents of "new" terrorism argue that the rise of this type of terrorism actively replaced the elements of "old" terrorism. On the other hand, skeptics view "new" terrorism simply as an evolutionary continuation of "old" terrorism (Crenshaw, 2008: 117-119).

To explore the debate further, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of Action Directe (AD), a French far-left "old" terrorist group from the 1970s and 1980s, and the Islamic State (IS), a "new" Jihadi terrorist organization that has been executing terrorist activity across France since the 2010s. Firstly, this analysis highlights the historical background and evolution of AD and IS in France, capturing the mutual French political context. Secondly, the essay outlines the characteristics of "old" and "new" terrorism, drawing on examples from AD and IS. Moreover, it examines the similarities and differences between AD and IS via the following variables: 1) goals, 2) means, and 3) organizational structure (Crenshaw, 2005: 122-133).

The comparison and distinction of "old" and "new" terrorism sheds light on the evolution of the modus operandi of terrorist groups, setting up the stage for fulfilling the research objective.

This paper argues that, while an immense transformation of terrorism is undeniable, the rise of "new" terrorism radically expands upon "old" terrorism rather than replacing it. The political circumstances, availability of technology, and vulnerability of the modern society to terrorism can also influence the way "old" and "new" terrorist groups operate (Ramakrishna, 2014). That is why this paper draws attention to the characteristics of these terrorist groups particularly in the French context, while recognizing that the new IS phenomenon in France is lacking the support of extensive literature.

THE ORIGINS OF ACTION DIRECTE (AD) AND THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS)

France's never-ceasing engagement with terrorism is unparalleled (Gregory, 2003: 124). After World War II (WWII), the 1970s and 1980s were the most violent decades of terrorist activity in Europe. France was no exception in this regard. Within only one year (1985-1986), France was the target of approximately 13 domestic terrorist attacks (Gaub, 2017: 1). The brutal political context of France in the 1960s and 1970s precipitated the outburst of domestic political violence, with workers' strikes and student riots inundating French politics. The widespread unrest of the late 1960s created a fertile ground for local grievances. Germany and Italy faced similar challenges which resulted in the rise of powerful and violent domestic terrorist groups such as Red Army Faction (RAF) and Red Brigade (BR), respectively. Although there were small-scale terrorist events in France, the government circumvented the rise of domestic terrorism out of student revolts during the 1960s. In the 1970s, the French government still perceived only "imported" terrorism from the Middle East as a threat (Karmon, 2005: 133).

In the late 1970s, a small, high-profile domestic terrorist group Action Directe (AD), which was officially created in 1978, began to gain traction in France. Their success can be tied to high unemployment and the "imperialist" French policy in former colonies. The AD, in its short-lived existence (1978-1987), went through a dynamic, changing ideology (Dartnell, 1990: 458). What started as a fairly disorganized revolutionary group without strong political motives in 1978 transformed into a terrorist group with clear domestic and international goals in 1981. The AD operations can be, therefore, classified into an early phase (1978-1980) and a later phase (1981-1987). The 1980 arrest of the AD leaders Jean-François Rouillan and Nathalie Méningon, following a gunfight with the police, caused a strategic re-thinking within the organization (Karmon, 2005: 136). This arrest of the AD leaders left the organization without a clear ideological direction. When a socialist government came to power in May 1981, prisoners were granted a presidential amnesty and released from prison. This had been the turning point for a new AD ideology which took a more radical shape and called for a revolution against the bourgeoisie and imperialists (Dartnell, 1990: 460). A second series of arrests of the AD leaders, nonetheless, concluded the AD terrorist chapter in 1987 (Aubron, 1996).

By the 1980s, France also became and remained a target of Islamist terrorism in part due to its provocative stance against religion and laïcité. France's perplexing relationship with terrorism has been further exacerbated in the 2000s. The pivotal 9/11 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil called upon France to join the U.S.-led "Global War on Terror" (Gregory, 2003: 124). In addition to France's role in mitigating the international terrorism threat, France's colonial history also set the stage for French involvement in contemporary Middle Eastern (ME) affairs. France has been a powerful actor in the past and ongoing events in the Middle East such as the Iraq War, the Arab Revolutions, and the Syrian civil war in the 2000s and 2010 (Bindner, 2018: 4).

The birth of the Islamic State (IS) emerged as a direct consequence of these disparaging conflicts wherein France was actively involved. The tensions between “religiosity and modernity,” accompanied by Islamic militancy, created favorable circumstances for the IS popularity (Oosterveld and Bloem, 2017: 5). Although the IS emerged in Iraq and Syria, it has not remained a regional terrorist group. In 2015, the IS expanded “into a network of branches, supporters, and affiliates” in at least eight other countries, including France (Wilson Center, 2019).

There are three main reasons why France was a prime target for international terrorism, namely the IS. The root of these reasons lies in France’s colonial past. Firstly, the IS condemns France’s unique culture and the constitutional principle of *laïcité* as “anti-Muslim” with the purpose of continuously humiliating the population of French Muslims, which account for approximately eight percent of the country’s population (Daguzan, 2016: 120). Secondly, the IS draws on French military interventions in Mali, Iraq, and Syria as France’s waging a war against Islam. Thirdly, the IS perceives French society as “weak and divided” as a result of colonialism, making it a desirable target for ensuing fear and chaos. The IS capitalized on the vulnerabilities of French society to infiltrate itself into the French context. Moreover, the IS successfully recruited and exploited French citizens instead of sending Iraq- or Syria-based terrorists to French soil. The incomplete integration of French Muslims (predominantly of North African origin) into French society has contributed to the issue of homegrown Jihadists in France. The IS sympathizers went to Syria to train with the IS and returned to France espousing the IS ideology. The gap in intelligence-sharing within the Schengen Zone in Europe presented an opportunity for the IS to execute small-scale and large-scale terrorist attacks on French soil since 2015 (Hecker and Tenenbaum, 2017: 4). The IS-staged November 2015 Paris Attacks, in particular, have been the deadliest terrorist attack in French history (Brisard, 2015: 5).

Notably, these terrorist attacks were a coordinated Islamist effort that killed at least 130 and injured more than 350 people. The threat of the IS’s terrorist activity on-ground in France and the vulnerability of the French society persist to-date.

The terrorist operations of AD, an “old” terrorist group, and IS, a “new” terrorist group, emerged under different political circumstances and “waves” of terrorism. They attempted to derail the French status quo in different time frames and contexts. The comparison of AD and IS will be divided into three sections, highlighting the 1) goals, 2) means, and 3) organizational structures of both groups (Crenshaw, 2008: 122-133). Each section aims to set up a theoretical framework for the broad comparison of “old” and “new” terrorist groups, fixating on the terrorist experiences of AD and IS. While the two groups are vastly different, AD and IS also have a few points of convergence.

GOALS OF AD AND IS

This section answers the question of why AD and IS engaged in terrorist activity in France and what they sought to accomplish. More broadly, the waves of modern terrorism explain the distinction in motivations of AD and IS. Since the AD and the IS belong to two different waves of terrorism, “New Left” and “Religious” waves, respectively, their ideologies are dissimilar (Rapaport, 2003). Distinctly, the AD is a far-left terrorist group with a “revolutionary vocation” (Dartnell, 1990: 457), whereas the IS is a terrorist organization with a religious motivation. Notably, different perceptions of persisting threats and France as an actor are at the root of the distinction in AD and IS motives. To illustrate, both AD and IS, in entirely different time periods, condemned the ongoing French military interventions in the ME and Africa. On one side of the coin, the AD perceived the interventions and French foreign policy as neocolonial and imperialist. On the reverse side, the IS viewed similar events as the French war on Islam.

These perceptions point to a different source of motivation for these terrorist groups, although anti-Westernism seems to be the common denominator. The distinction in motivations of "old" and "new" terrorist groups resulted in their contrasting goals.

Generally, "old" terrorist groups have specific and attainable political goals and are willing to engage in negotiations to achieve their aims. "New" terrorist groups, in contrast, often have ambiguous strategic goals and do not address their grievances to the government because they are not tied to a territory (Crenshaw, 2008: 123). The AD had both domestic and international concerns, but its early operations (1978-1980) had a more localized focus. They were inspired by the Italian BR, German RAF, Third World liberation movements and student revolts in the late 1960s. AD's early ideology was a mixture of anarchism and Maoism with nuances of Marxism; it denounced the capitalists and employers and criticized the colonial and imperialist French state with an emphasis on French African policy (Dartnell, 1990: 457). The radical ideology of the IS, in contrast, "set inalterable objectives: to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world" (Crenshaw, 2008: 123). Moreover, the only international issues that AD regarded as exigent in its early phase were those causing the plight of African immigrants (Karmon, 2005: 135).

In the early 1980s, the AD underwent an ideological radicalization. The crisis of the early 1980s enabled the internationalization of American capitalism, which helped reorient AD's ideology. In 1982, AD published two large ideological documents which showcased its transformation and redirection: "Pour un projet communiste?" and "Sur l'impérialisme américain" (Dartnell, 1990: 466). New goals were set. Generally, the text urged unity among revolutionary groups to support a social movement of overthrowing the bourgeoisie (ibid.).

The domestic goals, mainly addressed in the first ideological text, were to cause a communist revolution. However, the second document was rooted in anti-Americanism seeking to counter the U.S. as the main global imperialist power (Karmon, 2005: 137). As a result of this ideological change, AD became a variant of a Euro-terrorist group. After this point, AD based its attacks on a struggle against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the "Americanization" of Europe (Dartnell, 1997: 33). AD's reorientation towards destroying military structures required more violent means and high-profile targets (Tschantret, 2019: 935). Their political goals and calls to action were specific. It appears that AD took the path of revolutionary struggle looking to dismantle the status quo and orchestrate a new social class order.

The goals of IS, on the other side, are associated "with a revision of the status quo" and "the establishment of a new religious world order" (Crenshaw, 2008: 124). France has been the most active European Member State in Syria during the civil war, launching airstrikes against IS (Muro, 2015: 2). When the IS ideology and activity hit France, the IS's goal was reprisal for airstrikes against its fighters and insults against Islam's prophet (ibid.). Although their goals are ultimately different, both groups pursued a new world order. The IS's aims are to create an Islamic state and take control of Muslims worldwide (Blannin, 2017), whereas the goals of AD were to dismantle capitalism and engender a revolution (Aubron, 1996). Seemingly, these goals do not converge, but their nature does. Although "new" terrorists, the IS included, typically pursue largely unattainable goals, the AD anarchist-communist ideology is also difficult to achieve because it would require the disappearance of capitalism (Crenshaw, 2008: 125). A converging point of AD and IS in this regard is their pursuit of unrealistic large-scale goals. Interestingly, the AD also held international objectives, such as a pro-Palestine, anti-Zionism, and anti-American imperialism, which are similar to the IS' goals to destroy Israel and expel Western troops from the Middle East.

The AD also held a belief that “global armed action against ‘slave trader and imperialist countries’ was not only justified but was actually regarded as a revolutionary obligation” (Karmon, 2005: 151).

Notably, France is one of the main IS targets precisely because of its involvement in the ME. Both AD and IS approve of retaliation against France as a result of its policies. In conclusion, the motivations and goals of “new” terrorism have a foundation that is present in the motivations and goals of “old” terrorism, highlighting the importance of the French context in this analysis.

MEANS OF AD AND IS

The assumption of the conceptual comparison of “old” and “new” terrorism is that the means and methods of “old” and “new” terrorist groups are radically different. The “old” terrorist groups generally identify and attack specific targets, resorting less to terrorizing civilians. The “old” terrorist groups are in pursuit of a political agenda and want a seat at “the bargaining table.” In other words, they carefully tailor their attacks to deliver a message to the selected audience. Moreover, they act to get people to watch and hear the message; they do not want people dead. In turn, the attacks of “new” terrorist groups occur in more populated areas, resulting in substantial casualties. Simply put, the distinction between the means and ends of “new” terrorist groups is often unclear. Again, “new” terrorist groups often do not seek public support or negotiations to materialize their political agenda. Since the ideology of “new” terrorist groups has a religious base, the main audience to “impress” is the deity itself (Crenshaw, 2008: 128). “New” terrorist groups do not execute their lethal attacks to satisfy their political demands; they pursue attacks that lead to societal destruction and mass casualties (Gofas, 2012: 18). Members of “new” terrorist groups are willing to sacrifice even their own lives to cause mass casualties and “earn their spot” in paradise as defenders of Islam (Crenshaw, 2008: 128).

The common feature of the means among “old” and “new” terrorism is violence, but the degree of violence is drastically different. While there are exceptions to this framework among “old” and “new” terrorist groups, this premise majorly holds in the case of AD and IS.

For instance, the AD believed that violence was a direct consequence of the struggle for power between the bourgeois and proletarians (Dartnell, 1990: 463). The AD, in its first 1978-1980 ideological stage, however, executed attacks on symbolic material targets, not people. Given that the AD’s primary domestic concerns were the unemployment rate, inflation, and oppression, its main targets in 1979 were institutions related to labor such as the “Association of French Industrialists, the Ministry of Labor, and the Department of Social Security,” to name a few. In March 1980, the AD planted a bomb near the French Security Service offices in Paris along with a message from the immigrant neighborhood Barbès that the threat to France’s national security stems from its neo-colonial foreign policy. Three days after the attack on security services, the AD attacked the French Ministry of Cooperation for its activity in Chad and the Central African Republic. After a radical change in its strategy in 1982, the AD also started to carry out anti-Zionist operations. During that same year, AD executed eight attacks against Israeli or Jewish targets in Paris during the culmination of the Lebanese War (Karmon, 2005: 140). The further radicalization of the AD resulted in more violent attacks against not only property, but also political officials and military structures (Tschantret, 2019: 935). As presented, the AD’s targeted attacks and symbolic messages were the main means by which the AD wanted to instigate a communist revolution.

Unlike the operations of the AD, the attacks of the IS were less strategic and more tactical. The 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, namely a terrorist attack aimed at the offices of the French satirical newspaper, could also be regarded as targeting a symbolic property.

However, this attack has also killed or hurt civilians. Here we see a drastic increase in violence and IS's lack of concern for the consequences. The November 2015 Paris attacks are an example of "new" terrorism. The IS conducted three simultaneous attacks on the French Stadium, the Bataclan concert hall, and multiple Parisian restaurants via suicide bombing and automatic weapons, killing 130 and wounding hundreds of people. Organized and coordinated by European-born Jihadists with origins in North Africa, this attack makes it uncertain whether lethality and mass destruction were the IS's means or ends (Brisard, 2015: 5). Here, the difference between the means of achieving goals is crucial: the AD was sending targeted messages to their audience and the IS has been using lethality as the means and ends of its terrorist activity. The methods of AD and IS are also different, likely due to the available technology and weaponry. The AD, relevantly, considered the spread of technology as "evil" and sought to destroy computers at corporations (Dartnell, 1995: 459). On the other hand, IS has been utilizing social media and technological advancements to showcase its brutality, disseminate propaganda, and attract foreign fighters to join the "cause" (Robillard, n.d.). To deliver the message behind the attack, both organizations publicly claimed their attacks. For instance, AD left notes and published texts to justify its actions to the government and society. Similarly, IS took responsibility for their attacks on French soil - the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack and the November 2015 Paris attacks - among a few others. While they both want to be noticed and send messages to the audience, the AD had specific asks from the government and society, whereas the IS simply pursued revenge without any justifications.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES OF AD AND IS

Terrorist groups, whether "old" or "new," adopt diverse organizational styles. The general frames of operation of "old" and "new" terrorist groups imply a difference in organization structures.

Hence, the structures of AD and IS vary. Generally, "old" terrorist groups rely on a centralized model with a strict hierarchical structure restricted by geographical location (Gofas, 2012: 22). They operate under a "well-defined command and control apparatus" (Hoffman, 1997: 45) and comprise collections of individuals who had been trained in terrorist tactics. "New" terrorist groups, in contrast, adopt a loose structure of transnationally connected cells and support networks, subscribing to the decentralized model. This model allows for more independence of the organizational subunits. In the absence of the firm top-down approach, the diffusion of terrorist activity via the "new" model makes "new" terrorism inspirational rather than directed on the strategic level. Indeed, the breadth of "new" terrorist networks is not as threatening to security as the appeal of the strong ideology which can spark cross-border activity (Crenshaw, 2008: 132). On tactical and operational levels, the loose organizational units still have a well-defined chain of command, implying that direction is not entirely absent from "new" terrorism.

Both AD and IS organizational orders fit some of the aspects of the "old" and "new" structure, respectively, but not all. The initial AD apparatus of command and ideology were weak. Moreover, the AD started out as a loosely organized compilation of small groups of far-left ideology sympathizers who were "young, unemployed, and educated" (Dartnell, 1990: 458), suggesting a fluid hierarchical structure. The AD capitalized on the defunct revolutionary organizations and their human capital. Therefore, it recruited young people from "Proletarian Left - New Popular Resistance (GN-NRP), the Internationalist Revolutionary Action Groups (GARI), the Armed Cells for Popular Autonomy (NAPAP), and the International Brigades (BI)" (Karmon, 2005: 134). Besides recruiting like-minded revolutionaries, the AD also preyed on the immigrant community. Most of the AD leaders lived in Parisian slums surrounded by Turkish and Algerian immigrants who had grievances against the government institutions.

Some of them were even AD members (Karmon, 2005: 136). Similarly, the enabling factor of Islamic terrorism in France in the 1990s were dual nationals (mainly from North Africa) and young people from immigrant families (Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017: 4-6). French policies have often "cornered" French Muslims, negatively impacting the integration of Muslim immigrants into the French society. It has been rather easy for the IS members to highlight France as the prime target due to its domestic and foreign policies ostensibly "aimed" at Islam. Thus, the IS ideology may have set the foundation for the IS presence and organizational structure in France. Although the IS Caliphate follows a hierarchical structure, its transnational network is, indeed, more unstructured. In fact, IS has been widespread precisely because of the "attractive" ideology and loose, extensive network of sympathizers. The links between the ME-based IS leaders and the coordinated terrorist attacks in France in the 2010s are unclear (Glenn, 2015), implying that the IS has functioned as an independent subunit of the network with a common ideology.

While the IS has the "spider web" structure, the AD operations, on the other hand, were largely focused on France. They were channeled from two cities within France - Paris and Lyon. Once AD re-asserted its power after the release of its leaders from prison, clear divisions between the Paris and Lyon wing became apparent, implying not only a fragmented ideology, but also a weaker hierarchy (Dartnell, 1990: 458). The Paris AD wing, led by Rouillan and Méningon, focused on international issues, whereas the Lyon AD leadership, controlled by Olivier, embraced a domestic orientation (ibid.). In addition, the AD members, given their prior experience in revolutionary organizations, were also trained in terrorism techniques and tactics. In contrast to AD which recruited already trained terrorists, IS provided training for the IS sympathizers (Robillard, n.d.).

Tens of thousands of foreign volunteers worldwide have travelled to the heart of the IS to get trained as fighters of the IS and defenders of Islam, especially after the start of the Syrian civil war (Bindner, 2018: 2). French citizens make up a large proportion of foreign fighters (Brisard, 2015: 6). After receiving a series of training and brainwashing, foreign fighters return to their home countries and enable the spread of the ideology and execute terrorist activity (Bindner, 2018: 4). Access to technology has been key in the IS recruitment process, which was also the case in France.

CONCLUSION

In answering the research objective, this analysis faced certain limitations. The most evident limitation of this paper is the lack of profound analysis of the "old" vs. "new" terrorism debate. Another limitation of the paper is the scope which has not allowed for an elaborate analysis of both AD and IS before comparing them. This has led to certain generalizations in the analysis of goals, means, and organizational structures of AD and IS. There are also significant questions that this paper further raises for researchers. How will France more effectively monitor homegrown Jihadists who go to the ME as foreign fighters and return to France? How will the IS activity continue to evolve in France?

As presented above, the comparison of AD and IS was conducted via Crenshaw's (2008) "old" vs. "new" terrorism framework of three characteristics: 1) goals, 2) means and 3) organizational structure. Firstly, the goals of AD were to cause a communist revolution and dismantle imperialism while IS aims have been to retaliate for French policies and form the Islamic State. Convergingly, the extreme goals of both organizations are likely unattainable and have called for a new world order. Secondly, the means of AD and IS were different; AD targeted symbolic institutions while avoiding casualties, whereas the IS strived to kill lots of people and instill terror.

However, the common feature of the attacks was violence and sending a message to the audience. Thirdly, AD, more or less, had a traditional hierarchical structure, whereas the main structural component of the IS has been the ideology itself. Interestingly, both groups maximized the lack of integration of French Muslims into the society.

Given Crenshaw's framework, the conclusion is that the goals, means, and organizational structures of "old" AD and "new" IS are, indeed, radically different, implying that "new" terrorism may be separate from "old" terrorism. However, relying solely on this conclusion would be superficial. Crenshaw's comparison of dozens of terrorist groups produced a solid set of comparison characteristics, yet failed to provide contextual analysis of terrorist groups. It was precisely the common French context that highlighted the systemic challenges that have been creating a fertile ground for "old" and "new" terrorism in France in the past 50 years. Despite the evident difference in goals, means, and organizational structures of AD and IS, there were still numerous similarities. This overlap points out that the roots of "new" terrorism reside within the scope of "old" terrorism, especially in instances where terrorist groups operated in different time periods, but in the same context. This paper, therefore, concludes that "new" terrorism is an extension of "old" terrorism rather than an entirely new phenomenon.

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