

# Which Counterterrorism Strategy is Most Effective?

**TOM GINGELL**

California Polytechnic University, Pomona

*In this study, a contrast is made between two counterterrorism strategies used by westernised nations: hard power, consisting of the use of decisive military action, and soft power, consisting of diplomatic strategies and building relationships with the locally affected communities. These approaches are critically analysed to answer the question of: which counterterrorism strategy is most effective? Both approaches are examined through a normative and pragmatic lens, analysing their successes and failures throughout the recent years. The results of this study yield that only through the combination of both hard and soft power can counter terrorist professionals effectively prevent major attacks and destroy international terror threats.*

In terms of counterterrorism, there are two main perspectives on how to respond to terrorist incidents and strategize against these organisations. Hard power approaches consist of decisive military action such as bombings in order to eliminate terrorists or damage their infrastructure. By contrast, soft power is intended for economic sanctions and diplomatic strategies in order to build relationships with local communities as a means to weaken the terrorist ideology. Since the devastating attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001, there has been much debate amongst scholars on this subject, with strong advocates on both sides.

In regard to hard power, scholars argue that neutralising essential leaders and destroying terrorist organisations through the use of targeted missile strikes and military action are the only ways to successfully dismantle terror organisations and deter future attacks. Soft power scholars argue debunking the ideology behind the organisations and creating relationships with local communities yields success, paired with economic and political sanctions to pressure international governments to act more decisively. In this essay, I will analyse the various effectivity aspects of each approach through a normative vs. pragmatic framework. As such, both approaches shall be discussed and analysed thoroughly through each lens in the hopes of yielding the most effective approach to counterterrorism.

## Soft Power Approach

Soft power can be defined as “seeking the mutual assistance of states towards the end goal of crippling terrorism

and, second, using actors within the population who would become useful and critical partners in undermining terrorist ideology” (Aljunied 2011). Furthermore, the goal of soft power is to debunk and destroy the support for these terrorist organisations, as uniting the hearts and minds of local populations against terrorist organisations can prove detrimental to their continued operation and can stop the ideology gaining further support. However, soft power approaches require a deep understanding of the culture of the communities that they seek to build relationships with—something the U.S. and European countries don’t have a firm grip on. In terms of religious Islamist jihad, by understanding the various different aspects of Islamic society and culture taking place, counterterrorism agencies will be able to yield successful soft-power approaches that will undermine the ideology as a whole and destroy the support system for the terrorists.

Soft power approaches have indeed produced effective results; the most impactful being in the case of Libya—formerly the most direct state-sponsor of terrorism. After the brutal bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland killed 270 civilians, international powers were infuriated. Former Libyan leader Muammar al-Gadhafi denied any ties to the bombing, despite being quite possibly the most outspoken state-sponsor of terrorism. Previously, after the bombing of the 1986 La Belle Disco in Berlin targeting American troops, Libyan agents were implicated. The U.S. decided to take a hard power approach and responded by bombing two Libyan cities, resulting in the death of 41 Libyan civilians, including Gadhafi’s own

daughter. However, Libya continued to be an at-large state sponsor of terrorism, providing sanctuary, training grounds, and arms for numerous international terrorist organisations. In terms of a pragmatic perspective, the hard power strategy failed, while causing significant civilian deaths. After the Lockerbie incident, the U.S. and other international authorities decided to isolate Libya through the collective use of economic sanctions. In turn, Gadhafi was forced to give in to keep his country and regime afloat and abandoned his support for terrorist organisations and shut down the Libyan weapons of mass destruction programme. This is not the only case in which soft power strategies yielded successful results. Other successes include that of North Korea, Sudan, and Southeast Asia—the next example.

Working with two widespread Muslim leadership institutions proved exponentially beneficial—Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama are very outspoken critics of violent Islamist jihad. They have issued numerous religious decrees, or fatwas, claiming that the violence and senseless killing of innocents is against Islam ideology. These decrees played a tremendous role in combating terrorist ideology—with many Islamic scholars preaching widespread support for the same decrees. Both institutions were adamant to “emphasize that Islam does not advocate violence and warned against the misuse of religion” (Rabasa, 2003)—making a massive impact due to their widespread network of followers.

In terms of a pragmatic approach it appears, at least in these cases, soft power approaches were the most effective option in neutralising the terrorist threat. In recent years, the need for soft power approaches has substantially increased in the international community as pressures have mounted due to the failures of the Iraq War. Although hard power can result in the successful physical destruction of terrorists, “consideration of the survival of their ideas in the modern info-communications century reveals the significance of the issue of soft instrument use in anti-terrorism strategy” (Nasir 2018). In other words, soft power’s goal aims at destroying the organisation’s heart by depleting their ideological base and support. Scholars argue this approach, when successful, yields pragmatic results as they are able to successfully avoid civilian casualties and maintain better relationships with localised communities which presents considerable benefits as opposed to solely fighting these groups head on. These relationships can create wider support for countries like the U.S. and the U.K. within these affected communities which can prove very helpful in regard to international relations and communications. The partnership formed between these cultures can serve as a basis to set precedents for future relations between these vastly different cultures. Moreover, both U.S. and U.K. intelligence agencies reported that “our use of hard power in Iraq without sufficient attention to soft power has increased rather than reduce the number of Islamist terrorists throughout the past 5 years” (Nye, 2008).

Despite the benefits to utilizing soft power, there are

drawbacks to these methods. Soft power “rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others” —and counter-terrorism’s choice of weapon in this regard is usually economic and political sanctions (Nye, 2008). However, when the terrorist group is not backed by any state sponsors and operates in an anti-hierarchical cell structure, sanctions can be deemed useless. Although the Iraq invasion failed miserably and there was an increased interest in the use of soft power, terrorist groups have used this to their advantage.

Unlike state sponsors, terror cells create new challenges for counterterrorism experts. Both the Taliban and Al Qaeda have attempted to spin the U.S.’s use of soft power negotiations into a weakness—presenting the fallacy that these negotiations are the result of victory on behalf of the Taliban. Recently this year, during peace talks between Taliban and American leadership, they launched an attack which resulted in the death of an American soldier. As a result, President Trump immediately cancelled peace negotiations—resulting in the end of the soft power approach to the Taliban due to lack of positive results. This presents concern, as this creates the perception amongst Taliban followers that the U.S. and international community alike are losing and seeking peace out of desperation to stop the violence. Soft power use can create this perception, and terrorist organisations use this to their advantage whenever it presents itself. However, when U.S. led drone strikes are reportedly resulting in the death of hundreds of civilians, including women and children, it has great potential to inspire more jihad and violence as a result of losing a loved one. Therefore, soft power presents itself to be the less damaging alternative, despite terror groups spinning diplomacy into a form of weakness for nation-states fighting against terrorism.

The use of soft power is considered by some scholars the more preferable option due to the lack of direct military action and thereby the avoidance of further loss of life. Soft power, as this analysis has demonstrated, retains both positive and negative aspects, with various successes and failures. In other words, “Soft power, with a chance of victory, is smart power” (Lackey, 2015). Consequently, the use of soft power should still be pursued when appropriate, but a deep analysis of the circumstances surrounding the use of diplomatic actions should be observed when considering further action.

### **Hard Power Approach**

Leading up to the invasion of Iraq post 9/11, hard power had been considered the normative approach—so meting President Barack Obama initially sought to change , by pursuing terrorism through soft power. Shortly after taking office however, his tactics shifted —and he ended up ordering more drone strikes against terrorist targets than any previous president. Simply put, President Obama, someone who won office by promoting change and peace, decided military strikes were the most viable option when it comes to counter-terrorism. Although soft power has

enlisted success, “the soft power of attraction will not win over the hard-core terrorists” (Nye, 2008). Furthermore, when terrorists are able to undermine international security in the face of economic and political sanctions against the state-sponsor, these sanctions are deemed entirely useless, and a different approach is then called for.

Arguably, one of the biggest successes for hard power counterterrorism strategies comes from the U.S. led raid against Osama Bin Laden’s discovered compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011. The U.S. sent in a team of Navy Seals and J.S.O.C. units who quickly located Bin Laden and neutralised him, taking a plethora of important intelligence documents with them. The ensuing chaos of his death sent Al-Qaida leadership spiralling, despite Al-Zawahiri taking up the mantle once Bin Laden was out of the picture. It demonstrated a cut and dry victory for the U.S.

Another hard power success story comes from the drone strike against Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen, a proliferating voice for Islamist extremists worldwide who inspired jihad by the thousands. Although committing no violence himself, Awlaki was within the top leadership of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—A.Q.A.P. Although controversial, the death of Awlaki can be considered another decisive victory of hard power means as Al-Qaida thereby lost one of their greatest assets of propaganda. However, despite the brief interruption of Al-Qaida’s propaganda machine, his videos are still wildly distributed amongst Jihadist terrorists—and this must be noted when considering the strike a success.

Additional successes of hard power usage can be drawn from Colombia in 2008—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (F.A.R.C.) was a notorious and well organised terrorist organisation that had been harassing Colombia for years. As a result, Colombian military forces launched an airstrike on their jungle camp, effectively neutralising leader Raul Reyes and sixteen other members close to him. This strike successfully dismantled the core behind this organisation, sending them into dissolution. Likewise, in 2008, U.S. military officials launched a drone missile strike in South Waziristan, Pakistan that resulted in the death of top Al-Qaida official Abu Khabab al-Masri and his associates—who were responsible for the bombing of U.S. naval ship U.S.S. Cole. By neutralising these leaders, counterterrorism officials were able to successfully neutralise the threat of another coordinated attack by Masri and his associates—another success for hard power tactics.

Scholars, when advocating for hard power, focus a great deal of attention on the ineffectiveness of soft power. For instance, when it comes to the P.K.K., no amount of diplomacy or sanctions were able to curtail the terrorising actions of the organisation. Despite trying to adhere to their Kurdish grievances, Turkey found that P.K.K. terrorist activity actually increased. Moreover, scholars argue that there is no solution to international terrorism without decisive victory—which scholars argue can only happen through means of hard power military action to neutralise the threat.

Terrorist cells and organisations that act mainly by their own means also create problems for the soft power argument. Many of these groups have such extreme demands, such as the death of all Jews, Christians, and Westerners as the so-called Islamic State seeks to create. In this case, there is no form of diplomacy or economic sanctions that will cause a decisive end to the violence—military strikes resulting in total annihilation appears to be the only option. Likewise, Hezbollah has similar goals in regard to anti-Semitic violence; Cambodia with totalitarian Pol Pot and his attempted genocide, and the Rwandan Tutsi genocide—all of which resulted in an inherent failure of soft-power diplomacy and were only quelled by hard power military strikes. As some scholars argue, “hard power approach in fighting terrorism leads to the physical extermination of terrorists” (Nasir 2018), which in some cases is the only feasible option for counter terrorism agencies and nation states. Scholars demonstrate the need for hard power tactics as the only decisive action that will successfully result in dismantling these organisations.

Further examples in which hard power was the preferred option come from the 1990s, during which former President Bill Clinton attempted peace talks with the Taliban. It had been reported that the Taliban were providing safe refuge to Al Qaeda, “President Clinton tried—and failed—to solve the problem diplomatically instead of destroying terrorist havens in Afghanistan” (Nye 2008). As a result, the U.S. turned to hard power, and brought the fight directly to Al Qaeda which resulted in mixed success. Moreover, the use of U.S. drone strikes and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 provides yet another example—military forces “drove Al Qaeda out of Afghanistan and threw the Taliban out of Kabul in 2002 (Lackey, 2015). In terms of Iran, it has also been noted that despite not having a clear and decisive counterterrorism strategy, the “force-based element of Iran’s counter-terrorism approach at the present stage obviously prevails over the non-power-based” (Nasir, 2018). Through its hard power tactics, Iran was actively involved in the Syrian crisis, in which Iranian forces fought against the radicalised members of the region in order to disrupt drug trafficking operations going on throughout the region—an incredibly large source of income for extremist terrorists. This disruption proved detrimental to terrorist activity in the region.

Ultimately, as demonstrated by this essay, there have been numerous successes in which hard power was able to result in decisive victory for the counter-terrorist agencies or nation states. Without heavy-handed military operations, terror extremists twist the rhetoric into signs of weakness and use it to their advantage. In the case of terror groups with no state sponsors or ties, total annihilation is the only option as most of their ideologies have goals of such an extreme nature that diplomacy is not an option. In order to successfully prevent attacks and destroy terrorist groups rather than deal with their aftermath, it can be argued that military action is necessary prerogative.

### Conclusion

In terms of analysing these two counterterrorism strategies, a normative and pragmatic approach must be taken. In terms of the normative, the focus becomes on what is standard as a moral and just decision. As this essay has analysed, the normative approach has been the top choice for most counter-terrorism efforts, especially since the World Trade Centre attack of 2001 and the subsequent 2003 Iraq invasion. However, due to the absolute failure of this operation, scholars advocate for a push towards soft-power tactics.

Hard power, although the standard, has resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians and millions of dollars in infrastructure damage—including the homes of civilians. So, considering the normative approach, hard power would not be the just and moral option. Yet, “in several circumstances the application of hard power regrettably cannot be avoided”, in order for true success and a “more secure new global architecture, then sadly both soft and hard power must be exercised” (Nye 2008). Furthermore, sticking with the normative approach thereby results with soft power as the more viable option due to the lack of civilian deaths and the building of positive relationships between eastern and western cultures. Furthermore, with the demonstrated possibility of success with both hard and soft power, scholars argue that there must, at least, be a balance between the usage of the two approaches.

In terms of a pragmatic approach the questions arise of whether these two approaches are successful. As demonstrated previously in this essay, both hard and soft power tactics have success stories and strong arguments for each side. At the same time, however, each one does have certain drawbacks—hard power can result in the death of innocents or miss the target all together, whilst soft power can fail diplomatically and the rhetoric can be twisted into signs of weakness for the counter terrorism powers—garnering more support for terror. Consequently, the pragmatic approach can be used to support the use of both hard and soft power through the demonstrated successes of each method.

So, where does this leave counter terrorism officials and scholars? There evidently needs to be further study into the usage of both methods and their variability of success. Hard power must become more tacit and acute, reducing the numbers of civilians caught in the crossfire. On the other hand, soft power must be more definitive and conducted in a way that will not be used for propaganda for terror organisations, as the goal is to deplete support for the ideology, not aid with expansion. Scholars thereby, call for attention to the usage of both when considering which approach to use. This debate should not be a question of which approach is more successful, but when to use the various approaches in order to promote the most effective outcome. Scholars report, “solving today’s global problems will require smart power—a judicious blend of the other two powers” (Nye,

2008) in which both tactics are used. These tactics “manifested in soft and hard power approaches have the support of Muslim leaders and organisations who have debunked the jihadist ideology of hate and political violence” (Aljunied 2011). Thereby, with the support of hearts and minds and military action, beneficial relationships are built, and success becomes a higher probability.

Regarding which is more effective, the goal of counterterrorism agencies thereby should become an effective combination of the two forms of power—when military action is the only form of counter terrorism that will effectively prevent or stop a threat, not clean up after, it should be implemented. Likewise, only by winning the hearts and minds of these cultures and populations in which terrorism is thriving can success be guaranteed. Military strikes may effectively wipe out the physical terrorists, but the ideology lives on—especially when martyrdom is a demonstrated goal of the terrorist organisations. This combination of both approaches, coined smart power by Harvard scholar Joseph Nye, is the most effective way of countering terrorist action. In terms of a pragmatic and normative approach, smart power is effective, moral, and has the highest probability of success. Only through the combination of both hard and soft power can counter terrorism professionals effectively prevent major attacks and destroy international terror threats.

## Works Cited

- Aljunied, S. M. A. H. (2011). Countering Terrorism in Maritime Southeast Asia: Soft and Hard Power Approaches. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 47(6), 652–665.
- Gottlieb, S. (2014). *Debating - terrorism and counterterrorism: conflicting perspectives on causes, contexts, and responses*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Hasan Jabbari Nasir, & Bahri Khurshedovich Bahriev. (2018). Iran's Contemporary Anti-Terrorism Approach: "Hard" and "Soft" Elements. *Vestnik RUDN International Relations*, 18(4), 823-836.
- Jones, S. G. (2013). *Hunting in the shadows: the pursuit of Al Qaida since 9-11*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lackey, D. P. (2015). Soft Power, Hard Power, and Smart Power. *The Philosophical Forum*, 46(1), 121–126.
- Nye, J. S. (2008). Security and Smart Power. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(9), 1351–1356.
- Salt, J. (2018). Turkey and Syria: When "Soft Power" Turned Hard. *Middle East Policy*, 25(3), 80–96.