

The (Star) War(s) On Terror

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Leah Goykadosh

Mentor: Professor Jonathan Cristol, Political Science

Does terrorism exist in Star Wars, or did the Rebellion and Empire just commit a series of war crimes? A seemingly generic question asked during a dorm movie night led to an investigation of the application of pop culture media in international relations.¹ Designed to introduce each other to what we deemed as our ‘essential childhood media,’ in our Junior year, my dorm room would take turns choosing what nostalgic movie we’d watch and analyze. Picking apart the animation and special effects, weird scripts, and out-of-date references, extra credit was awarded if you could draw connections to any material discussed in a lecture earlier that week. The week I discovered a roommate was unfamiliar with *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*² and learned about sources of international law, I reigned victorious in the discussion and found the inspiration behind this thesis. Though I can’t recall what fictional event actually started the debate, my room proceeded to try and list every potential war crime and terrorist group in Star Wars and argue their validity. We got stuck when discussing Mandalore, which has many potential terrorist groups but a complicated definition of civilian, as armor and military training is vital to their culture. Though the argument settled, I was left questioning how to classify a group that later forms a government and curious about parallels with the real world. This thesis utilizes a terrorist organization in the Star Wars Universe to study the rise of real world terrorist-government entities and identify counterterrorism strategies that may address them.

There is much to be learned from outer space beyond conspiracy theories about Jewish Space Lasers.³ Star Wars is a science fiction franchise and a Reagan-era (presumably agnostic)

¹ For example, can an act be considered a war crime if there’s no evidence of a definition of war crimes provided “in universe?”

² *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* is italicized when referring to the TV series. “The Clone Wars” refers to an intergalactic conflict that occurs in the *Star Wars* Universe.

³ Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) theorized in a Facebook post that the 2018 California forest fires were started by a space laser, possibly orchestrated by the Rothschild family, sparking many jokes online about ‘Jewish Space Laser’ conspiracy theories (Beauchamp 2021).

space laser program; but can it also be used as a model for terrorists? And, if the answer is yes, then can it not also be used to gain insights useful to the counterterrorism practitioner?

The question of terrorism in Star Wars is not about the conflict between the Rebellion and the Empire or between the Resistance and the First Order. Contrary to what one character in the film *Clerks* believes, the Rebels are *not* terrorists, and the Death Star *was* a valid military target. It is the terrorist group Death Watch, present in numerous books and TV shows, which provides us with a framework for real world analysis. Undergoing the transition from terrorist organization to the functional government of a territory, Death Watch models a political development with few examples in the real world.

This thesis uses a case study of “Death Watch,” a fictional terrorist group within the Star Wars Universe, to investigate real world terrorist-government entities and develop theoretical strategies to combat them. I explain the benefits of using a case study based in pop culture, specifically science fiction to gain insight into international relations. Then I present an introduction to the case and give Death Watch the context necessary to study it. I show that Death Watch uses strategies such as information warfare, provocation, and the provision of social services, as they ultimately attain legitimacy. Lastly, I identify counterterrorism strategies applied within the case, such as military intervention and investigative policies, and discuss their application in the real world.

Methodology of Case Studies 101

This thesis uses a single, generalizing case study. The value of case studies lies in their ability to enable the study of specific factors that outline and affect real world situations. A generalizing case study is an in-depth analysis of a particular event with the intent to explain

why something happened. Case studies that concentrate on clearly defined variables can help us understand the complexities of a phenomenon beyond those found within the case itself. This ability is useful because we can adjust the parameters and specifications within a case study in a way that we cannot in the real world. Much like in a science experiment, where multiple tests are run to account for every factor of a chemical reaction, including different control tests, a case study allows researchers to frame analyses on smaller scales in order to isolate important factors of influence. As Moses and Knutsen (2007: 134) write:

The case-study researcher's focus is trained on explaining a single outcome. Her aim is to unearth evidence of a hypothesized causal mechanism buried in the experience of a particular case. The assumption here is that patterns exist in the social world and are part and parcel of a larger mechanism that is inherent in the nature of things, and that these patterns can be captured, as J. S. Mill averred, by a succession of simple variable analyses.

We can study the relationship between patterns found in the case study and patterns found in the study's results. Therefore, not only does a case study emphasize pivotal moments, but it also presents their effects in a way we can analyze. This focus on patterns allows us to explain outcomes and create predictions based on the presence of these patterns in other cases.

This paper uses within-case explanations as part of its hypothesis-generating case study of Death Watch. This focuses on understanding why things happened in the specific case and then applying that theory to the real world— in contrast to a comparison of patterns and variables between multiple cases. Moses and Knutsen (2007: 310) continue to explain, “For them understanding does not arise from comparing similar cases with an eye at controlling for variation. Rather, understanding comes from untangling the complex knot of connections: from unfouling the causal cable.” In this type of case study, there is no means of studying how the presence of different control groups affects the results. As we intend to explain what is going on within one specific case, we give more attention to “the complex

knot of connections” and how they might interact, studying their cause and effect. The “patterns” we are looking for are not details that repeat with regularity between cases; instead, they are important factors in the development of the case. The intention is to create a hypothesis that will be applied to analyze broader situations. The single case study allows the researcher to discover patterns from the case that can be the source of further study.

Pop Culture and Popping the Ideological Bubble

The study of pop culture can be useful in international relations because of its ability to explore new ideas without the political and emotional rigidity that can arise in response to reality. Consumers can more easily set aside skepticism while interacting with a fictional universe than with our own. It would be reasonable to assume that because consumers are aware that they're engaging with a work of fiction, they will treat the information they receive differently. And yet, as Daniel and Musgrave (2017: 507) write, “audiences do not suspend their disbelief—they automatically construct meanings from sources they trust.” The nature of emotionally investing in synthetic experiences -- perceptions of reality that are physically impossible to exist in nature, such as those presented to an audience through a movie, book, or game -- requires the brain to receive and process data, including visual, auditory, and temporal (Perla & McGrady 2011). Engaging with synthetic experiences leads the pop culture artifact to become trusted as a source of information about either the universe they are watching or the universe they inhabit — and sometimes, the distinction is not as stark as we believe it to be.

Audiences “construct meaning” and learn from media because it becomes a “source they trust” while investing in it. That does not mean they become less skeptical about the information; it means they interpret the information differently. There is no moment where the

audience chooses to temporarily retain false information for the sake of comprehension, as long as the narrative has been established and the audience is engaged. Rather, the brain processes the narrative as a basis from which to learn (Gerrig & Rapp 2004). This cognitive process allows the audience to engage with information and perspectives that otherwise would have triggered biases or skepticism about its premise. In this way, synthetic experiences derived from pop culture can have a real world impact.

There are numerous examples of developments in international policy that are direct results of pop culture media. For example, the novel *The Cobra Event* had a stronger influence on President Clinton's decision to increase US investment in biodefense than any formal report presented to him on the topic (Daniel & Musgrave 2017: 505). The 1984 film *WarGames* prompted Ronald Reagan to ask "Could something like this really happen?", which led to the establishment of the first US cybersecurity policy directive (Kaplan 2016 :1). Daniel and Musgrave assert that pop culture's influence on people is why it should be treated as a legitimate source of analysis in international relations. They note, "Because novels, movies, and other sources influence audiences' ideas about issues central to international relations, we must treat such sources seriously—both as researchers and as citizens" (Daniel & Musgrave 2017: 512). It would thus be irresponsible to ignore pop culture, as we have significant proof that it influences understanding and behavior in issues relating to international relations. Given that we can demonstrate how pop culture affects its audience, a case study taken from a fictional world can help eliminate the ever-present biases and preconceived notions in case study research.

Sci-Fi? Less “Fi” More Form

Science fiction (SF) is exceptionally influential on consumers' perception and behavior due to its nature of reflecting the real world while introducing new concepts that mark the fictional world as inherently different. Jutta Weldes presents this analysis in the introduction to her (2003) edited volume, To Seek Out New Worlds. She discusses how science fiction utilizes the creation of a world just slightly different enough from ours that it (and we) can both represent and reflect upon real-world situations. Though it is typically characterized by its focus on speculative concepts, technological advancements, or combinations of both, SF can be more “real” than other genres. For example, it can extrapolate potential long-term consequences of real world actions or allow for a serious discussion of weighty issues without contemporary politics or particular preconceived notions getting in the way.⁴ Weldes (2003: 4) writes:

Many works of SF begin with, make explicit reference to, and poach on politics, including historical and contemporary events, situations, and characters from world politics. The relations between SF and world politics, then, are more numerous and more complex than is generally assumed.

SF capitalizes on audience familiarity and knowledge in order to build its own universes, and it can fictionalize and dramatize politics for entertainment and to enhance its real-world impact. The real-world impact is heightened when the fictional universe contains recognizable elements of our own universe. There can be similarities between SF worlds and the real world, which we can see in the way *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone* presented real social issues in a fictional setting; but it is in the deviations from reality that we see SF's use for understanding international politics. That SF is not reality allows us to see it as more than a repetitive

⁴An example includes Joe Haldemann's *The Forever War*, which used the time dilation inherent in an intergalactic war to examine the alienation American soldiers in Vietnam felt when they returned to a changed American society.

portrayal of events. The new-ness and futurism of SF enables us to study the impact of potential changes on reality.⁵

Star Wars is the product of a balance between “explicit references” to and “estrangement” from reality;⁶ and Star Wars creator George Lucas has always been open about its basis in reality. The Empire’s military and social behavior was intentionally modeled on Nazi Germany; Emperor Palpatine was written as an amalgam of Adolph Hitler and Richard Nixon; and the conflict between the Rebellion and the Empire is modeled on both the Vietnam War and French Revolution (Sunstein 2016: 127-9). Star Wars capitalizes on its audience’s preexisting knowledge of and opinions about politics and international affairs.

Mandalorians: Management Under Review

Star Wars is the third highest-grossing media franchise of all time. The franchise includes twelve movies, multiple TV shows, and seemingly countless comics and books. It is both famous and influential and is well-suited to serve as a case study to create a theory about “terrorist-governments,” which I define as terrorist or insurgent groups that have “effective control” over a populated area.⁷ There are few current examples of terrorist-governments. The Taliban in Afghanistan and Hamas in the Gaza Strip are perhaps the most notable examples.⁸

The Death Watch case study allows us to study the relative success or failure of different types

⁵ “Futurism” refers to the technical and social advances that break from existing tradition and practice, it is non-temporal. Guffrey (2006: 155) presents Star Wars as an example of retrofuturism, as it is created by blending ideas, technology, and settings, inspired by both the past and future. It applies technological developments of the future to a distinctly nostalgic aesthetic of the past. After all, the fictional events referenced in this paper took place “a long time ago in a galaxy, far, far, away.”

⁶ See Weldes 2003 for a discussion of Science Fiction’s characteristics of “explicit references” and “estrangement” in portraying events based on reality and their importance in enabling the audience to study the real world through the differences.

⁷ “Effective control” over a defined, populated area is the minimum requirement for the assertion of sovereignty. See: Grant 1998-1999; Geldenhuys 2009; Fabry 2010.

⁸ That both the Gaza Strip’s sovereignty and the Taliban government in Afghanistan are unrecognized is irrelevant for the purposes of this paper. Questions of *de jure* sovereignty are beyond the scope of the research.

of intervention before and after Death Watch gained political power. Death Watch successfully transitioned from a purely militant organization to a functional government, and by this fictional transition, we can better understand the phenomenon in the real world.

Death Watch may not be familiar to the casual Star Wars fan; but the group has appeared in multiple books and animated shows, and was recently discussed in the popular Disney + series *The Mandalorian* (S03E07).⁹ The Mandalorian people were first introduced to Star Wars with the popular character Boba Fett in *The Empire Strikes Back* (Kershner 1980) and have since been prominently featured throughout the Star Wars Universe. Due to what I can only describe as the writers' linguistic lack of clarity, "Mandalore" can refer to either: a system of planets; the largest planet with an independent government; or the title of the ruler of the Mandalorian people.

The casual Star Wars fan might recognize Mandalorians as bounty hunters with distinctive armor— most famously Boba Fett, Jango Fett, Din Djarin, and Bo Katan Kryze, each of whom appears throughout the Star Wars Universe. Each character belongs to a different Mandalorian faction and is influential in Mandalorian politics. Mandalore engaged in multiple wars of expansion and suffered many civil wars. The total social upheaval brought about by these wars led to the development of three distinct cultural factions— True Mandalorians, New Mandalorians, and Death Watch.

True Mandalorians are the armor-wearing mercenary force with which people are most familiar because of Boba Fett's popularity. Armor is the traditional garb of the True Mandalorians and, along with training and education, forms the tenets of True Mandalorian

⁹ In this paper I cite individual episodes of television series using the common "Season Number, Episode Number" method, in which S03E07 indicates "Season 3, Episode 7."

culture. True Mandalorians make no internal distinction between military and civilian; all receive military training.

In contrast, New Mandalorians do not wear armor and are extreme pacifists who do not even engage in self-defense if it could harm others. They believe that having the ability and willingness to fight was the source of their societal problems; by fostering non-aggression, they can resolve social, economic, and political tension at its roots. This belief represents a radical shift from their warrior history and a complete societal change. During the Clone Wars — a civil war fought by the Galactic Republic (an intergalactic federal democratic government) and the Confederacy of Independent States (a separatist movement) about the right of secession and the balance of power — a New Mandalorian government led the Party of Neutral Systems (PONS), a political organization of systems not aligned with either government. PONS called for the abolition of the military and an end to the use of violence— even against secessionist movements. Promoting the New Mandalorian commitment to diplomacy, PONS tried to facilitate peace agreements and protected the right of states to remain impartial in the conflict. If the True Mandalorians can be considered 100% military, then the New Mandalorians can be considered 100% civilian. However, the existence of Death Watch means they are not opposite sides of the same coin.

Death Watch is even more militaristic than the True Mandalorians. While they have similar dress and cultural similarities, their approach to international politics is very different. They advocate a return to expansionism in pursuit of a new empire. Star Wars canon directly identifies Death Watch as both an insurgency and a terrorist group (*Star Wars: The Clone Wars* S02E13). Death Watch carries out activities that clearly meet the definition of terrorism found in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004). They are a non-state

organization that uses violence to instill a state of terror in a population in pursuit of a political goal—the reinstatement of the Mandalorian nation’s “warrior” values. They also meet the CIA’s (2012 :1) definition of insurgency, as they are engaged in, “a protracted political-military struggle directed toward subverting or displacing the legitimacy of a constituted government or occupying power and completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations.” In addition to falling under the relevant real-world definitions, Death Watch’s actions demonstrate patterns that are observed and studied in real world terrorist and insurgent groups. It is possible to learn from Death Watch how such a group might gain effective control of territory and what might stop them.

The three factions formed over a political dispute about the role of Mandalorians in the galaxy; but sources are contradictory about the specifics of the groups’ origins. Even though the history is fictional, we must nevertheless impose some consistency if we are to draw inferences for the real world. This paper focuses on the canonical material released by Disney, which includes: the theatrical releases; the *Clone Wars* and *Rebels* television programs; and all media produced after the Disney purchase of Lucasfilm; in addition to *Jango Fett Open Seasons*, which is not Disney canon,¹⁰ but is important because it includes the introduction of Death Watch.¹¹

¹⁰*Open Seasons* is included in Disney’s “Legends,” a non-canonical collection that does not contradict the movie’s canonical information.

¹¹ These boundaries to the research minimize, but do not fully eliminate, contradictory evidence. The serious Star Wars fan may be aware of slight chronological inconsistencies within the Star Wars Universe, including with the introduction of *Open Seasons* as material. However, these issues do not impact the argument of the thesis, and thus are not addressed.

Death Watch What Happens With Terrorism

Star Wars: The Clone Wars depicts the formation of Death Watch as a response to the New Mandalorians' new political control of the system. The New Mandalorians exiled "all warriors" and those that opposed the disarmament ordered by the new, pacifist government. Later, Death Watch is formed in their place of exile by those who "idolize violence and the warrior ways of the past" (*Star Wars: The Clone Wars* S02E12). The formation took the new government by surprise as they assumed opposition had died out. In fact, the exiled became radicalized.

The New Mandalorians exiled their opponents to a moon; but as big as a moon might be, a prison is still a prison, and the prisoners are not necessarily limited in their exposure to and influence in society.¹² This makes "prison radicalization" a particularly pernicious problem— and not only for a galaxy far, far away. Prison radicalization occurs due factors such as alienation from mainstream society, increased exposure to previously radicalized individuals and groups, and real or perceived mistreatment while imprisoned (Hamm 2009). Prisoners' physical and psychological vulnerability makes them more susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups. These groups provide physical security and emotional support, giving the recruit a higher purpose, a sense of belonging, and the knowledge and means to act in the group's interest. Radicalization itself is a psychological process that encourages willingness for more extreme measures in order to complete a goal. Terrorism is dependent upon radicalization as it depends on group members' willingness to intentionally harm other human beings (Mulcahy et al. 2013).

¹² A prominent example includes Nelson Mandela, who became a symbol of resistance and hope during the 27 years he spent in prison for anti-apartheid activism.

The isolation of a specific group can result in an echo chamber, in which members are only exposed to information reinforcing their current position. Harvard's Cass Sunstein discusses this trend in *The World According to Star Wars* (2016: 148), where he writes: "Terrorism arises as a result of social networks, and in particular echo chambers, in which people talk and listen mostly to one another." The perceived oppression of the group by the government impacts the conviction among members that their cause is righteous. In addition to radicalization, excluding soldiers from participation in public life can have other undesirable consequences, as we saw in Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion.

After the United States deposed the Saddam Hussein government, it installed its own people to run the country while a new constitution was drafted before a new government could be formed. One of these leaders, L. Paul Bremer, issued an order to "de-Baathify" the Iraqi government and to disband the Iraqi army. These actions immediately created a large pool of unemployed, armed men who felt humiliated and became hostile to the US occupiers. It turned what could have been a resource of manpower, beneficial in the maintenance of peace, into part of the security threat (Fallows 2004). Bremer's order failed to account for the possible effects of social isolation and exclusion on these men. Like members of Death Watch, this group of former soldiers were excluded from society for political reasons. This exclusion of an entire class of people from post-war society served only to provide a reason for a wide range of malign activity. Bremer's orders only served to isolate these groups, and in their isolation some became radicalized and many, both radicals and non-radicals, went on to join Al Qaeda in Iraq, the progenitor of the Islamic State terrorist group (Pfiffner 2010).¹³

¹³ See Bassil (2012); Fallows (2006); for more detailed histories of the Iraq War and its consequences.

This case study also demonstrates the significant impact external actors can have on civilian support for terrorist organizations, especially if they ignore citizen policy preferences. On multiple occasions, outside interference in the internal affairs of Mandalore resulted in increased New Mandalorian civilian support for Death Watch. Death Watch engaged in the classic terrorist strategy of provocation and encouraged its members to stage attacks against Galactic Republic targets, aiming to provoke a heavy-handed response that would evoke an adverse reaction from civilians and increase support for the Death Watch position.¹⁴ A potential foreign occupation could change the public perception of Death Watch from terrorists to freedom fighters. Both the New Mandalorian government and Death Watch were aware that any foreign intervention violating Mandalore's sovereignty would only benefit Death Watch, and they acted accordingly. Due to Death Watch's attacks, the Senate supported intervention on Mandalore— At first, by opening an investigation into Mandalore, and later, with military support to fight the terrorist organization. The Senate voted to send in the military despite government and public opposition, which strengthened Death Watch's argument for a stronger Mandalore. The Senate hoped to destroy Death Watch, but their actions would only have served to rally more people to Death Watch's cause. As Death Watch would not only have been able to show that they were freedom fighters helping the population fight their oppressors, but that the pacifist government was not fit for this purpose. The Senate could have chosen to work with Mandalore and within its policy of neutrality; but instead it enacted its own plan and failed to take into account local politics and political culture. New Mandalorian government representatives were not even present when the final debate about sending intervention was held. Similarly, a major critique of Bremer's order to disband the Iraqi military is that the decision-making process subverted the standard procedural routes, as

¹⁴ See Kydd and Walter 2006 for a discussion of "provocation" as a terrorist strategy.

he did not consult the Secretary of State, National Security Advisor, CIA Director, or Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Pfiffner 2010: 85). Bremer's leadership is criticized for disregarding concerns from other US military leaders present, and for implementing policies that contradicted their work. Despite active negotiations to reinstate members of the Iraqi military, which had the support of other US leaders and the Iraqi soldiers, Bremer issued a memo ordering Americans to stop negotiating with the Iraqi military, excluding those who would be affected by the policy from all decision making processes.

Unfortunately the parallels between the Galactic Republic and United States foreign policy under George W. Bush are not limited to the invasion of Iraq. Bush pushed for elections in Gaza despite widespread opposition from both Israelis and Palestinians. In a 2002 White House Rose Garden speech, Bush called for elections and the establishment of a constitutional framework for democracy in the Gaza Strip (Bush 2002). This plan failed to consider the desires of the actual people living there, who were opposed to elections being held on an American timetable, some people even opposed elections at all. In a *Vanity Fair* interview, former Gaza Strip politician and security official Mohammad Dahlan said that, "Everyone was against the elections.... [but] Bush decided, 'I need an election. I want elections in the Palestinian Authority,' 'The president wants elections.' Fine. For what purpose?" (Rose 2008). Dahlan, the former leader of the Fatah [Party] in Gaza, opposed the elections as Hamas, a US-designated foreign terrorist organization, would likely win the election. Despite the near universality of this specific concern and abundant, supportive evidence, the Bush Administration continued to press for elections, which were held in January 2006. As expected, Hamas won the election and assumed control of the Gaza Strip. No election has been held in Gaza since that time. This result was the foreseeable

consequence of the failure of an outside power to account for local politics, culture, and political culture. Death Watch, and real world terrorist organizations, utilize foreign actors' involvement in affairs of the state to justify their ideology and recruit members. By ignoring the advice and desires of those affected by their intervention, foreign actors can drive civilians towards terrorist organizations presenting themselves as defenders of the people.

Death Watch engages in multiple forms of information warfare as they try to find their place in regional galactic politics. Information warfare is the use of misinformation, disinformation, and/or propaganda to confuse, mislead, or influence a target population (Lin 2018). Death Watch is first identified as a threat through its use of disinformation campaigns. Years before the Clone Wars, Death Watch used disinformation to orchestrate the genocide of the True Mandalorians. They arranged for True Mandalorians to be hired to address an insurrection, then submitted false reports to the Galactic Republic that the True Mandalorians had carried out massacres of political activists. Death Watch even killed women and children and blamed the True Mandalorians just to “prove” the false claims they made about the “risk” posed by the True Mandalorians. An immediate response from the Republic and Jedi results in the genocide of the True Mandalorians. During the Clone Wars, Death Watch used disinformation attacks to convince the Galactic Republic that the New Mandalorians created a secret military that supports the Confederacy of Independent Systems in its efforts to secede. This plot fails to incur any reaction as a Jedi investigation quickly uncovers the truth. However, they then promote the false claim that Mandalore had asked for Senate intervention. Death Watch sent an altered video of a New Mandalorian politician to the Senate, in which he asked for intervention against Death Watch. Death Watch then killed the politician in a

terrorist attack, lending further credence to the contents of the doctored video and emotionally manipulating its target audiences. These actions trigger the outside intervention that had been objected to by the government and population of Mandalore. Death Watch targets not only the Senate with a disinformation attack, but also their own people. They later present the New Mandalorian leader as weak, for her failure to protect the state and as hypocritical, due to their false claim that she murdered Death Watch's leader. They spread propaganda about the benefits of militarism and argued that only Death Watch's strength can ensure safety and independence.

By controlling the media and spreading disinformation, Death Watch garners attention and support domestically and intergalactically. Their use of information warfare not only highlights a successful tactic used by terrorist groups, but also helps show how this tactic could be combatted. Their information warfare failed when reliable sources were able to fact check or investigate the false information and release accurate information to the public. This has alarming implications for the real world, where social media provides terrorist groups a platform from which they can disseminate disinformation more quickly and to a larger audience than ever before (Kimmage 2021). Studies have shown that people are not good at judging the reliability of sources and that they often confuse popularity with truth. This phenomenon can be due to information cascades, in which receiving the same information or watching others draw to the same conclusion in sequence will influence more people to do the same, as well as a general lack of education on internet safety and credibility (Hills 2020).

Terrorists utilize information warfare to promote their agenda internationally, assert their message within their own group, and increase recruitment. Typically it's used to increase the impact of their operations by sensationalizing their attacks and to harm their opponents by

publicizing their failures. For example, Hezbollah's information campaigns emphasize its successes and messages of resistance ideology, martyrdom, and legitimacy through social welfare provision. It uses its own television station to broadcast battlefield recordings of conflict with Israeli soldiers, which helps to promote its "success" to the domestic audience. Running newspapers, television programming, radio stations, and social media outlets, Hezbollah controls how it is perceived and works to sway the opinions of its audience (Clarke 2017).

The Taliban uses the media as a means of information dominance over its narrative. By framing their actions through different core messages, such as jihad, fighting moral corruption, and forming an Afghan Caliphate, the Taliban tries to get its actions internalized and legitimized by its target audiences, both the Afghans and non-Afghans. The Taliban uses manipulations of the media to present itself as a legitimate authority, as it introduces carefully managed perspectives and solutions to Afghan citizens' problems, achieved by following the Taliban's ideals (Hussaini & Morris 2020).

Terrorist groups often weaponize social media platforms in their information wars, benefitting from the reach and engagement opportunities it provides. ISIS is often regarded as the group with the best marketing campaign, as at one point, it published about 38 new pieces of media a day and has spread its message through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and even video games (Koerner 2016). Hezbollah even runs a training program to educate people on manipulating photos and information, managing bot accounts, and spreading disinformation on social media (Crisp 2020). The inability to fact-check information as fast as it can be produced makes mass media a valuable tool for these groups.

The most crucial factor in Death Watch's transition from a terrorist group to functional government is its legitimization as a provider of resources that the New Mandalorians could not guarantee. Death Watch ultimately succeeds in undermining the New Mandalorian government in the eyes of the population and takes control of the system. Death Watch allies itself with a crime syndicate that carries out a variety of violent attacks, which the New Mandalorians are unable to stop. Death Watch then demonstrates its ability to manage the violence (that it created!) and to provide the essential services that the government can no longer provide. It achieves success by creating *insecurity* and then by providing *security*. Death Watch then uses this newfound stability to highlight the benefits of their militarism, and they successfully make a case for a formal transition to a Death Watch government.

The phenomenon of a terrorist organization providing social services to civilians is not purely the product of fiction. Many terrorist and insurgent groups, with varying ideologies and goals, provide social services as a way to gain popular support while simultaneously undermining legitimate governments. The nature of the services provided and the aspects of the governments they object to vary between cases, but for terrorist groups that desire territorial control, the need to undermine an existing government is universal. Moreover, the need to maintain at least tacit support of the population means that the provision of social services will survive beyond the initial military conflict.

In an article in *Terrorism & Political Violence*, Victor Asal et. al. (2022) studied how variables such as alliances, leadership type, territorial control, and foreign state support affect the probability that a terrorist organization would provide community services. Their results showed that although having foreign financial support and a religious identity increases the likelihood that an organization provides social services, an ongoing attempt to establish

legitimacy has the most substantial positive impact. Terrorist groups will provide social services as a public display of challenging the authority of a state by establishing their ability to govern.

The Taliban, Hamas, and Hezbollah, provide services to gain legitimacy and support. Interestingly, these groups also considered security a resource, though unlike Death Watch they didn't need to fabricate it. Eli Berman and David Laitin (2008: 1947) note in a study about terrorist groups, social services, and the likelihood that they will engage in suicide attacks that:

All three grew by providing local public goods in an environment where local public good provision by government was exceptionally weak. Each developed into an effective insurgent organization that produced a specific local public good — security, using violence.

Hezbollah (and its progenitors) have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to build hospitals, mosques, schools, and charitable organizations. Though it did not begin with the intent to provide social services, when people were displaced due to the Lebanon war in 1982, the Lebanese government could not provide essential public services. Hezbollah began by providing aid to those fighting against Israel and its Lebanese allies and partners but expanded its organization to provide citizens with higher quality assistance than the Lebanese government has maintained. Their use of violence against Israel also legitimizes Hezbollah, as after the Lebanese Civil War, Hezbollah was granted permission “to maintain its weapons and continue its military resistance of Israel” (Early 2006, cited in Grynkewich 2008 :362). In allowing Hezbollah to have a military force to confront an opponent and defend the border, the government subtly acknowledges Hezbollah's competence and the fact that it cannot do so on its own. Hezbollah ran in the Lebanese parliamentary elections in 1992 and has remained a party in parliament since then, winning 15 seats in the 2022 election. They continue to provide

social services in the form of public goods and military support, undermining the broader state while they assert their capability in the active government (Grynkewich 2008).

Hamas provided a religious nationalist alternative to the secular nationalist Fatah and cited its religious obligation to provide social services and maintain medical clinics, schools, and charities. It is understood that their ability to provide resources was one of the main reasons Hamas won in the 2006 election. Not that all voters were necessarily aligned religiously or ideologically with Hamas, but that Hamas demonstrated an ability to govern efficiently and without corruption. Hamas needed to maintain public support as more legitimate organizations received more funding from donors. Providing resources to citizens meant that Hamas could present itself not just as an ideological organization or violent militia but as a genuine and functional alternative form of leadership. It enabled Hamas to prove itself more competent than Fatah, and garner support from those who would otherwise be turned away from Hamas's use of violence. Therefore, building charities and providing social services functioned as advertisements for the state Hamas would build if everyone followed their ideology (Szekely 2015).

The Taliban was formed by religious scholars and seminary students who used violence to establish safe roadways and trade routes in Afghanistan. Their success allowed for increased stability, law, and order. Regarded as a modest and reasonable goal, Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban's founder, initially led a campaign against checkpoints run by bandits and corrupt military officials. The Taliban formed as a response to corruption in Afghanistan, bringing strict interpretations of Islamic law along with safety as they expanded along the roads they secured. Civilians saw the Taliban as a potential source of stability, as they ensured roadways and were an organized and dignified, relatively well-behaved group.

Additionally, civilians assumed that the US and UN supported the Taliban, which promoted the idea that the Taliban regime would be recognized as the government. The US saw the Taliban as the group most likely and capable of bringing stability to the region by taking over the country. Therefore, the US was open to negotiating with the Taliban to end the civil war and bring peace to Afghanistan (Cristol 2019). Providing security as a resource meant that the Taliban was treated as the functional government by citizens and the US long before it had full control of Afghanistan.

For Strategies Listen to Those Who EnCOUNTER TERRORISM

In studying both failed and successful attempts at intervention in Death Watch's rise, we can outline potential ways of addressing real world terror groups as they undergo the transition to effective control of a territory. Terrorism is designed to scare its audience and change the way its opponents behave. Death Watch successfully utilizes the terrorist strategies of retaliation and information warfare to affect their targets behavior, providing examples for the audience of how they might be used and the effects they have. The case study serves as a cautionary tale to counter disinformation whenever it arises, as Death Watch gained significant influence when they successfully launched information wars against other actors or their own population. Initially, the best way to prevent the spread of Death Watch was investigating their actions and claims. By understanding their intent and capabilities, Death Watch's opponents were able to predict their actions and plan accordingly, enabling the opponents to defeat them on a physical level. Meanwhile, by publicly disproving their claims, opponents were able to discredit the group's capabilities and ideology, challenging how they're perceived and limiting the spread of their extremist ideas. This suggests that effective

counterterrorism strategies require intelligence gathering and a defense against disinformation and propaganda.

In practice, this is easier said than done. Discovering the truth and countering false claims may seem like a straightforward plan in theory, but implementing an effective strategy to discover and publicize the truth takes time and practice. As disinformation campaigns are typically launched against civilians, it can become impossible for governments to identify and address all of the disinformation available alone. Azani & Liv (2020) suggest different types of legislation to combat the use of disinformation in terrorism. Their proposals emphasize sharing the liability for the spreading of disinformation across different parties, including companies that inadvertently host and support disinformation. By holding multiple parties liable for the availability of disinformation, information warfare can be more efficiently countered. This includes measures to address the creation, dissemination, and interaction with terrorist propaganda and disinformation campaigns online. While legislation regulating the accuracy of online information is important, it is also essential for individuals to be able to protect themselves against disinformation when they interact with it. Investigating the truth cannot be solely dependent upon a governing force when individuals are the ones being targeted. There's too much data available online for the government to alone verify in a timely manner, people should be taught how to address the information they interact with. Proactive efforts in countering information warfare should citizens, as a basic education in cyber literacy skills can mitigate the risk of falling victim to disinformation (Guess et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the case identifies the interplay between information warfare and the terrorist organizations' pursuit of legitimization, as the message being spread often promotes their ideology as a means of problem solving. Though this is stereotypically done through a

more concrete example, such as the provision of social services, both social welfare and information wars aim to convince citizens that the terrorists are more successful than the current government. Death Watch providing security on Mandalore simultaneously asserts that the New Mandalorians are ineffective, and that Death Watch's extreme militarism is a legitimate ideology to support. However, as a popular uprising proves itself stronger than Death Watch, and is able to maintain security without extremism, it is able to depose Death Watch and eliminate their influence in society. While real world terrorist organizations also gained support through their provision of security, their ongoing social service programs are essential in *maintaining* civilian support for the group. Organizations that provide social services are therefore more difficult to eliminate due to their entanglement with citizen welfare. Any counterterror strategy designed to fight these groups needs to address their social service systems as they foster ideological support for the group, and account for the needs of citizens in their absence. A state will need financial and logistical support to carry out this form of counterterror effectively. If they already had the capability to ensure these social services, there would have been less need and availability for the terrorist group to step in and gain legitimacy. A strategy by which states displace social services run by terrorist organizations with effective alternative welfare systems will undermine popular support for the organization, challenge the group ideologically, and reassert the legitimacy of the government (Grynkewich 2008: 363).

Another counterterrorism strategy applied after the organization has gained legitimacy relates specifically to military intervention. After Death Watch was legitimized as the government of Mandalore two different attempts were made to address their rise to power through intervention. While both relied on a request for outside assistance and intervention,

the second, successful attempt is organized by Mandalorian citizens. In the first instance, just after Mandalore transitioned to a Death Watch government, the former New Mandalorian leader makes a personal request of the Jedi Order for assistance, subverting the proper Republic channels. This request fails to address how the Republic, and the Jedi that serve in their army, have no jurisdiction in Mandalore due to Mandalore's own policies, and ultimately, it fails to enact any change. Later, a former leader of Death Watch who left due to ideological differences of leadership and Mandalorian citizens' needs, requests Republic and Jedi military assistance in reclaiming Mandalore from Death Watch. Leading a popular uprising, they request intervention and are granted support. This marks a stark difference from the last calls for support, as it's both a genuine request and follows proper procedure, contrasting Death Watch's disinformation campaign and the personal request, respectively.

In this instance, there are discussions between the Republic and the Mandalorian uprising about how Republic intervention will violate standing treaties with Mandalore, and the long term effects this intervention may have. Only after all parties have decided that the repercussions will be worth it, and the Mandalorians insist on foreign military intervention, do they agree to work together. It continues to be citizen run, though it's a joint operation, Republic forces are merely providing assistance and following the Mandalorians' plans. This partnership is victorious, Death Watch is defeated, and Mandalore plans to build a new government and bring stability to its system.¹⁵ The success of this intervention draws attention to the critical role of citizens in effective counterterrorism measures. As this plan is enacted according to Mandalorian interest and organization it also reaffirms the importance of including the perspectives of those affected by policy decisions in essential decision making

¹⁵ Almost immediately after Death Watch is deposed from the government, the Empire is formed. This later affirms Death Watch's legitimacy as the government as Death Watch leadership gets reinstated because the Empire thought they would be easier to control.

processes. Additionally, negotiations occurred before military interventions began, emphasizing the need for following protocol and having an established plan for the long term consequences of any decision.

Case Closed

This thesis uses Star Wars' Death Watch as a case study to examine the strategies of terrorist-government entities and create counterterrorism theories to address them. The case has demonstrated Death Watch does fit into the limited category of terrorist organizations that gained functional control of a territory. The formation of this fictional group demonstrates the trend of radicalization due to exclusion from society, which can be seen in the real world in the disbanding of the Iraqi military and prison radicalization. Death Watch gains legitimacy through information warfare, providing social services including security, and proving themselves as more capable than the government. The case also demonstrates that foreign actors can drive civilian support for terrorist organizations, as it can reframe how the group is perceived or even worsen conditions.

Analyzing counterterrorism strategies utilized against Death Watch identified four theories that should be applied in the real world. Firstly, it highlighted the importance of following proper procedure and listening to the advice and concerns of experts when making policy decisions. This includes complying with the social and political culture and demands of citizens and the state they are acting upon. Secondly, there needs to be a strategy to address information warfare with speed and accuracy. This can include legislation to counter disinformation and propaganda online, as well as educating the population on cyberliteracy skills. The third and fourth strategies apply to foreign intervention after a terrorist-government

entity has legitimacy. The government should displace social service systems run by terrorist organizations, and ensure these services are provided to citizens through alternative means. This will likely require foreign financial and operational support, as the prior lack of this capability is what enabled the terrorist organization to gain legitimacy. Finally, any form of military intervention should not be taken unless there is a long term plan to address the effect it will have on the state and its citizens.

It would be remiss to ignore an essential factor of pop culture media in this conclusion of a pop culture sourced case study. This thesis opened with the argument that SF allows us to analyze and theorize about how new ideas will affect our reality. However SF's nature of being grounded in reality means that its content is also limited by reality. For all that pop culture works to build synthetic experiences and teach us to think outside the confines of the world as we know it, the ideas that inspire it often reflect reality-based problems *and* solutions. This is not intended to discourage a researcher hoping to pursue a study in pop culture or a deeper analysis of Mandalorian culture and politics itself. But rather, remind the audience that they should not assume these problems will tie themselves up as neatly as plot points, and that indifference can cause real damage.

A simple case can be made that Mandalorians just represent the complicated political systems in the Middle East that the US sees as militant. The Mandalorians' efforts to establish a new society are limited by our ideas and hopes of how to eliminate terrorism and bring stability to the Middle East. Death Watch, representing an amalgam of real world terrorist groups, enables researchers to analyze information and form new ideas, without the skepticism and bias associated with conflict in the Middle East. Terrorist-governments are a complex issue, and creating and enacting successful counterterror strategies is more

challenging in the real world than in SF. However, a case study will not typically provide a perfect solution, regardless of its source, and all theories need extensive research before they are applied as plans. Utilizing Death Watch as a case study enables us to anticipate eventual stability, consider theories otherwise ruled out due to bias or assumption, and approach the issue of terrorist-government entities from a new perspective, able to learn new ideas.

In this way, Death Watch's conclusion is notable. Death Watch is destroyed as a result of the 'Purge of Mandalore,' as the Empire carpet bombs the entire planet, reneging on its promise to bring an end to conflict and spare the region if the second Mandalorian popular uprising surrenders (*The Mandalorian* S03E07). This can be a dangerous idea to weave into the proven synthetic experience turned educational format of pop culture media. At face value it seems to be promoting carpet bombing as a military tactic and an effective counterterror strategy. However, rather than promoting this event as a victory, the narrative focuses on the cost of human life as civilians are massacred alongside terrorist groups. Mandalore is devastated, the Empire remains the villain, and our emotionally invested brains are processing the reminder that not all viable strategies are *good* ones. This case study offers insight into the complicated sphere of terrorist-governments, their tactics, and counterterror strategy that can combat them. The audience is shown the destruction of an entire civilization at the hands of both a terror group and foreign actors, and every effort to counter terror and bring stability to the region, in the hopes that when looking for solutions, they'll gain empathy along with inspiration.

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