

# [Constructivist concepts of terrorism](https://assignbuster.com/constructivist-concepts-of-terrorism/)

### How Does Terrorism lend itself toConstructivist Understanding?

Over the past twenty years, the essential nature of global politics has been changing profoundly and becoming even more complex. As the international system evolves it often renders traditional, materially-determined theoretical approaches to International Relations as ill-equipped to compellingly account for action. “ Increasingly, ideational concerns play a vital role as mobilizing influences, causing actors to behave in an unprecedented manner”. Terrorism is a key phenomenon most typical of this complex trend towards the rise of the power of ideas. The terrorism we have seen in the past twenty years is ideologically-motivated and seemingly irrational meaning mainstream traditional theoretical understandings of anticipated action and reaction are no longer useful. In this essay, I will be analysing Constructivism as atheoretical lensfor studying terrorism. First, I will establish the main themes of constructivism and then discuss how terrorism is constructed within the media and by states. I will use this to explain why I believe terrorism fits into the constructivist framework more so than othertraditional IR theories. Then, with a particular focus on the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda and their activities I will show that terrorism only exists within our subjective understandings proved by its various definitions in contrasting communities. Ultimately then I will conclude that terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding because it relies on our subjective reality.

Constructivists believe theworld is constituted socially through inter-subjective interaction. For aconstructivist, agents and structures are mutually constituted and factors suchas norms and identity are central to the establishment and dynamics of worldpolitics. The central constructivist argument is that “ states act on the basisof how they see themselves and others, and what types of behaviour they see asnatural or desirable”[1]. Alexander Wendt a core social constructivism scholar insists that InternationalRelations is ‘ not a given, but constructed’[2]. Wendt placed importance in ‘ the impact of ideas and identities, how they arecreated, how they evolve and shape the way states respond to a situation’[3]. Wendt’s central thought ‘ anarchy is what states make of it’[4]isoften used to identify constructivism. He believes that the anarchy that existsin global politics is socially constructed by states based on their conceptionsof identity and how they create their own security dilemma. He argues that thisconstruction of anarchy is based on how states perceive ‘ the self and theother’ through shared cultural understandings which ‘ arise out ofinteractions’. Although he speaks mostly about state interactionsconstructivist thought can also be used in the interactions between non-stateand state actors too. Terrorism lends itself to Wendt’s understanding of thethree cultures of anarchy which depend on how identities are defined becauseterrorism is ‘ what states make of it’.

In 2012 Alexander Spencer carried out a metaphorical analysis[5]onterrorism which explains how terrorism lends itself to constructivistunderstanding, through a study of the construction of the terrorist identity. Thearticle develops an approach which emphasizes the crucial role of metaphors inthe construction of reality. To illustrate this the article traces themetaphorical construction of Al-Qaeda in the German press after the terroristattacks in New York and Washington in 2001, Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. At first terrorism was represented as a war and this guided states into‘ responding militarily’[6]. However, from 2004 onwards the primary metaphor shifted from war to crime and asa result Al-Qaeda was constructed as a criminal organization rather than amilitary organization. The influence of this construction of terrorism as acrime is seen in the counter terrorism policies of the UK post-9/11 whichfocused on immigration regulations[7].

This shift, the article argues hastransformed Al-Qaeda from an external threat to an internal threat, whichentails a shift in counter-terrorism practices from a military to a judicialresponse. ‘ The view that terrorism is crime leads [states] to favor legalsolutions’[8]. The article argues from a constructivistpoint of view, that terrorism is a social construct. Although usually there isa particular focus on the terrorist actor when it is presented to us in themedia but, the terrorist actor is a product of discourse therefore discourse isa logical starting point for terrorism analysis. In particular we must look atthe discourse of the terrorists’ enemies as it is this which effect theterrorist motivations, strategies, organisational structures and goals. Therefore, constructivist studying discourse rather than the individual is likely to givea more accurate view of actor’s motivations. An investigation into metaphoricalconstructions of terrorism by Hulsse and Spencer in 2008 suggests that thechange in the way the media constructed terrorism might be due to us ‘ gettingused to Al Qaeda terrorism’[9]. Terrorismtherefore lends itself to constructivist understanding as images of terrorexist in different levels of construction and the way in which the mediapresents terrorism has a massive impact on how states respond to it.

Terrorism perhaps best lends itself toconstructivist understanding due to the failure of other IR theories tounderstand the constructivist orientation of Al Qaeda and this has lead them tocome up with a state centric analysis of terrorism. A constructivist approach, thanks to itsmultidisciplinary understanding can give more plausible insights about the roleof norms, ideas, time and context in shaping the relation between states andterrorism as non-state actor.  Realism has very little to contribute to thediscussion of Al Qaeda as a transnational actor post 9/11. This is because at realisms core is thebelief that international affairs is a struggle for power among self-interestedstates. Foreign policy writer Jack Snyder argues because of this approach “ itis difficult for the state-centric theory to explain why the world’s onlysuperpower announced a war against Al Qaeda, a non-state terrorist organization”[10]. International relations writer Burak KÜRKÇÜ[11]that the assumptions of liberalismon democratic institutions with liberal values and neoliberal understanding ofpeaceful change with the help of institutions also fails to adequatelyacknowledge terrorist groups or explain terrorist activity. An undividedopinion on the identification of “ state” on one hand, fractured understandingof defining terrorism on the other hand makes it quite difficult to establish astable ground with traditional theories.

One the other hand, constructivists do not have a picture of the world to be challenged by 9/11because they believe the universe exists within the ideas of the peopleinvolved in it. ‘ Though constructivism offers no picture of what the world islike, it pushes enquiry into the processes by which humans constructunderstandings’[12]. Froma constructivist point of view 9/11 took place because of a constructedidentity which is antipathy for ‘ the west’ and also an organizations desire toconstruct a new identity, one of a pan-Islamic movement. Lynch uses the basictenets of constructivism which we discussed as ‘ ideas, identities and norms’[13]to show how Al-Qaeda’s strategy post-9/11 lends itself to constructivistunderstanding. According to Lynch “ Al-Qaeda’s strategy seeks to promote anIslamic ‘ identity’, define the ‘ interests’ of all Muslims as necessarily in confrontationwith the West, and shape the ‘ normative environment in which Muslim politicsare contested”[14]. Sayfal-Adel, an al-Qaeda strategist argued in a March 2005 interview that the“ attack of 9/11 had succeeded in its primary goal of enticing the United statesinto direct interventions in the Arab region”[15]. This clearly shows why constructivists consider a transnational group with ideologicalinfluence to be an eligible actor on the political stage. Terrorist groups likeAl-Qaeda lend themselves to constructivist understanding because unlike theother IR theories constructivists see structures and actors as mutuallyconstituted. This is because it is not always that the structure determinesstates interests and actions but sometimes agents can influence the nature andthe effects of a structure.

David Schild uses the casestudy of Al Qaeda in his dissertation piece to argue that we can useconstructivism to understand the activities of Al Qaeda and this highlights the“ value and appropriateness”[16]of constructivist enquiry. Through this analysis of Al-Qaeda, David Schildgains insight into how contemporary terrorism functions. A key part of hisconstructivist analysis is the examination of the agent-structure relationshipas “ it is concerned with the patterned manner in which norms (ideationalstructures) and the identities, interests and resultant actions of agentsinteract”[17]. In the case of Al Qaeda then, when you examine how ideational concernsinfluence action and vice versa then tentative generalizations can be maderegarding the functioning of the terrorist organization and in turn ofterrorism in general. Similar to how constructivists have no picture of theworld, Al-Qaeda has no territorial picture of its own, therefore it allows stateactors to construct it for themselves. Lynch argued this point saying “ AlQaeda’s constructivism derives both from structural factors- absence of aterritorial base, a globalized field of contention shaped by the new media andinformation technologies- and Islamist ideas themselves”[18]. Therefore the functioning of Al Qaeda fits into Wendt’s thought processdiscussed at the beginning of this essay that “ social threats are constructed, not natural”[19].  Terrorism lends itself to constructivistunderstanding because it shows reality is socially constructed throughinteraction. Relationships under constructivism are products of historicalprocesses and interaction. Author K. M Fierke[20]argues that the identities of actors such as these terrorist organizations havebeen shaped over time by cultural, political, material and socialcircumstances.

Terrorism lends itself to constructivismbecause the term ‘ terrorist’ itself is so ambiguous and dependent on the personusing the term. “ Terrorism is not a ‘ given’ in the real world; it is instead aninterpretation of events and their presumed causes”[21]the definition of terrorism is therefore based on how it is being interpretedand constructed by individuals or states. We are reminded of this from thewell-known phrase “ one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. Consequently, terrorism only exists within our subjective understandings andthe definition varies “ depending upon the context, available cultural resourcesand combinations of people involved”[22]. For social constructivist, the construction of terrorism as a ‘ social threat’can be seen in the intensity of a counter terrorism policy. Terrorism lendsitself to constructivism because it is a social fact “ which requires humaninstitutions for its existence”[23].

Terrorism lends itself toconstructivist understanding because it is a socio-political concept whosedefinition varies in contrasting communities. At the same time, it has adaptedto the changes in its surroundings which has facilitated the capabilities ofterrorists to utilize resources, solicit funding, and develop new strategies. Since terrorism is defined differently across various institutions, agenciesand countries many conclude that there is not a single acceptable definitionfor terrorism that exists, after all one countries interests are different tothat of another. As a result, an event can be considered a terrorist incidentby some but a very similar act may be considered as justifiable by the samepeople, it often depends on who the perpetrator is and where the event happens. In the end, the labelling of a terrorist incident or group depends entirely onthe often-skewed outlook of the individual or organization defining the event. An example of this is in the Palestine and Israel conflict, the PalestinianLiberalization Organization (PLO) was seen as a terrorist organization despitethe fact it was considered by many Palestinian civilians as a body whichrepresented them and they considered Israel as a terrorist state. However, theperception of the PLO as a terrorist group changed after the Madrid conferencein 1991 when they agreed to recognize the right of Israel’s existence. Theconceptualization of the terrorist is not dependent on the threat that ispersonified by the individual, but as we can see in this instance the label ofthe terrorist is constructed through the language and interpretation of eventswhich engage the public’s attention and support.[24]

When attempting to makesense of the social world, constructivists view certain aspects of reality as aconstruct rather than it being created. Constructivists view knowledge as viewsand beliefs which people have reasonable confidence in. Enlightenment thinker WilliamThomas produced the Thomas theorem whereby “ if a person perceives a situationas real, it is real in its consequences”. Meaning, behaviour is dependent on asubjective interpretation of reality. Terrorism lends itself to this thinkingbecause it is not a given in society but instead an analysis of events andtheir presumed motives that can have serious impacts on how identities areconstructed, and how these identities shape events and responses to theseevents.

Overall, I believe terrorism lends itself toconstructivist understanding because, as I have explored in this essay, it doesnot exist outside of our subjective reality but instead relies on humanengagement for legitimacy and existence. Although a social fact, this does notmean it is any less real and often it is recognized and agreed upon bypolitical organizations and institutions. After analysing how constructivistsview the world and in turn, the war on terror it clarifies how terrorism fitsinto the constructivist framework. By moving away from a state-centric outlook, constructivists claim the west react to terrorism based on how they sociallyconstruct the concept of a terrorist. Following the attack of 9/11 we canunderstand why terrorism lends itself more so to constructivism than it does toany traditional IR theories as there was a need for non-material insight intothe seemingly irrational actions of this new transnational group. By giving usan understanding of how agents can influence another agents action and howthese actions interact and evolve, constructivism offers an insight intophenomena considered anomalous by mainstream theory. Constructivist perspectiveallows us to unpack the views of a terrorist group in order to beginunderstanding how its members shared sense of propriety engenders observed behaviourover time and explains why such behaviour runs contrary to that which isanticipated by the traditional theories. By considering the changing nature ofself-interest with its non- material determinants, the role of identity indefining actors and the problems in cooperation and coordination faced bytraditional theories, “ constructivism seems a better-developed theoretical lensin terms of explaining global terrorism and its impact on changing state behaviour”[25]. Terrorism lends itself toconstructivist understanding because it is a social problem that cannot existindependent of the ideas of the people involved in it.

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