Targeting Blue:

Why We Should Study Terrorist Attack on Police

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ABSTRACT

With almost 12% of all attacks since 1970 targeting law enforcement, police make attractive targets for terrorist groups for several reasons, yet studying this unique phenomenon is largely neglected in the academic literature. Perhaps the scant research on this topic is due to a debate over whether attacks on police are considered terrorism and a concern about typological theorizing. This paper is a call to academic arms for scholars to study the unique phenomenon of terrorism targeting the police, arguing that such violence is indeed terrorism and disaggregating terrorism target type is beneficial for theoretical development and evidence-based policy.

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Introduction

Terrorism is commonly thought of as attacks against the public (that is, unarmed, unsuspecting civilians), not against those who protect the public. Consequently, terrorist attacks targeting police receives little academic attention. However, police have been victimized by terrorist attacks more so than one might expect. According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), police have been targeted by terrorist groups in 11,500 of the 98,112 recorded incidents between 1970 and 2010, comprising almost 12% of terrorism targets. For comparison, private citizens were attacked in only about twice as many incidents – private citizens are the most frequently attacked target. (See Figure 1.) While police rank as the fifth most popular target type, they have been the focus of terrorists almost as much as the military, the government and business entities. Given the relative popularity of targeting police, the lack of academic interest to this unique target type is "surprising" (Freilich & Chermak, 2009, p. 145).

Figure 1. Distribution of terrorist attacks worldwide, 1970-2010, by target type
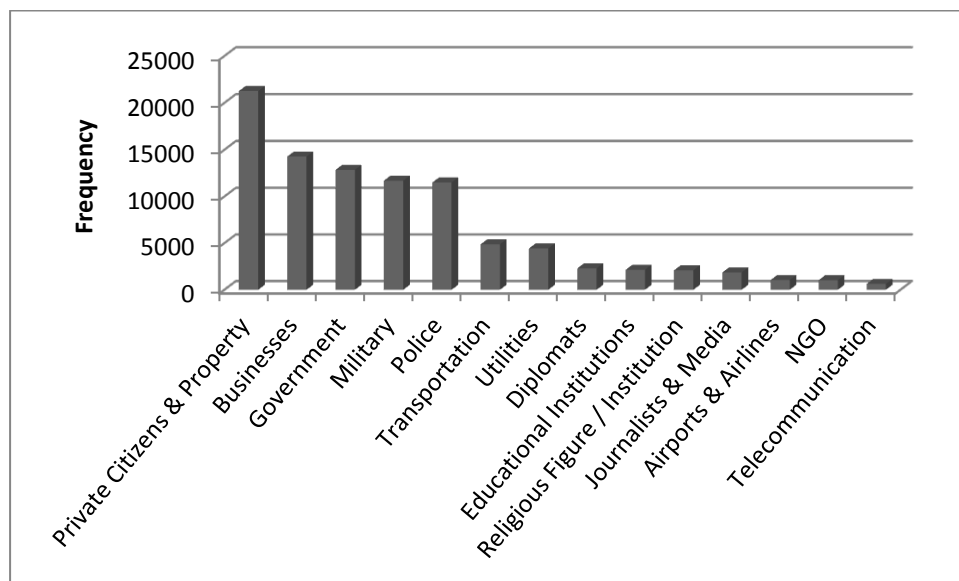
(data source: GTD, 2011)

Perhaps scholars have focused attention on other aspects of terrorism because attacks on police may not be considered "terrorism". Taking into account that police receive special training in weapons and tactics to defend them and others, and considering they voluntarily put themselves in harm's way, police may be considered "combatants" and therefore attacks on police may not be defined as terrorism. Indeed, violence – including terrorist violence – is considered part of the officer's job, as reflected in the concept of the "blue canary". Similar to the canary used by early miners to detect hazardous gases in the mine shafts, a blue canary is a responding officer who, unfortunately, falls victim to hazardous materials, signaling to other authorities to call HAZMAT (Batista, 2005). Seemingly, police as victims of terrorist violence is expected.

Another reason scholars may prefer studying terrorism, generally, instead of focusing on specific target types like the police, is to build a general theory of terrorism. A general theory explains as much terrorism as possible, aiming to be broad in scope. This provides for broad tests to promote empirical support for the theory. The practical purpose of a general theory is to direct policies, which sometimes can be difficult to do when focusing narrowly on a topic.

With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the argument that attacks on police are, indeed, terrorism is presented. The second focus is that studying unique terrorism target types encourages theory and policy development. The paper begins by exploring why police make attractive targets for terrorists, followed by a discussion of whether attacks on police should be considered terrorism. Once this is established, the lessons learned about terrorism by disaggregating its study into smaller types of terrorism are reviewed. The paper concludes by encouraging scholars to devote attention to studying terrorist attacks targeting police to fill this gap in the literature.

Why Would Terrorists Target Police?

Terrorists choose certain targets for a variety of reasons. Among other incentives, terrorists attack for several reasons: (1) symbolic reasons, as some targets are proxies for other desirable targets (like the government); (2) practical reasons because some targets may provide weapons or materials terrorists need or because targets may stand in the way of carrying out an attack; (3) demonstrative reasons,

to show terrorists' strength and commitment to their cause; and (4) because targets are accessible and they are "low-hanging fruit" or simply easy to attack. As shown in Figure 2, these motives are not mutually exclusive. A target can be both symbolic and accessible. For example, civilians are practical targets because, in democracies at least, they can persuade the government to concede to terrorists' demands; civilians also are easily accessible because they are ubiquitous. Police are a unique target for terrorists because police fall into the intersection – that is, police can be targeted for all of these reasons – as explained in the sections to follow.

Figure 2. Reasons terrorists attack
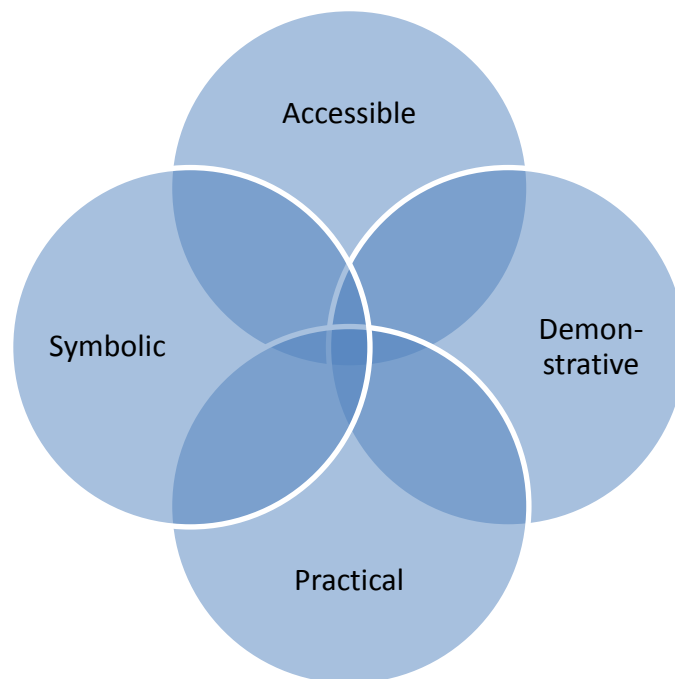
Symbolic targets. Bombing or otherwise attacking targets that are symbolic of an ideology – like the World Trade Center in New York City, the target of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States – is akin to attacking that ideology itself. Police make attractive targets for some terrorists because they are representatives of the government's coercive authority, making them symbolic targets. Some terrorist groups in the United States even have "hit lists" targeting police officers (Freilich & Chermak, 2009) because police are in a "brotherhood with the enemy government" (Miller, 2010). Indeed, this can be seen around the world. For example, both Pakistani and Afghani police are targeted by Taliban

militants as symbolic attacks against foreign forces on the respective country's soil – in the former country because of United States drone strikes and in the latter country due to the long-standing US military presence. Baker and Safi (2007) reported in Time that Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, a spokesman for the Taliban, claimed that the Taliban will continue to target people – including the police – who work with foreigners. The Taliban also attacks the police to disrupt the improving infrastructure, recently to recruit local police to join their forces (Salahuddin, 2012) and notably in Afghanistan because the Afghan National Police are part of counter-insurgency operations, suggesting terrorists also target the police for practical reasons – to which we now turn.

Practical targets. Terrorists may select a target for its practicality. Considering that police have discretion whether to arrest/release members of terrorist organizations, they may be viewed as "roadblocks" who thwart terrorists' goals. Perhaps more important, as first responders to emergencies police are strategic targets for terrorist groups. By overwhelming or incapacitating law enforcement, they become ineffective in resolving a terrorist attack, making the incident much bigger and more fatal. And, a terrorist attack on the police diminishes the capacity for police to respond to other incidents. Response systems are typically set up to deal with civilian incidents; when the responders are targeted, who responds to that incident is questionable. An attack on police reduces morale, increases stress on police, and increases costs to the public in terms of healthcare and missed time from work. An attack on police may create more confusion and a weaker initial response to a terrorist incident, making the authorities seem ineffective. This casts doubt on the police's ability to protect the public, potentially decreasing the likelihood that the public will cooperate with them and thereby supporting the terrorists' cause. Similarly, attacks on police potentially reduce authorities' ability to detect and investigate terrorists, which enhances terrorists' ability to act in the future.

The Maoists in India targeted the police for practical reasons when the Indian government launched an offensive against Maoists' terrorism. In one 2010 incident, the group killed about 75 policemen in an ambush; after the initial ambush, reinforcements were attacked when trying to collect the bodies (Kumar, 2010). As a result of the police failure to gather the fallen officers, the Indian Air

Force had to be called in to remove the dead. Reuters reported the perception that police are not competent to handle the Maoist terrorist threat (Kumar, 2010), which implies that they should no longer respond to such violence. In addition to its practicality, this attack also shows the group is capable of killing those who are trained in responding to violent offenders.

Demonstrative targets. Attacking the police demonstrates the terrorist group's capacity for violence and shows its strength. Police are viewed as having a great deal of power, as they are well-prepared for violence. However, when terrorists best police, terrorists consider themselves stronger. In Pakistan on December 6, 2010, Lashkar-e-Islami terrorists broke into the home of a Frontier Constabulary officer, beat his mother and brother, and kidnapped the officer (GTD, 2011), demonstrating the power of the group.

Demonstrative attacks also serve the purpose of gaining publicity, which helps with recruitment and garnering sympathy from "soft-liner" opponents and from "third parties" who might persuade opponents to concede to terrorists' demands (Pape, 2005, p. 9). Because of the heinous nature of attacking an agent of the state, attacks on police receive quite a bit of media attention, making police a target for terrorists interested in such attention.

Accessible targets. Police also are accessible targets, as they are ubiquitous and they are more vulnerable than other targets representing the government's coercive force (e.g., the military). Police routinely patrol areas; they have police stations with minimal security available to the public and people know the location of the stations. While active military units also may go on patrol, they are heavily armored – typically more so than the police. Additionally, military bases are not accessible to anyone other than military personnel. A recent explosion at a police station in Turkey demonstrates the accessibility of the police to terrorist groups. A suspected militant associated with the PKK (Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan, which translates to the Kurdistan Workers' Party) sped through a police checkpoint about 55 miles away before he rammed into a Turkish police station, where the bomb inside his vehicle exploded (BBC News, 2012). Several police officers were killed, and the bomb injured some children of officers, as police residences were nearby (BBC News, 2012).

While the police are targeted for all (symbolic, practical, demonstrative or accessibility) of these reasons, other targets may or may not be. Consider the other main targets of terrorist attacks: citizens, businesses, government personnel and installations, military, transportation and utilities, and religious institutions. There may be symbolic reasons for attacking citizen targets, and citizens are easily accessible targets, as they are everywhere. However, they do not serve a practical purpose as other targets do. Generally, terrorists cannot demonstrate their strength by attacking citizens. Most citizens do not have specialized training in defense and most citizens are not perceived as "strong". Citizens are not practical targets because risk structure for terrorists will not change with an attack on citizens. Also, citizens often are intended recipients of message (with the exception of businesses, which may be practical targets for funding of terroristic enterprise).

Other targets are attacked for some, but not all, of these reasons, too. Businesses may be symbolic of capitalism, businesses are everywhere and easily accessible, and they can be practical targets for funding of terroristic enterprises. However, a terrorist attack on a business does not necessarily demonstrate a terrorist group's strength or commitment to the cause – but this may depend on the business. Government targets like diplomats, buildings, foreign embassies and personnel are symbolic targets of the state. Some government targets, like one that houses money or caches of weapons, may be practical targets, and attacking some of the more heavily guarded government facilities or personnel (think a head of state) can demonstrate a group's strength. But, many government buildings are not easily accessible, fenced off from the public and or requiring identification to enter.

Similar to the police, the military, as representatives of the government's coercive force, is symbolic of the state, is a practical target to gain weapons or to weaken combatants who may impede a terrorist attack, and, due to their weapons, training, tactics and protection, is a target that establishes the strength of the terrorist group. Unlike the police, the military is not easily accessible, housed in heavily guarded bases and patrolling in armored vehicles.

Transportation and utilities are not symbolic targets of the state, nor are they usually heavily guarded; while they are accessible targets, they may or may not be

practical (unless they are attacked to provide some sort of cover for another attack). Finally, religious institutions are symbolic of a belief that may run counter to the terrorists' creed; given that many religions strive to help the populace, they are by nature accessible to everyone. But, religious institutions do not offer weapons or financing, and as a type of civilian target they are weak targets relative to stronger targets like the military or police, blocking opportunity for a terrorist group to demonstrate its strength.

Attacking each of these targets is considered terrorism. Terrorists have more reasons to attack the police than any of these targets; in fact, police are the only target that definitely meets all four reasons for attack. Accordingly, attacks on the police, too, should be considered terrorism.

Table 1. Reasons terrorists may attack selected targets

	Symbolic	Accessible	Practical	Demonstrative
Police	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Business	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**/No	**Yes**/No
Military	**Yes**	No	**Yes**	**Yes**
Government	**Yes**	No	**Yes**/No	**Yes**/No
Citizens	**Yes**/No	**Yes**	No	**Yes**/No
Transportation	No	**Yes**	**Yes**/No	No
Religious	**Yes**	**Yes**	No	No

In addition to these four reasons, police are often secondary targets because they guard other primary targets (like businesses or government facilities). For example, the New York City Police Department reported 23 officers killed in the line of duty responding to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (NYPD 9/11 Memorial website, undated) – even though the police were not directly targeted in these attacks.

Indeed, terrorists have many reasons to target the police. Yet we know little to inform policy or theory because scholarly work on policing and terrorism typically focuses on countering terrorism (Borum & Tilby, 2005; Carter & Carter, 2009; Clarke & Newman, 2007; Deflem, 2006; Innes, 2006; Lum et al., 2006; McGarrell et al., 2007; Weisburd, Feucht, Hakimi, Mock, & Perry, 2009;

Weisburd, Jonathan & Perry, 2009), whether the police instead of the military should combat terrorism (Perliger et al., 2009), police preparedness and training (Chermak et al., 2009; Pelfrey, 2007), consequences of police responses to terrorism (Brodeur, 2007; Loader, 2006; Weisburd et al., 2010), organizational change (Nussbaum, 2007), police attitudes about terrorism (Freilich et al., 2009), or public attitudes toward the police (Jonathan, 2010), but rarely on police as victims of terrorism (but see Deflem, 2011; Deflem & Sutphin, 2006; Freilich & Chermak, 2009). This lack of attention to terrorist attacks targeting police "is surprising considering the large threat that terrorism poses, especially to law enforcement" (Freilich & Chermak, 2009, p. 145). Perhaps terrorist attacks on police are relatively absent from scholarly literature because some may not consider attacks on police "terrorism".

Are Attacks on Police "Terrorism"?

Terrorism is intentional violence on non-combatants by non-state actors in the pursuit of an ideology, usually political. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD), for example, defines terrorism as "intentional act of violence or threat of violence by a non-state actor" (National Consortium, n.d., ¶10). For a case to be included in the GTD, two of three additional criteria must be present:

1. The violent act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal;
2. The violent act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and
3. The violent act was outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law (National Consortium, n.d., ¶11).

It is this third criterion that challenges whether attacks on police should be considered terrorism.

At the heart of this debate is whether such attacks occur outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which guides (usually inter-state) armed conflicts. IHL suggests civilian casualties should be avoided during armed conflict, which should be directed toward combatants; a hallmark of terrorist activity is violating this rule, as civilians and non-combatants typically are targeted (Forst, 2009; Hoffman, 2006; Jenkins, 1980). The question arises whether police are considered civilians or combatants, and the answer determines

whether an attack is considered terrorism – or something else (like assault or homicide). Attacks on police should be considered terrorism where police are civilians and, as such, non-combatants. Western countries, like the United States, have police agencies that are separate and distinct from the military; in these countries, attacks on police clearly are attacks on civilians and are in violation of IHL.

Complicating the issue of determining whether police are a civilian body, many countries have multiple policing agencies. In Venezuela, for example, Dirección de los Servicios de Inteligencia y Prevención (Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services or DISIP) and Cuerpo Técnico de Policía Judicial (Judicial Technical Police, renamed the National Directorate of Criminal Investigation or CICPC) are the two main national investigative agencies, housed under the Ministry of Interior and Justice (Birkbeck, 2006; Policía Nacional Estará, n.d.). El Cuerpo de Policía Nacional Bolivariana (CPNB or National Police), responsible for transit systems, was established in 2009 (Policía Nacional Estará, n.d.). Venezuela also has state and municipal level police forces (Birkbeck, 2006). In addition to these civilian policing agencies, Fuerzas Armadas de Cooperación (FAC or National Guard or Armed Forces of Cooperation) is part of the military, housed under the Ministry of Defense (Birkbeck, 2006; Policía Nacional Estará, n.d.). With arrest powers, FAC is responsible for internal security, border protection, and Venezuela's highway system, functioning as a federal police force (Birkbeck, 2006; Policía Nacional Estará, n.d.). Similarly, the Turkish National Police, a civilian force, is responsible for policing urban areas, while the paramilitary Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı (the Gendarmerie) operate in conjunction with the military to secure rural areas, which comprise about 90% of Turkey (Library of Congress, 1995, 2008). While the Gendarmerie is part of the armed forces, it is housed under the Ministry of Interior during peacetime (Aydin, 2006). Supplementing the Gendarmerie, village guards were created in 1985 to serve as local militias, mainly in southeastern Turkey (Library of Congress, 2008). Additionally, these agencies change over time, some becoming civilianized and others becoming paramilitary or part of the military. For example, the People's Police of Albania, created in 1945, initially was housed under the Ministry of Interior, but became part of the Armed Forces in April of 1991

(Shkembi, 2006). Since November 1999, the People's Police has been separate from the military (Shkembi, 2006). Following the IHL rule that terrorism is directed against non-combatant targets, determining whether particular police agencies are civilian bodies or part of the military is important.

Some may argue attacks on police should not be considered terrorism because police are not civilians: Police are part of the body of government, and in some (usually more autocratic) countries police are part of the military. For example, the Royal Bahrain Police and the military "are one and the same" (Miller, 2006, p. 67). There, attacks on the police, who are part of the same body as the military, may be considered attacks against combatants and may not violate the precepts of IHL. However, military agencies are considered non-combatants during times of peace and when they are not on-duty (Hull, 2001; National Counterterrorism Center, 2009) – in other words, when they are not actively involved in conflict; the same applies to police, even when they are part of a military body.

A further difficulty resolving the issue of police combatant status in terrorist incidents is that specific police agencies often are not reported. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD), perhaps the most comprehensive incident-level database on terrorism, does a remarkable job of separating cases where police were targeted; however, many of the news sources from which the data are drawn often only identify the "police" were victims, neglecting to specify the particular agency. This is true of another oft-used database to study terrorism, the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents. This challenge in determining combatant status can be compensated by defining police as civilian in countries where they are not part of the military forces and non-combatants, when they are part of the military forces, during times of peace.

While one criterion of IHL – non-combatant status – can be met, this may be a moot point because IHL may not even apply to terrorism. Again, IHL guides armed conflicts. Typically, armed conflict refers to war, and to invoke IHL, generally a state must be one of the parties (Bianchi, 2011). While terrorism is asymmetric armed conflict of an extremist group usually targeting the state, Bianchi (2011) observes, "terrorism in and of itself is not inherently related to armed conflict and only comes under the regulation of IHL in certain particular situations" (p. 3). Accordingly, terrorism, by definition, is not bound by IHL

because terrorism itself refers to asymmetric conflict outside of war. Terrorism is a violation of IHL; indeed, violations of IHL may be called "terrorism" (ICRC, 2010). Because terrorism violates IHL, "terrorists" are those who are not concerned with the driving principle of IHL – namely, the protection of civilians.

Regardless of the argument, attacks on police by terrorists are terrorism. However, we know relatively little about this particular target type. Beyond the debate over whether attacks on police are terrorism (they are), this target type may be neglected in scholarly literature for another reason. Some may argue that studying specific types of terrorism distracts from forming a broad, general theory of terrorism. The next section reviews this argument, assuming that attacks on police are indeed terrorism, and encourages the study of terrorist attacks targeting the police for both theory and policy development.

Studying Types of Terrorism

Disaggregating terrorism into types sometimes is frowned upon. General theories are preferred because they offer universal causes of terrorism, attempting to explain many different types of terrorism across cultures. Typologies, on the other hand, serve as classification systems, organizing "facts" of terrorism in meaningful ways to better understand it. Typologies of terrorism have focused on characteristics of terrorism offenses and on aspects of terrorists. For example, Smith (1994) differentiated between domestic and international terrorism. Combs (1997) pointed out types of terrorist tactics, including bombing, arson, hostage-taking and kidnapping, assassinations and ambushes, aerial hijacking, and chemical-biological attacks, among others. Shifting focus from the offense to the offender, Hacker (1976) identified three types of terrorist offenders: criminals, crazies and crusaders. Combs (1997) points out that identifying the commonalities among all types of terrorism can be useful (in her case, she used typologies to develop a definition of contemporary terrorism). However, typologies have been criticized on several grounds. First, there is no limit to the number of "types" – that is, the number of characteristics in a typology is arbitrary. Similarly, when to stop the typological breakdown is unclear. Categories should be mutually exclusive, but when they are, their explanatory scope may be limited. Additionally, the boundaries between categories can be fuzzy, clouding conceptual clarity. For these reasons, many social scientists shy away from

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typological theories. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is not to argue in favor of typological theories. However, studying smaller aspects of terrorism can tell us a great deal, allowing scholars and policy makers to build upon this information to develop theory and policy.

Pape (2003, 2005; Pape & Feldman, 2010), for example, focused his research on suicide terrorism campaigns – one type of terrorism. Contrary to popular opinion, Pape found that suicide terrorism is not driven by religion (used only as a recruiting tool), but rather a secular nationalist goal: "to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland" (Pape, 2005, p. 4). Pape (2005, p. 4) identified three main trends supporting this hypothesis: (1) suicide terrorism are not isolated, but occur in organized campaigns; (2) suicide attacks are more likely to target democracies, which are more easily persuaded by citizens to negotiate with the terrorist group; and (3) groups sponsoring suicide terrorism campaigns aspire toward political self-determination, and a necessary first step is to remove a democratic power from a territory they want. This has implications for state governments.

Pape's hypothesis can be studied using other outcomes, like terrorism generally, broadening the scope of his findings. Braithwaite (1989) argues that the causal instances outlined in a general theory must account for most types of the behavior the theory claims to explain and must explain some variance in all of the cases. Indeed, one criterion used to evaluate theory is whether the theory is broad in scope. Accordingly, a good theory must account for a wide range of behaviors. Exploring theoretical predictors on specific types of terrorism – like terrorism directed at police – has the potential to demonstrate the broad scope of a theory or the limits of a theory.

Additionally, target types matter. Terrorism is a struggle between those without power against those with power. Terrorist groups typically have limited resources and must focus their efforts wisely to have the biggest desired impact. Accordingly, they are selective in their targets (see Sandler & Lapan, 1988), and disaggregating target types allows for enriched theoretical development. For example, Martin and colleagues (2009) found that organization type affected collective violence against certain target types. Rorie (2008) concluded that target type affected whether a terrorist group claimed an attack. Terrorists may attack

the police for reasons both similar to and different from other targets. However, little is known about how target types compare because studies of terrorist attacks on police are scant.

One notable exception is the work of Freilich and Chermak (2009; see also Deflem, 2011; Deflem & Sutphin, 2006). Drawing from their Extremist Crime Database focusing on attacks in the United States since 1990, these scholars critically examined two cases of right-wing extremist attacks on police in the context of situational crime prevention. They suggested a strategy to prevent such attacks on police can be found through hard and soft situational crime prevention techniques, which reduce the opportunity for "routine" encounters to escalate into violence. While their study was exploratory, they encouraged additional research on extremist attacks on police – a recommendation echoed here.

Discussion

This paper has established that attacks on police should be considered terrorism. Police are attractive targets of terrorists for several reasons, and terrorist groups have more reasons to attack the police than most other targets. In many instances, police are non-combatants and are not actively engaged in warfare; accordingly, attacks on them are akin to attacks on civilians or military personnel during peacetime. Police are not actively involved in wartime conflict and so when they are attacked, they are victims of terrorists. In other instances, the line between the police and the military is blurred and in some countries – like Afghanistan – the police are specifically charged with fighting insurgents and terrorists; however, similar to military targets, attacks on police can be considered acts of terrorism when police are off duty or otherwise not engaged in active conflict. Any act of terrorism, though, is asymmetric conflict operating outside the boundaries of the IHL, so an attack on police by terrorists should be considered terrorism. In any event, little is known about terrorist attacks targeting the police.

Studying terrorist attacks on police is beneficial for both theoretical development and generating evidence-based policies that can protect both the police and the public. Terrorists have a lot to gain by attacking the police and the public has much to lose when terrorists attack police – in terms of safety and morale. This paper is a call to "academic arms" to study such attacks.

First, we need to know more about the nature and extent of this problem. Freilich and Chermak (2009) reported on extremist attacks on police in the United States. Deflem (2011) described terrorism against police in Afghanistan and, with Sutphin, reviewed attacks on police in Iraq (Deflem & Sutphin, 2006). These make a significant contribution to understanding such attacks, but more needs to be done. Further studies describing terrorist attacks on police are needed, outlining geographical areas high and low in attacks on police, which organizations are more likely to attack the police, whether police are primary or ancillary targets, and so on. These will help build theories about attacks on police, which likely will support theories of terrorism, generally.

Second, when we have more information describing terrorist attacks on police, researchers should compare attacks on police with attacks on other targets and explore the factors affecting terrorist attacks on police. Are these factors similar to or different from correlates influencing terrorism against other targets? Additionally, scholars can test theories of terrorism, which should apply to attacks on police if the theories are worth their salt. For example, Pape's (2005; Pape & Feldman, 2010) theory that the presence of a foreign military – especially one of a different religion – on a country's soil spawns suicide attacks in that state may apply to attacks on police, especially when the police (paramilitary or otherwise) are helping that foreign military like the police helping the United States in Afghanistan. If support is found for this and other theories of terrorism using specific terrorist targets (like the police) as dependent variables, then the theory will be bolstered by having a broader scope. In short, focusing on terrorist attacks on police can contribute to moving the field forward.

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