

Terrorism

Undergraduate course syllabus
Philip Luke Johnson
pjohnson@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Course Description

Most people can list various examples of terrorism and terrorists, but finding a definition that neatly fits all examples is tricky. Finding a definition that most people agree on is trickier still; researchers and policymakers have never settled on a common definition. Despite this lack of conceptual clarity, the field of terrorism studies continues to grow, as scholars attempt to understand the violent actions of a diverse range of actors, including domestic hate groups, transnational religious networks, state militaries, and so-called “lone wolves.” In this course we will not get too comfortable with any one definition of terrorism. Instead, we will consider the idea of terrorism from differing positions and theories, and always with a healthy dose of reflection upon what counts and doesn’t count as terrorism. The course is loosely divided into four sections. The first considers terrorist definitions and designations from a historical perspective. The second section looks at the motivations and mechanisms through which people turn to perpetrating violence. The third section examines the place of states in perpetration and prevention of violence. The fourth section surveys the diverse repertoire of strategies and practices of contemporary terrorism.

Course Objectives

By actively participating in this course, you should expect to:

- Think critically and reflectively about how you use (and don’t use) the concept of terrorism.
- Identify different approaches to defining terrorism, and recognize the stakes of designating an act or actor as terrorist.
- Describe changes across recent history in terrorist practices and scholarly research on these practices.
- Understand the processes by which people choose (or feel that they have no choice but) to perpetrate violence, while recognizing the relative rarity of turning to violence.
- Discuss strategies and policies for preventing violence, and critically examine the practices justified by these policies.
- Conduct research that involves identifying interesting sources, and recognizing the limitations of all sources.
- Write regularly, and in different formats.
- Give and receive constructive feedback on writing.

Assignments and Grading

Regular class assignments

3 x Reading assignments = 3 x 5% = **15%**

In-class activities = **20%**

Participation = **15%**

Class assignments total = **50% of total grade**

Research project

Research paper outline (Week 8) = **15%**

Final research paper (Week 15) = **35%**

Research project total = **50% of total grade**

Reading assignments. Students should complete three reading assignments over the course of the semester. Each reading assignment should cover all of the readings for a single week. In the reading assignment, you should briefly summarize each of the readings, and then offer a short critical comparison of the readings: in what ways do they agree or disagree? Does one reading help you understand the others? Expect to write one paragraph for each text, plus one additional synthesis paragraph. The assignment should 1-2 pages in length, single-spaced. You must submit your first writing assignment during week 2, 3, or 4, so I can get a sense of your thinking and writing. Apart that first assignment, you can choose any week from 2 to 14 for your reading assignments. Assignments are due at the date and time of our class for the week, and no late assignments will be accepted. If you do not submit your assignment in time, you will have to complete another assignment for a different week.

In-class assignments. Every week we will complete at least one in-class assignment. These my range from 5 minutes of reflective writing, to a group research assignment taking half of the class time. You do not need to do any extra preparation for these assignments, besides covering the readings for the week, and bringing the tools you need to write, research, and think critically to class. Each in-class assignment should be submitted at the end of the class. No late submissions will be accepted.

Participation. You are expected to attend and participate in every class. Participation does not have to look the same for every person. Participation should aid your studies, rather than forcing you to learn in any particular way. You can participate by asking thoughtful questions after class or during office hours, for example. Work on finding ways that you can comfortably participate in this course, and wherever possible, check in with the instructor about these plans.

Research paper outline. The paper outline is due in Week 8. It should show your early thinking about a possible final paper topic. The outline can be either a general summary of the paper that you want to write, or a rough draft of the introduction and first pages of your final paper. It should also include a bibliography with at least five relevant works for your paper topic (these can include texts that we have read in class). The proposal should be at least three pages long, double-spaced (bibliography is not included in the page count). The proposal is due during our class for week 8, and there will be a penalty for every day that the proposal is late.

Final research paper. The final paper is due in Week 15. It should be 10 to 12 pages long, double-spaced. The final paper should be submitted during class in week 15, and there will be a penalty for every day that the paper is late. A rubric for the paper will be discussed, agreed upon, and circulated before the deadline for the research paper outline.

Course Expectations

Course materials. All readings will be posted to Blackboard [or equivalent]. There are no required texts that you need to purchase for this course, but every text on the syllabus and posted on Blackboard is a required reading. Podcasts are accessible online. If you have trouble accessing or listening to the podcasts, please contact me about making accommodations.

Preparation. Arrive on time and prepared for each class. We'll be diving straight into a discussion at the start of each session, so you need to turn up ready to participate. Those that have prepared a reading assignment for the particular class will be asked to take the lead in our discussion each week.

Technology. Students are welcome to use whatever technology is helpful to them in class, but are asked not to do so in a way that will distract other students (or the instructor). Keep everything on silent, and keep the things on your screen relevant (even if we're too polite to say so, we can all see what's on your screen).

Communication. Most readings will be posted on Blackboard [or equivalent], and I will use Blackboard as the main way to contact the class with any announcements or changes to this syllabus. Please make sure that you are checking your university email, or whichever account you have linked to Blackboard. You will also need a Turnitin account, in order to complete the final paper.

Late work. No late work will be accepted for regular assignments (reading assignments, in-class activities, participation). Late submissions are accepted with a penalty for the research project. If you find yourself struggling to keep up with the work, please contact the instructor as soon as possible. Alternative plans can be made in many situations, but the more notice for these plans, the better.

Incompletes. An incomplete grade is only available under exceptional circumstances, and to students in good standing at the end of the semester (that means that you have been present, participating, and have completed all of your work to date).

Credit/No credit. Credit/No credit is only available to students that have completed all assignments (that includes attendance and participation).

Uncomfortable material. This course digs deep into some confronting material, and some of the topics covered may be quite uncomfortable or concerning for students. Please read through the syllabus carefully ahead of time, and contact the instructor if you anticipate encountering any problems at some point in the semester. It isn't always possible to see difficult situations coming ahead of time, however, so if any topic or discussion becomes particularly troubling, you are welcome to step out of the room or away from the screen to take some time out. Students are encouraged to talk to the instructor about any such issues; you will never have to disclose anything that you consider private, but we will be able to make a plan so that you can participate as comfortably as possible in class.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: What is Terrorism?

- Crenshaw, Martha. 1981. "The Causes of Terrorism." *Comparative Politics* 13, 4: 379-399.
- Tilly, Charles. 2004. "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists." *Sociological Theory* 22, 1: 5-13.
- Schmid, Alex. 2012. "The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, 2: 158-159.

Activity: Brainstorm a list of terrorists. What do these have in common?

Week 3: Freedom Fighter, Criminal, or Terrorist?

- Bhatia, Michael. 2005. "Fighting Words: Naming Terrorists, Bandits, Rebels and Other Violent Actors." *Third World Quarterly* 26, 1: 5-22.
- Dolliver, Matthew & Erin Kearns. 2019 "Is it Terrorism? Public Perceptions, Media, and Labeling the Las Vegas Shooting." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.
- Meier, Anna. 2020. "The Idea of Terror: Institutional Reproduction in Government Responses to Political Violence." *International Studies Quarterly*.

Activity: Research some organizations/movements/individuals listed by the FBI as domestic terrorists. Who counts as a terrorist, who doesn't, and why?

Week 4: What Was Terrorism?

- Rapoport, David. 2004. "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism." In *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, ed. Steven Chermak & Joshua Freilich. Georgetown University Press.
- Davis, Mike. 2008. *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb*. Verso. Ch.1, 2.
- Stampnitzky, Lisa. 2013. *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism."* Cambridge University Press. Introduction, Ch.1.

Activity: Research a major terrorist attack from the 90s.

Week 5: Who Turns to Violence?

- LaFree, Gary, Michael Jensen, Patrick James & Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein. "Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States." *Criminology* 56, 2: 233-268.
- Gambetta, Diego & Steffen Hertog. 2016. *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connections Between Violent Extremism and Education*. Princeton University Press. Preface, Ch.1.
- Bloom, Mia & Ayse Lokmanoglu. 2020. "From Pawns to Knights: The Changing Role of Women's Agency in Terrorism." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.

Week 6: Why Turn to Violence?

- McCauley, Clark & Sophia Moskalenko. 2017. "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model." *American Psychologist* 72, 3.
- Sageman, Marc. 2004. *Understanding Terror Networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Ch.4, conclusion.
- Asad, Talal. 2007. *On Suicide Bombing*. Columbia University Press. Intro, Ch.2.

Activity: Brainstorm a list of interesting research paper topics.

Week 7: Lone Wolves and Disturbed Individuals

- Schuurman, Bart, Edwin Bakker, Paul Gill, & Noémie Bouhana. 2018. "Lone Actor Terrorist Attack Planning and Preparation: A Data-Driven Analysis." *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 63, 4: 1191-1200.
- Malkki, Leena. 2014. "Political Elements in Post-Columbine School Shootings in Europe and North America." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, 1: 185-210.
- Scaptura, Maria & Kaitlin Boyle. 2020. "Masculinity Threat, 'Incel' Traits, and Violent Fantasies Among Men in the United States." *Feminist Criminology* 15, 3.

Activity: Read and discuss excerpts from "The Unabomber Manifesto."

This could be a confronting activity for some students. We will discuss this activity ahead of time in class. Please contact the instructor with any concerns.

Week 8: States and Terrorism**Research paper outline due**

- Piazza, James. 2008. "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52, 3: 469-488.
- Byman, Daniel. 2005. "Passive Sponsors of Terrorism." *Survival* 47, 4: 117-144.
- Savun, Burcu & Brian Phillips. 2009. "Democracy, Foreign Policy, and Terrorism." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, 6: 878-904.
- Fisher, Daren, Laura Dugan & Erica Chenoweth. 2019. "Does US Presidential Rhetoric Affect Asymmetric Political Violence?" *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, 1: 132-150.

Activity: Peer review of research paper outlines.

Week 9: Counterterrorism and the War on Terror

- Allmahomed-Wilson, Sabrina. 2019. "When the FBI Knocks: Racialized State Surveillance of Muslims." *Critical Sociology* 45, 6.
- Shoker, Sarah. 2021. *Military-Age Males in Counterinsurgency and Drone Warfare*. Palgrave.
- Jordan, Jenna. 2009. "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation." *Security Studies* 18, 4: 719-755.

Activity: Read and discuss excerpts from Mohamedou Ould Salahi's *Guantanamo Diary*.

This could be a confronting activity for some students. We will discuss this activity ahead of time in class. Please contact the instructor with any concerns.

Week 10: Foreign Fighters and Forgeries

- Hegghammer, Thomas. 2013. "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice Between Domestic and Foreign Fighting." *American Political Science Review* 107, 1: 1-15.
- Cragin, R. Kim. 2017. "The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees." *Orbis* 61, 2: 212-226.
- Callimachi, Rukmini. "Caliphate Podcast." *New York Times*. Prologue, Ch.1, 2, 6.

Activity: Discuss accuracy and ethics in the *Caliphate* podcast.

Week 11: Violence and Victims of Terrorism

- Kydd, Andrew & Barbara Walter. 2006. “The Strategies of Terrorism.” *International Security* 31, 1: 49-80.
- Asal, Victor & R. Karl Rethemeyer. 2008. Dilettantes, Ideologues, and the Weak: Terrorists Who Don’t Kill.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25, 3.
- Matfess, Hilary. 2020. “Part and Parcel? Examining Al Shabaab and Boko Haram’s Violence Targeting Civilians and Violence Targeting Women.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.
- Alakoc, Burcu Pinar. 2020. “Femme Fatale: The Lethality of Female Suicide Bombers.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43, 9.

Week 12: Terrorism, Communication, and the Media

- Nacos, Brigitte. 2016. *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Ch. 2, 3.
- Kearns, Erin. 2019. “When to Take Credit for Terrorism? A Cross-National Examination of Claims and Attributions.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*.
- Brown, Joseph. 2018. “Force of Words: The Role of Threats in Terrorism.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*.
- Goldenberg, Alex & Joel Finkelstein. 2020. “Cyber Swarming, Memetic Warfare, and Violent Insurgency: How Domestic Militants Organize on Memes to Incite Violent Insurrection and Terror Against Government and Law Enforcement.” Network Contagion Research Institute.

Week 13: Terrorism, Crime, and Financing

- Petrich, Katharine. 2019. “Cows, Charcoal, and Cocaine: Al-Shabaab’s Criminal Activities in the Horn of Africa.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.
- Zabyelina, Yuliya. 2019. "The ‘Capone Discovery’: Extortion as a Method of Terrorism Financing." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*: 1-16.
- Johnson, Philip Luke. 2019. “The Crime and State Terrorism Nexus: How Organized Crime Appropriates Counterinsurgency Violence.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, 6: 16-26.

Week 14: Flexible week

The class will vote on the topics to cover (or return to) this week.

Week 15: Conclusions

Final research paper due

Additional Podcasts

Talking Terror

Royal Holloway, University of London

<https://soundcloud.com/user-366747443>

Terrorism 360

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

<https://www.start.umd.edu/terrorism360>