

# Terrorism works, but only when governments allow it to

April 28 2014

---



Terrorism does work, but only when governments respond to it in a violent fashion and play into the terrorists' strategy, argues Michigan State University's Jakana Thomas. Credit: Michigan State University

Terrorism can be a successful strategy for rebel groups during civil war, but only when governments allow it to work, finds a new study by a Michigan State University political scientist.

Responding to acts of terrorism with violence is more likely to prolong

the conflict. However, if governments negotiate or use sound counterterrorism efforts, they stand a better chance of bringing about a peaceful resolution, said Jakana Thomas, assistant professor of [political science](#).

Her study appears online in the *American Journal of Political Science*.

"Terrorism can work, but only if a government allows it to," Thomas said. "When governments attempt to quash the terrorists and kill civilians in the process – as so often happens – their response backfires and feeds into the terrorists' strategy."

Thomas analyzed civil conflict from 1989 to 2010 in Africa, which has seen a drastic rise in terrorism. Some 45 of the 106 African rebel groups in the study carried out [terrorist attacks](#). Rebels practicing terrorism in Somalia, Kenya, Libya and other African countries have threatened regional stability and posed security threats globally.

"That Western nations, including the United States and France, have begun devoting resources to support counterterrorism in Africa underscores its significance," Thomas said.

The findings are relevant globally. When Thomas compared terrorism in Africa with the rest of the world she found the types of attacks (such as bombings, armed assaults and assassinations) and the targets of the attacks (such as governments, businesses and civilians) were nearly identical.

Her study is one of the first to examine terrorism in the context of civil war. Previous research on the effectiveness of terrorism has been inconclusive.

Thomas refutes the popular adage that governments do not negotiate

with terrorists. According to the study, rebel groups employing a greater number of terror attacks were much more likely to participate in negotiations and gain more concessions from the ruling party in the months following the conflict.

"Governments should consider negotiating with disaffected people in the country. That doesn't necessarily have to be the groups using terrorism; it can be other groups, such as civil groups operating on behalf of these armed rebels," Thomas said.

"I'm not suggesting we should negotiate with Al-Qaeda," she added. "This is in the context of [civil war](#) with routine violence, when negotiating with these domestic rebel groups may be the only way forward."

Another way governments might deal with the problem is by finding ways of ending civil wars once they start. As much as [terrorism](#) is a problem, Thomas said, a government refusing to seek peaceful settlements is also a problem.

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Terrorism works, but only when governments allow it to (2014, April 28) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-terrorism.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--