

Tricia Bacon. “Is the Enemy of My Enemy My Friend?” *Security Studies* 27:3 (2018): 345-378. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1416813>.

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The panorama of terrorism comprises not only prominent groups such as al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), but also webs of relationships among these organizations and their lesser-known allies. Around the world, terrorist groups team up for joint attacks, training, and even moral support. Although such cooperation has occurred for decades, it is only in the past several years that a wave of research on the subject of terrorist group alliances has emerged. Tricia Bacon’s scholarship, including this article, is an important part of this body of work.

In the article, Bacon asks why terrorist groups form interorganizational alliances. This is a fundamental question, given the consequential nature of terrorist group cooperation. Research demonstrates that terrorist group alliances are associated with organizational lethality, longevity, and learning.¹ Yet before Bacon’s work, there had been little theorizing on the sources of this cooperation.

The article offers several substantial contributions. First, it draws attention to an interesting and understudied topic: terrorist alliances that cluster around major “hubs.” This is the thrust of several pieces of

¹ Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, “The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks,” *Journal of Politics* 70:2 (2008): 437-449; Michael C. Horowitz, “Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovation: The Case of Suicide Terrorism,” *International Organization* 64:1 (2010): 33864; Michael C. Horowitz and Philip B.K. Potter, “Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58:2 (2014): 199-225; Brian J. Phillips, “Terrorist Group Cooperation and Longevity,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58:2 (2014): 336-347. On potentially detrimental (to involved groups) aspects, see Daniel Byman, “Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations,” *Security Studies* 23:3 (July 2014): 431-470, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.935228>.

scholarship by Bacon, including her excellent book.² Other work has shown that these specific types of alliances have important consequences,³ and it seems intuitive given the prominence of groups like al Qaeda and ISIS, which are the centers of their respective alliance networks. There has been somewhat of a boom of research in recent years on terrorist group alliances, but Bacon's work stands out for its emphasis on hubs in particular. Additionally, further speaking to the novelty of the research, only a few studies have sought to understand the *roots* of terrorist group alliances, whether hub-based or not.

The second contribution is the theoretical framework, which offers a detailed and plausible explanation for terrorist group cooperation. Interestingly, Bacon does not seek to create a general theory explaining all terrorist organizational alliances, but sets out clear scope conditions. The article focuses on alliances involving hubs, as mentioned above. Additionally, the article concentrates on what Bacon calls "non-rival alliances" (e.g., 350), or alliances among groups that do not at times fight each other. Regarding the theory, Bacon argues that three factors explain alliances: organizational needs, shared identity characteristics, and trust. She refers to these as "jointly sufficient conditions" because the presence of only two factors might be insufficient to lead to an alliance. The article presents a diagram, Figure 1 (353), which helpfully outlines the conditions under which organizational needs might lead to alliances, group decline, or other outcomes. Overall the article introduces a nuanced argument that contrasts well with theories of terrorist group cooperation based, for example, on capability aggregation.⁴

The third contribution of the article is its empirical section consisting of rich case studies of alliances in several contexts. Of the recent studies that seek to explain terrorist group cooperation, most are quantitative and examine global samples.⁵ While the global quantitative studies claim to offer generalizable findings, of course they cannot go in-depth with each of the terrorist groups to thoroughly understand causal mechanisms. Bacon's qualitative analysis, then, fills a crucial gap in that regard. The article explores relationships involving two groups, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and al-Qaeda. The inclusion of a more historical case, the PFLP, is helpful for demonstrating that Bacon's argument is not simply a theory of al-Qaeda. Given the substantial differences between the groups, the fact that the argument finds support in both cases suggests a good deal of external validity. The case studies are dyadic, as they examine the PFLP's attempt to ally with the Japanese Red Army, its lack of such efforts with the Weathermen, and al-Qaeda's alliance with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in Algeria. The negative case of the Weathermen is especially

² Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). See also Tricia Bacon, "Alliance Hubs: Focal Points in the International Terrorist Landscape," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8:4 (June 2014): 4-26.

³ Horowitz and Potter, "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality."

⁴ Ely Karmon, *Coalitions Between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists and Islamists* (Leiden: Nijhoff Publishers, 2005); Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵ Victor H. Asal et al., "With Friends Like These ... Why Terrorist Organizations Ally," *International Public Management Journal* 19:1 (January 2016): 1-30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2015.1027431>; Navin Bapat and Kanisha Bond, "Alliances Amongst Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science* 42:4 (2012): 793-824; Brian J. Phillips, "Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1431365>.

interesting and useful. Not enough case studies analyze negative cases. This article's qualitative analyses are executed well, harnessing evidence from interviews, declassified documents, and secondary sources.

The policy suggestions based in the research are an additional contribution. One implication of the findings is that a goal of counterterrorism should be to reduce the capabilities of hub groups in particular. A state might not plan to target a hub if that group is not attacking the state – even though the hub's partner organizations, its dependencies, might be a more direct threat. However, given the importance of hubs to their partners, perhaps they should become focal points for states and international institutions. Another policy implication is that states should sow mistrust among terrorist organizations. This seems important given the advantages such groups draw from alliances.

Beyond these contributions, Bacon's work implicitly raises a number of issues that can be addressed with future research. One set of questions concerns the extent to which the findings of this article are applicable to other cases. Bacon's laser-like focus on perhaps the most important type of terrorist cooperation inspires questions about other types. Alliance hubs are clearly worth understanding, and the article is convincing in that regard. But can the theory, or some elements of the theory, be applied to terrorist alliances that do not involve hubs? What are the differences between hub-based and non-hub-based terrorist group alliances? Which type of alliance is more common? Scholars could make use of social network analysis, drawing on concepts such as centrality as well as hub-and-spoke networks, to build on Bacon's work.

Another question related to generalizability involves the article's scope condition of focusing on non-rival alliances. Empirically, how common are such alliances? It seems reasonable to assume that purely cooperative relationships are conceptually distinct from 'it's complicated' relationships – those characterized by both cooperation and occasional intergroup violence. Frenemy relationships among terrorists seem quite common, so it seems important to understand these types of alliances as well. Finally, regarding generalizability, the article focuses on alliances where the groups have expectations of future collaboration, part of what Assaf Moghadam refers to as high-end cooperation.⁶ Is Bacon's argument applicable to shorter-term collaboration? If not, how could the theory be modified to explain shorter-term cooperation?

The article overall makes a convincing case for the three conditions necessary for alliances (organizational needs, shared identity characteristics, and trust). However, conceptually, there are some questions that might be able to be addressed in future research. First, the three conditions are not completely independent. For example, Bacon writes that trust can be facilitated by homophily (357), which is related to shared identity. To what extent can we distinguish shared identity from trust? Which characteristic is more essential for alliance formation? An additional question has to do with the article's focus on relationships between hub groups and weaker groups. From the very beginning, then, the argument presupposes a fourth condition, power asymmetry. This is not a problem for the theory, but it suggests the opportunity for additional research that further brings together material (e.g., capacity) and non-material (identity, trust) alliance arguments.

Overall, Bacon's article sheds light on a critical topic in security studies: cooperation among terrorist groups, particularly involving central nodes in the networks. It presents a clear and nuanced theory for why this cooperation might occur, and uses a well-designed set of case studies to demonstrate that the theory is

⁶ Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

applicable in a range of cases around the world. Scholars will benefit from reading this article to understand the interdependent nature of global terrorism, and future research will benefit from drawing on the theory.

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