Society (2018) 55:248–252
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-018-0246-x

SYMPOSIUM: WHAT IS ANTIFA?

Is Antifa a Terrorist Group?

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Published online: 15 May 2018

Abstract
Starting in 2016, a number of protests and physical confrontations aimed at individuals and groups associated with right wing politics in the United States have been attributed to an ill-defined entity called "antifa": short for anti-fascist. A high profile example took place in Charlottseville, Virginia on August 11-12, 2017. During two days of conflict and violence, anti right wing protesters clashed with right wing supporters. During the second day of the confrontation, a right-wing supporter drove a car into a crowd of protesters, killing one person and injuring 35 others. While many antifa supporters see it as a defense against right wing extremism, some on the right view supporters instead as terrorists. I tackle these issues in this essay by applying the guidelines of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to determine whether the actions by antifa supporters during the Charlottesville incident consitute terrrorism. I conclude that while the events share many characteristics of terrorist attacks, they do not include all of the elements of terrorism required by the GTD. I also question whether antifa can be considered to constitute a "group" at this point in time. My essay highlights how complicated it is to distinghish terrorism from other forms of illegal violence.

Keywords Terrorism · Antifa · Right-wing extremism · Political violence

During 2016 and 2017 there were a growing number of violent attacks on far right speeches and activities in the United States by individuals, some of whom identify with a loosely defined movement called "antifa"—short for anti-fascists. Most notably, antifa supporters were among those who protested the 2016 election of Donald Trump, participated in the February 2017 University of California, Berkeley protests against alt-right speaker Milo Yiannopoulos, threatened to disrupt the 82nd Avenue of Roses Parade after hearing that the Multnomah County, Oregon Republican Party would participate (the parade was ultimately canceled), and confronted alt-right supporters in Boston and Berkeley, California (Beinart 2017). While the press attention received by antifa is recent, anti-fascist opposition groups can be traced back at least to the 1920s and '30s, when militant leftists battled fascists in the streets of Germany, Italy, and Spain (Beinart 2017). Antifascist movements generally faded with the end of World War II but began to rise again in Europe and the United States in the late 1980s, in response to the perceived growth in neo-Nazism.

One of the highest profile recent events associated with antifa occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11–12, 2017. In this usually quiet university town, rumors started to circulate about a right-wing gathering called Unite the Right Rally planned for Saturday, August 12. The stated goal of the rally was to oppose the removal of a statue of General Robert E. Lee from a local park. By Friday, August 11, a diverse grab bag of right-wing supporters had gathered for the rally, including opponents of removing Confederate statues, as well as members of various militia groups, white supremacists and white nationalists, Klansmen, and neo-Nazis. Word began to spread that white nationalists and neo-Nazis were planning a torchlight procession for Friday night. A little after 8 p.m., Richard Spencer, a leader of far-right white nationalists and a scheduled headline speaker at the Saturday rally, confirmed to a reporter that the march was on for 9 pm and gave the location. Some marchers waved "Trump/Pence" signs and Confederate flags; some also chanted racist and anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim slogans. Some carried semi-automatic rifles (which is legal in Virginia).

Opponents of the right-wing marchers were equally diverse, including militant left-wing supporters as well as students, local residents, civil rights leaders, members of church

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groups and others who were simply curious about the unfolding confrontation (Heim 2017). On the evening of August 11, counter-protesters chanted their own slogans and clashed with the marchers in confrontations that gradually became more violent. On the morning of August 12, Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency, asserting that public safety could not be safeguarded without additional help. As the protesters and counter protesters clashed, the Virginia State Police declared the assembly to be unlawful. In the early afternoon, James A. Fields Jr., a man with links to white-supremacist groups, rammed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters about a half-mile from the rally site, killing one person and injuring 35 others (Hawes and Perez-Penadec 2017).

Fueling the growing interest in antifa in the United States is the election of Donald Trump, who has been a frequent target of the movement's supporters. For many, the connection between President Trump and the alt-right was strengthened by his response to the confrontations in Charlottesville. When he commented on the incident, Trump did not specifically denounce white nationalists, instead generally condemning "hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides." His statement and his subsequent defenses of it, in which he also referred to "very fine people on both sides," were seen by critics as implying moral equivalence between the white supremacist marchers and those who protested against them, and were interpreted by many as a sign that he was sympathetic to white supremacy (Gray 2017). Shortly after the Charlottesville events, Fox news (2017a) concluded that antifa was a "domestic terrorist organization." An article by Josh Meyer (2017) claims that internal documents within the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation now use the label "domestic terrorist violence" in their confidential intelligence about antifa.

Is antifa a terrorist group? This seemingly straightforward question is actually quite complex when we pursue the details. In this essay, I provide an answer to this question by applying the classification scheme used to define terrorism by the team that collects the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) at the University of Maryland (LaFree et al. 2015). But before I tackle the question of what constitutes a terrorist attack, I first consider the even more basic question of whether antifa can be considered a group at all.

Is Antifa a Group?

In our recent book, Martha Crenshaw and I (Crenshaw and LaFree 2017) argue that from both a policy and research standpoint, the concept of a terrorist group is an abstraction around which there is a great deal of variation. When we think of terrorist groups what usually comes to mind are highly organized entities that persist over time, have a more or less well-defined chain of command and exhibit stable leadership along with hierarchical organizational structures. We think of groups like al Qa'ida or ISIS or the IRA. However, on the other end of the spectrum are individuals who carry out terrorist attacks but are not members of any known organization and who have no formal links to a specific group. And between these two extremes, there are a bewildering array of alternatives.

In general, antifa falls on the less structured side of this continuum. It is not a highly organized entity. It has not persisted over time. There is little evidence of a chain of command or a stable leadership structure. To this point in time antifa seems to be more of a movement than a group. In this respect, the current form of antifa resembles other broad political phenomena like the anti-abortion or animal rights movements. Individuals who oppose abortion or using animals for experiments encompass a diverse range of positions, stretching from those who do not support the use of abortion or using animals in laboratories, to those who legally protest these practices, to those who are willing to use violence to stop them. This is not to say that terrorist attacks are only violent when committed by organized groups. Terrorist attacks can be quite deadly even when a specific group does not perpetrate them. Think of the recent attacks by the Tsarnaev Brothers during the Boston Marathon in 2013 or the deadly attack by Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City in 1995 that claimed the lives of 168 victims.

Therefore, I am skeptical about whether in its current form antifa constitutes a group. However, can we argue that individuals associated with antifa have nonetheless committed acts of terrorism? To answer this question, I turn next to the inclusion rules used by the GTD.

Defining Terrorism in the GTD

GTD collection begins with more than 2 million articles published daily worldwide in order to identify the relatively small subset of articles that describe terrorist attacks. Data collection uses customized search strings to isolate an initial pool of potentially relevant articles, followed by more sophisticated techniques to further refine the search results. After the articles most likely to describe bona fide terrorist attacks have been identified, a team of researchers reviews each case and records information for the database. At present, the GTD includes information on more than 170,000 terrorist attacks, worldwide, from 1970 to 2016.

The GTD defines a terrorist attack as *the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a nonstate actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation*. From this definition, the GTD team has developed six criteria to determine whether an incident should be included in the database. Three of these criteria must always be present for an incident to be included.

In addition, two of the three other criteria must be present to be included in the database (for more details, see LaFree et al. 2015). The three mandatory criteria are that the incident (1) be intentional, (2) include some level of violence or immediate threat of violence, and (3) the perpetrators of the incident must be sub-national actors. In addition, at least two of the following three criteria must be present for an incident to be included in the GTD: (1) the act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious or social goal; (2) there must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience than the immediate victims; and (3) the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities.

It may not be immediately obvious from this brief description, but the GTD is an *event* database. In other words, cases are included only if there is some event that our team classifies as a terrorist attack, according to the rules I have just described. So the relevant question is: Have individuals who are connected to the antifa movement committed any acts of terrorism to this point in time? Given that allegations of antifa terrorism have been connected especially to the Charlottesville case, and that there is a good deal of open source data on this case, I have chosen to use it as an example.

Did Antifa Supporters Commit a Terrorist Attack in Charlottesville?

In Table 1, I list the results of applying the three mandatory GTD terrorism criteria and the three criteria that have to be present in at least two of three instances to the actions of putative antifa supporters during the Charlottesville confrontations. According to Table 1, in the Charlottesville case antifa met two of the three mandatory GTD requirements of terrorist attacks but is missing the third requirement. Again, in the Charlottesville case, certain actions by antifa supporters seem to meet all three of the secondary requirements to classify an event as terrorism in the GTD.

Table 1 Applying the global terrorism database (GTD) checklist to Antifa in the Charlottesville case

Criterion	Does antifa meet the requirement?
Mandatory requirements:	
1. Incident must be intentional	No
2. Violence or threat of violence	Yes
3. Sub-national actors	Yes
2 of 3 requirements:	
4. Political, economic, religious, or social goal	Yes
5. Larger audience	Yes
6. Outside legitimate warfare	Yes

Let us begin with the five GTD terrorism requirements that are met by antifa supporters in the Charlottesville case. First, to be classified as a terrorist attack, the GTD requires that the incident involve some level of violence or the immediate threat of violence (START 2017). Attacks against persons must be intended to cause injury (throwing an egg at someone does not satisfy this criterion). Descriptions of the Charlottesville confrontation (Astor et al. 2017; Penny 2017) report that a number of antifa activists carried sticks, blocked entrances to the park where white supremacists planned to gather, and fought with right-wing marchers. One student eyewitness from the University of Virginia noted that, "I was on Market Street around 11:30 a.m. when a counter-protester ripped a newspaper stand off the sidewalk and threw it at alt-right protesters. I saw another man from the white supremacist crowd being chased and beaten. People were hitting him with their signs" (Pearce 2017). Another counter protester who was present explained that, "before the attack occurred, we chased the Nazis out of their park, removing their platform" (Pearce 2017). Therefore, it does appear that the actions of antifa supporters in this case would meet the requirement that the incident involve some level of violence or the immediate threat of violence.

Second, another definitional requirement of the GTD is that the acts recorded be limited to "non-state actors." This requirement is used to distinguish political violence committed by groups and individuals from the violence committed by nation-states. There is no evidence that antifa supporters in the Charlottesville incident were state actors, such as police officers or soldiers, so the case clearly meets the non-state actor requirement.

Third, to be included in the GTD, the act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal. The actions of the antifa supporters, in both Charlottesville and elsewhere, are explicitly political. Counter protesters in Charlottesville clearly saw themselves as taking a political stand by countering racism and hate crime (Astor et al. 2017; Beinart 2017). In fact, the demonstrations have directly targeted Trump and other politicians.

Fourth, another GTD criterion is that there must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience than the immediate victims. To apply this criterion, the GTD includes the act taken in its entirety, irrespective of whether every individual involved in carrying out the act was aware of this intention. As long as any of the planners or decision-makers behind an attack intended to coerce, intimidate or publicize it, the criterion is met. A reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* (Armengol 2017) who witnessed the second day of the confrontation—just before Fields rammed his car into the counter protesters–noted that:

> The white nationalists, for the time being, seemed to have dispersed. Some of the armed militia members had just driven away in vans and pickup trucks. The crowd was jubilant. Demonstrators waved flags calling for solidarity and they chanted anti-racist slogans, declaring, 'Whose streets? Our streets!' and 'Black lives matter!' They hooted, played on drums and blew horns.

This response seems to support the claim that many of the counter protesters were aware of the media attention being generated by the events taking place and were clearly interested in having their message reach a broader audience than those who directly participated (Wang 2017).

Finally, another consideration for inclusion in the GTD is the requirement that the action be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities. In particular, this refers to whether the attack targeted non-combatants or civilians. This requirement of the GTD is most frequently invoked to distinguish terrorist attacks from conventional military confrontations during wars. Clearly, the Charlottesville case falls outside the war context.

Table 1 shows that the main GTD requirement that is not present in the Charlottesville case is that the incident be intentional; that it be the result of a conscious calculation on the part of the perpetrators. It turns out that measuring the intentions of perpetrators is quite complex and for several reasons these complexities may be especially great in a case like the one that took place in Charlottesville. The idea of intentionality implies that the perpetrator instigated the attack. While it is not entirely clear, it appears that in the Charlottesville case the antifa supporters were mostly responding to the actions of the marchers (*Fox News* 2017b; Heim 2017). The GTD team does not typically include as terrorism events where two opposing sides are locked in confrontation—even if it turns violent. So for example, the GTD usually excludes riots, protests, clashes, strategic responses (e.g. shoot-outs with police in response to a raid or other targeted action by law enforcement), and large-scale continuous conflicts without a discrete beginning and end.

The GTD team poses a series of questions about incidents in order to help determine whether a case like the one occurring in Charlottesville was intentional rather than a spontaneous response to unfolding events. First, did the perpetrators approach the incident with the intent of doing harm? In the Charlottesville case, the counter demonstrators seemed to be mostly reacting to the marchers. Second, were there prior announcements about doing harm made on social media? The social media announcements before the confrontation seemed to focus on disrupting the march but not doing harm to the marchers. Third, was there evidence of a coordinated attack (e.g., a bomb is detonated and then snipers shoot first responders who rush to the scene)? There was no evidence of a coordinated attack on the part of the counter protesters. Fourth, was there a discriminate target of the attack (e.g., a polling station, political figure, newspaper office, public transportation)? The target of the counter protesters was generally the march itself rather than a specific target. Were weapons used that required advance assembly or were otherwise unavailable in the location where the attack took place? The counter protesters did bring along sticks and shields, but in general, the weapons used by the counter protesters were either low tech or defensive. Finally, did the event evolve into a riot where the attacks were part of a general conflagration rather than a discriminate event? Clearly, in the case of the counter protesters at Charlottesville it was often difficult to make this distinction. On balance, the incident in Charlottesville does not seem to meet the GTD requirement that the perpetrators came to the incident with the intention of committing violence.

Conclusion

To summarize, I conclude that at this point in time antifa does not constitute a group and based on my application of the GTD coding rules, the actions of counter protesters in Charlottesville in 2017 does not constitute a terrorist attack. GTD includes no cases attributed to antifa through the end of 2016, however, the 2017 data had not yet been publicly released when this essay was being prepared. I was able to look at the unofficial GTD for 2017 and while it is not yet definite, it looks like GTD will not attribute any 2017 cases to antifa, although it is likely that the GTD will classify the actions of James A. Fields Jr., who rammed his car into the group of counter protesters, as a terrorist attack. Perhaps more than anything else, the Charlottesville case illustrates how challenging it is to separate terrorist attacks from other forms of violence. Some counter protesters at Charlottesville were antifa supporters and some of those supporters used violent methods, were sub-national actors, had political motives, were playing to a larger audience and were not part of a wartime confrontation. But despite these similarities to other events that we treat as terrorism, GTD classification rules will likely exclude antifa in the Charlottesville case because it is not clear that antifa supporters went to the alt-right rally with the intention of committing an act of politically motivated violence.

It is important to note that the GTD team strives to apply these inclusion rules in the exact same way in all cases and regardless of ideology. In fact, the antifa outcome for Charlottesville, if it is verified when the data are finalized and published, is not that unusual. The GTD excludes a diverse range of incidents because of the requirement that to qualify as terrorism, incidents must be intentional rather than spontaneous. For example, the sovereign citizen movement is a loose grouping of individuals who see themselves as not answerable to any government laws but only to their particular interpretation of common law (FBI 2010). In recent years, individuals who claim an affiliation with this movement have been involved in a wide variety of violent incidents, many of which

have involved shooting police officers (MacNab 2014). The GTD generally excludes sovereign citizen cases where a police officer makes a routine traffic stop of an individual who then shoots the officer and claims that he did so because he is a sovereign citizen who does not have to follow governmental laws. As with the Charlottesville case, these incidents fit the other GTD requirements for terrorism, but they do not meet the requirement that perpetrators intentionally sought out police to commit the violent act. At the same time, if a perpetrator planned an ambush of a police officer and then committed an act of violence against that officer in the name of the sovereign citizen movement, the GTD would likely include the case.

It is important to note that these conclusions are based on my interpretation of the classification rules of the GTD. While the GTD has become a widely used data source on terrorism, at this point in time there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism. Terrorism definitions and classifications of specific incidents vary by country and even by different agencies within the same country. Moreover, as we have seen above, the Charlottesville case shares many of the characteristics of the thousands of attacks that the GTD includes as terrorism.

I focused in this essay on the Charlottesville case, and it could be that other antifa-related actions that occurred in 2017—like the violence at alt-right events in Boston and Berkeley, California (Richardson 2017)—might still end up in the official version of the GTD. The classification of the Charlottesville case also does not mean that antifa will never commit an attack that would qualify as terrorism in the GTD. Nevertheless, based on my application of the GTD classification system, antifa did not commit a terrorist attack in Charlottesville and most likely has not yet committed a terrorist attack anywhere else.

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank Erin Miller and David Pyrooz for helpful comments on an earlier draft. Any errors are mine alone.

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