



# Foreign Aid and Counterterrorism

**Burcu Savun and Daniel C. Tirone**

12 June 2017

**Over the last two decades, democracy assistance programs have become an important component of foreign aid budgets of many Western democracies. Could these programs also aid counterterrorism?**

**Author's note:** *This contribution is based on the article “Foreign Aid as a Counterterrorism tool: More Liberty, Less Terror?” by Savun and Tirone 2017.*

When the Trump administration revealed its “skinny” budget proposal earlier this year, there was a strong and swift reaction to the proposed 28% cut to State Department funding. Critics questioned whether it was wise to cut foreign assistance during a period in which there are more global refugees than at any period since World War II. Others suggested that the reduced funding to the United Nations would “make it impossible” for that organization to do its job.

An additional consequence of this decrease in State Department funding is reduced spending on foreign aid, with every country but Israel facing potential cuts in U.S. assistance. The US secretary of state Rex Tillerson defended the budget cuts, arguing that the Administration “was acting on the expectation that there would be fewer conflicts involving the US directly as the time goes by and its allies would do more themselves to contribute to development aid and disaster assistance.”

However, these cuts could prove to be harmful not only to the countries which rely on this assistance, but also to broader U.S. interests.

One such benefit of foreign aid is its ability to promote global democracy, which Condoleeza Rice described as part of the U.S. national interest but which would be threatened with reductions in aid. Decreasing foreign aid could also have a

### Latest

**An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme**

**Chances for Peace in the Third Decade**

**A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham**

**A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind**

### Most read

**The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities**

**Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug**

negative effect on another one of its benefits: reducing terrorism in other countries.

## Terrorism and Foreign Aid: What are the links?

Image credit: [US Marine Corps/Wikimedia](#).

Potential links between foreign aid and terrorism have a long – and contentious – history. George W. Bush publicly identified a link between the two in remarks he delivered shortly after 9/11, arguing for an increase in development assistance to [combat poverty which increased terrorism](#). The logic was that the lack of jobs and economic opportunity generally can breed anger and frustration which terrorist organizations can use to grow their ranks. The head of the African Development bank recently restated this thought when he argued that cuts in U.S. foreign aid to Africa would “[turn the continent into ‘a recruiting field for terrorists’](#)” by reducing jobs foreign aid supports.

While there is an intuitive logic to this perspective, it is not strongly supported by [academic research](#). Researchers have not been able to identify any consistent effects of foreign aid on reducing terrorism, and some have even argued that such arguments may have negative consequences such as [increasing xenophobia](#) against individuals from developing countries.

Despite the lack of evidence for economic aid reducing terrorism by increasing economic development, we argue that foreign aid can still play a role in counterterrorism policies. In our [recent research](#), we provide evidence that governance and civil society aid can dampen the participation in and support for terrorism by improving the political conditions of a country.

## Cartels

---

## ORG's Vision

---

## Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

Democracy promotion programs, which are aimed at fostering moves towards democracy in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments, have seen a dramatic increase since the 1990s. While approximately 30 developing countries received democracy aid from OECD donors in 1990, the corresponding figure was 134 in 2013. Research into U.S. democracy promotion programs during this period also found that it reached nearly 75% of those countries deemed to be eligible for it across all of the major global regions. The size of the aid packages has also increased, with a median aid value of \$10 million in 2000 and \$46 million in 2010.

These aid programs seek to advance democracy by providing funds aimed at improving governance and civil society institutions in the aid receiving country. The OECD, whose members provide the majority of this type of foreign assistance, [governance aid](#) as that which is intended to enhance “the accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness of the official sector”, while civil society assistance is meant to “integrate participation and pluralism, including the right of opposition, into the political life of the country.”

These improvements in governance and civil society are the key links between foreign assistance and terror reduction. Although there are many reasons why people may adopt extremist ideology and therefore there is no “standard” profile of a terrorist, recent discussions in policy circles suggest that poor political conditions provide a breeding ground for extremists. For example, at the [2015 Summit on Countering Violent Extremism](#), President Barack Obama stated: “We have to address the political grievances that terrorists exploit... When people are oppressed, and human rights are denied.... when dissent is silenced, it feeds violent extremism. It creates an environment that is ripe for terrorists to exploit.”

Supporting this belief, research has shown that low levels of **civil liberties** and **political participation**, state **repression**, and abuse of **physical integrity rights** are shown to be associated with greater participation in terrorism.

Foreign democracy assistance can therefore reduce the appeal of terrorism in recipient countries in multiple ways. By improving the recipient's civil society, foreign aid can reduce the state's ability to repress the civil liberties of its citizens. This aid can also dampen citizens' participation in terrorism by supporting community participation programs which are designed to bring citizen groups and leaders together to address local grievances and problems.

By strengthening a country's judicial institutions and the rule of law, foreign assistance can also increase citizens' confidence in **legal procedures and courts**. This makes them more likely to utilize established laws as a means of dispute resolution rather than turning to physical violence, such as terrorism. Similarly, aid targeted to promote **education** and health, **health** is also effective in dampening terrorism.

## **Caveats**

Our research is encouraging for those who seek additional counterterrorism tools. However, a few cautionary notes are also appropriate.

First, aid given to improve conditions such as civil society, governing institutions, or education and health is not always effective. Examples from countries such as Burma and Jordan have raised questions about the effectiveness of international efforts to promote democracy in the face of **pushback from authoritarian governments**. In the cases where aid fails to

improve domestic political conditions we would not anticipate any beneficial effect on terrorism.

Second, our results specifically look at the impact of these conditions on domestic terrorism, where perpetrators and victims are the nationals of the country in which the incident occurs. Attacks by a group in one country on citizens of another country (transnational terrorism) are not covered in our framework.

Finally, our results suggest that aid's ability to reduce terrorism by improving domestic conditions only works when the country is not also experiencing some form of violent civil conflict. When terrorism is used as part of a civil war, for example, we do not expect (and our results do not support) that aid should be able to address the conditions which are causing the violence. One possible example of this would be the civil war in Sri Lanka, where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was labeled a terrorist organization by groups such as the US, Canada and the EU and **both the insurgents and government were accused** of widespread human rights abuses. In this context it is unsurprising that the brutal civil conflict continued in spite of the \$85 billion in democracy and civil society aid which was provided by the members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) from 1999-2009.

## Conclusion

These conditions all support the belief that reducing terrorism is no easy task and foreign aid is not a universally effective counterterrorism tool. However, it is beneficial to highlight that aid can serve as a non-military strategy to reduce terrorism abroad, and adds an alternative to the unsupported poverty and terrorism pathway. It is also one which is, compared to other strategies

governments might pursue, inexpensive. Foreign assistance currently represents less than 1% of the federal budget, even though Americans consistently overestimate the amount of aid the government provides.

Terrorism continues to be an imminent threat to many states around the world and designing effective counter-terrorism policies remains to be a priority for policymakers. Supporting global democracy and civil rights through foreign aid should therefore be a policy we should seek to expand rather than contract.

**Burcu Savun is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh.**

**Daniel C. Tirone is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Louisiana State University.**

### Share this page



## Contact

Unit 503  
101 Clerkenwell Road London  
EC1R 5BX  
Charity no. 299436

## Follow us



## Useful links

[Login](#)  
[Contact us](#)  
[Sitemap](#)

Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745



Registered with  
**FUNDRAISING  
REGULATOR**

[Accessibility](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#)

[Privacy policy](#)