Terrorism as failed political communication
Terrorism as Failed Political Communication
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Abstract
Some terrorist acts are meant to communicate something beyond the violence they cause. They are a form of political communication that should be studied as such. To identify the acts we consider politically communicative, we develop a typology of primary objectives that ranges from strategic goals to such communicative statements as moral condemnation. We examine why, as a form of political communication, terrorist acts typically fail. Terrorism fails as political communication because it is violent; because targeted audiences often have little prior awareness of the group’s grievances; because it is sometimes a complex communication; and because governments and media frame issues in a way that sidelines the act’s communicative content. In promoting a better understanding of the message, and why it fails, we hope to make this component of terrorism a more robust subject of study for political communication scholars.

Keywords

terrorism, political communication, communication failure, speech acts, rhetoric

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Communication. The revolution in communications technology has dramatically changed how terrorist organizations communicate. E-mails, fax transmissions, websites, cell phones, and satellite telephones have made it possible for organizations to contemplate a global strategy. However, too great a reliance on such technology leaves organizations vulnerable to sophisticated monitoring of communication.