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*A HISTORY OF TERRORISM*

*ATACKS AND TERRORIST CAMPAIGNS*

*FROM BAKUNIN TO IS*

DREYERS FORLAG OSLO, 2017

PART FOUR

CAUSES AND COUNTERMEASURES

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Sample translation

CHAPTER 8

WHY TERRORISM?

The six historical chapters have demonstrated that terrorism takes many different forms, varying as much in aims as in operations. In Europe modern terrorism first arose on the political left, in the form of the anarchists in the second half of the 19th century. In the USA religion lay behind John Brown’s attack on the slave town of Pottawatomie, and extreme racism provided the ideological basis for the Ku Klux Klan. The first nationalist terrorists were the Irish Skirmishers. Religious fanaticism has played a strong role in both ancient and modern terrorism – from the Zealots to Al-Qaeda – but there is no shortage of non-religious or atheist terrorists. Terrorism has built on national, ethnic and religious identities, as well as universal ideologies such as socialism, anarchism and even a struggle for democracy and self-government. Terrorism has been directed against both democratic states and authoritarian regimes, nation states and empires, as well as small elites and whole classes of society. The nature of the threat varies from epoch to epoch, but in recent times we have seen plenty of terrorists from all four types – religious, nationalist, left-wing and far right extremism. This chapter looks at the common elements across time, place and ideology, and discusses how terrorism can be understood as a type of rational strategy for armed conflict.

One of the most striking features of modern terrorism is how rarely it works. Hardly any terrorist group has achieved the aims it claimed to be fighting for. This also applies to most of the groups analysed in the previous

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six chapters, even though these groups were chosen for study because of their significance. Nearly all terrorist campaigns end without any form of ‘victory’ for the terrorists. The few examples of terrorists achieving some of their aims are dubious, and all of them are connected to nationalism. Most of the groups that can in any way claim to have achieved their strategic goals have two important features in common: restricted political objectives and limited violence against civilians. These are organisations that have used terrorism as one part of a broader political or armed conflict: Michael Collins’ IRA, EOKA in Cyprus and the ANC in South Africa, as well as the Zionist organisations in the Palestine Mandate and the FLN in Algeria. The latter two made wider use of violence against civilians than the first three. This in turn gave rise to further terrorism after the countries they were fighting for achieved independence. On the other hand, many organisations have achieved tactical objectives, for example when Hezbollah’s attacks on American and French bases in Beirut in 1983 forced these two countries to abandon the Lebanon. Moreover, some terrorist groups whose main aim was to polarise society and make it difficult for the existing regime to operate, have to some extent achieved this. Al-Qaeda in Iraq and IS in Iraq and Syria are good examples of using terrorism to weaken the apparatus of state and foment civil war. Even the most extreme terrorist groups can sometimes have rational strategic objectives.

*Three Myths about Evil, Mad and Oppressed Terrorists*

This chapter challenges three important myths in the debate about terrorism. Each has been prominent in the official debate after major terrorist attacks, as for example 11th September 2001 in the USA and 22nd July 2011 in Norway. There is an understandable tendency to see terrorism first and foremost as evil. The American President George Bush used the word ‘evil’ frequently after 11th September and put a lot of effort into explaining why the terrorists hate democracy and freedom.5 Milder versions of this also followed the attacks in Madrid, London, Paris, Brussels and Oslo. The problem is not that this is incorrect, but that it carries a danger of crowding out other explanations. Nevertheless, it raises an important question: Given that terrorist activity is more or less universally seen as evil, how do terrorists justify their actions?6

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Another widespread tendency is to explain – or explain away – terrorism as the actions of madmen. This is often an important element in ‘lone wolf’ terrorism. Some of these terrorists are indeed of unsound mind, or psychotic as determined from a medical or a judicial point of view. This is also expanded on in literature, for example by Dostoevsky, Turgenjev and Conrad.7 In non-fiction, the British historians Roger Griffin and Michael Burleigh emphasise this point of view in their analysis of terrorism.8 Again, an overworked simplification points out an important question: Why do some people choose to support or take part in terrorism?9

The third widespread but largely misleading assertion is connected to terrorism as a social phenomenon. This is based on the premise that terrorism is caused directly by poverty, oppression and low educational levels, or by certain types of religion (or lack of religion). Such structural explanations have been very prominent in both political science and politics, and are often associated with attempts to explain political violence more generally (particularly rebellion and civil war).10 But because both ‘terrorism’ and ‘civil war’ are terms which cover many different types of conflict, with several phases of gradual escalation, structural explanations alone give at best only a limited contribution to the debate. At worst, they are directly misleading.11 Nevertheless, this debate does shed some light on important questions about how certain political and social circumstances – for example lack of democracy, weak states, rapid modernisation, social injustice and extreme ideologies – can make it more likely that some activists will turn to terrorism. Researchers generally distinguish between underlying circumstances, circumstances which bring about terrorism and circumstances which make it easier to keep a terrorist campaign going once it has started.12

The alternative is to consider terrorism primarily as a tool, rather than as a syndrome or a symptom of insanity. Although many studies have seen terrorism as an expression of evil, madness or social crisis, it has become more and more usual among researchers to consider terrorism as one of several

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tactics that non-state groups can make use of in conflicts.13 In other words, terrorism is seen as a strategy which some groups choose to use in an attempt to reach a political goal. This does not in any way assume that the goal is realistic, or that the terrorist group has a solid understanding of reality, or even that the members are as rational as most people. On the other hand, it indicates that there are several possible reasons why some people are members of terrorist organisations or turn to ‘lone wolf’ terrorist activities. Seeing terrorism as a strategy certainly does not exclude the possibility that political and social circumstances can be a seedbed for terrorism, or that many who are involved in extremism and terrorism may have serious psychological problems. But it emphasises that the transition from peaceful – and lawful – political opposition to the use of political violence – hence terrorism – is a process. Armed struggle, even in the form of terrorism, requires a conscious decision from groups as from individuals. Terrorism is a phenomenon with causes, processes and conclusions. Most terrorist campaigns are short and achieve little so far as their own objectives and attention beyond the local community are concerned. All come to an end sooner or later.

This chapter consists of four parts:

The first part discusses different explanations of the causes of terrorism and the most important common elements in what motivates individuals and small groups to take part in terrorist actions.

The second part discusses terrorism as strategy and the most important strategic differences between groups.

Then the third part deals with the most important common features in terrorist tactics.

The last part puts a spotlight on why and how terrorism comes to an end – whether the terrorists achieve their goal, take part in a negotiated compromise, are defeated, disintegrate or change tactic to other forms of political resistance.

HOW DOES TERRORISM ARISE: BASIC CAUSES

OR STRATEGIC CHOICE?

There is an important dividing line in the literature on terrorism between researchers who primarily see terrorism as a phenomenon, and researchers who consider terrorism mainly as a strategy. If one regards terrorism as a phenomenon,

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and especially as a symptom of another, greater problem, it is natural to seek for deeper and more fundamental causes of terrorism. If you consider terrorism mainly as strategy or tactics, it becomes more relevant to enquire under which circumstances it is likely that individuals or groups will turn to this type of tactic. In both instances, the investigation can be directed equally well at society as at the individual: at political, social, economic or structural problems which give rise to terrorism on the one hand, or at individual motivation on the other. That yields four types of explanation, as shown in the table below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Terrorism as a Phenomenon | Terrorism as a Strategy |
| Social level | Root causes  (political, social and economic relationships; weak states;  regional relationships) | Circumstances  (political, social and economic risk factors;  invasion;  particular events) |
| Individual level | Psychology  (personality; values;  world view; religion) | Objective and Process  (revenge; affiliation; provocation; radicalisation) |

*Oppressed Terrorists?*

The most common myths about the causes of terrorism maintain that terrorism is a direct consequence of political, economic or social oppression. The explanation is apparently that people who are oppressed and who lack access to political means of rectifying this sometimes turn to political violence out of sheer desperation. Seen this way, terrorism is a symptom of social injustice. Under certain circumstances it is only a matter of time before an inventive leader turns to political violence – rebellion, civil war or terrorism.14 In this view, terrorism is a phenomenon that can be explained by identifying the root causes of the terrorists’ discontent and that can be combatted by changing the social relationships at its basis.

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Even though such explanations are often an important part of the stories terrorist groups tell about their own origins, there are two big problems with this type of analysis. The first is that there exist many more societies with high levels of social or economic oppression which do not give rise to terrorism, than similar societies where this leads to political violence.15 In other words, the background factors which are often associated with terrorism usually do not give rise to terrorism. Moreover, terrorism has arisen in most types of states and regimes, including rich, well-established democracies. There are also researchers who have pointed out that open democracies are more exposed to terrorism than dictatorships, because it is easier for terrorists to operate in open societies.16 Social oppression is neither a necessary nor a sufficient ingredient. In addition, weak government can be a common factor underlying both social discontent and the growth of political violence in countries where the government lacks the means to solve social problems or maintain law and order.17 In fact, it is in weak states that terrorism is most deadly, as measured by the number of victims.18

The second problem is that members of terrorist organisations are often richer and better educated and of higher social status than the average in their society.19 There can be many explanations for this, for example that there are so many ‘applicants’ that the terrorist groups can allow themselves to ‘appoint’ the best candidates.20 In this respect there are many differences both between and within groups. Many groups are made up of members with different motivations – from the dedicated, action-orientated, uncompromising terrorists that Nechaev described in *The Catechism of the Revolutionary* in 1869 to members who are more goal-orientated and willing to compromise.

Altogether, there is just as little reason to search for underlying causes why individuals become terrorists as there is to assume that certain societies give rise to terrorism. These two problems have led many researchers to prefer to interpret ‘root causes ‘ as ‘risk factors’ – i.e. as conditions which make a society more vulnerable to terrorism, rather than as factors which cause terrorism directly.21

*Political, Social and Economic Risk Factors*

If we understand terrorism as a strategy which certain groups can use, underlying causes suchas economic, social and political injustice or oppression can be seen as indirect causes – in other words, as *risk factors.* In certain

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circumstances, political violence – terrorism – can become more likely. In this case there is no direct causal mechanism linking social structures with terrorism (or rebellion, civil war or other forms of political violence). Such relationships are just an indirect cause, to the extent that the terrorist groups’ objectives are connected with changing them. There can also be an indirect effect, in that weak states or terrorist organisations in neighbouring countries can make it easier for terrorists to go about their business. Five relationships are particularly important in this respect.

The first and most widely discussed risk factor is political oppression. Nearly all terrorist organisations justify their use of violence by claiming that they are oppressed by the authorities or by foreign regimes. As one of the definitions of terrorism in Chapter 1 was that it includes a political objective, this is not surprising. The degree of accordance between the group’s perception of oppression, break-down of human rights and the regime’s lack of legitimacy on the one hand and the broader society’s perception of the same problems on the other, can have great influence on how a terrorist campaign develops, but it is usually a small group – an elite – who take the initiative in the use of political violence.22

The next risk factor is social oppression. Political oppression can be especially provocative when it is combined with wider social problems or connected with ethnic and religious identity. Modernisation, urbanisation and explosive population growth can lead to social melt-down and indirectly to more potential recruits for politically radical organisations (even though it is a long step further to political violence). National, religious or ethnic conflicts can add another dimension to injustice, which is particularly difficult in the case of minorities that cannot have any hope of winning power in a democratic or semi-democratic system.23

Economic problems comprise a third set of risk factors. Poverty, low educational levels and restricted economic development are among the most over-stated and misunderstood, and therefore also the most studied, causes of terrorism. On the societal or the group level there is relatively little empirical support for any connection between poverty and terrorism. This is also a

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difficult area of research because the concepts are unclear. Should we look at poverty in the USA, Saudi Arabia or some other country to explain the 11th September attacks? Many parts of the research in this area show little or no consistency, even where good data is available.24 On the individual level, the explanation given is that the poor have less to lose by violence. Empirically, however, it is quite clear that there is no general correspondence here: Terrorists are systematically neither poorer nor richer, or better or worse educated, than non-terrorists.25

A fourth risk factor is related to weak states, or ‘state capacity.’ An important element in the definition of a well-functioning modern state is that it has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence and more or less monopoly on the actual use of violence. In cases where states disintegrate, either for internal reasons or because of an invasion, and more or less anarchic circumstances prevail, the road to political violence is shorter than in stable states with an effective power apparatus. Political violence in the form of rebellion and civil war often includes an element of terrorism. The results of research in this area are clearer.26 Iraq after 2003 is a good example: Rebellion, resistance, local political violence and civil war were well mixed with terrorism in the years that followed. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was a consequence, not the cause, of the disintegration of the state.

The fifth set of risk factors is to do with international relations, consisting of international politics and the regional neighbourhood. Studies of civil war as well as of terrorism show that in many instances it is the result of contagion. A conflict in one country spreads over the borders, for example by armed groups using friendly or anarchic neighbouring states as safe havens, by states supporting terrorist groups in neighbouring states, or by regional conflicts increasing the availability of weapons and experienced personnel.27 The Middle East again provides several examples, and the development of new Al Qaeda and IS groups in North Africa shows the same trend.

However, these five factors are no more than indirect causes. In most instances, neither political, social nor economic injustice and oppression lead to terrorism. Even within the same country it is not necessarily the case that it is

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the most oppressed groups or regions that give rise to terrorism or other forms of political violence. The Aceh region in Indonesia experienced civil war for 30 years up to 2005 and has since been used as a safe haven by terrorist groups, but several other parts of Indonesia with similar or worse conditions remained peaceful.28 It is best to understand economic, political and social factors, as well as weak states and international relationships, as circumstances in which radical groups find it easier to tell a story of oppression, easier to find potential recruits and easier to operate without being defeated by the police or the state’s armed services. Even though such situations do not directly cause terrorism, they are in many instances an important part of the political and social backdrop. It can therefore be difficult to combat terrorism without taking into account – and reducing the problems associated with - such ‘basic causes’ or risk factors.

In addition to structural risk factors, a number of other political, economic and social circumstances can give rise to terrorism. Terrorism relatively seldom comes like a bolt from the blue, at any rate as seen from the terrorists’ point of view. The decision to turn to terrorism is in most instances a combination of far-sighted development and some few events which cause discontent to overflow. In some cases it is a gradual deterioration of political and social conditions, or frustration because a group has not been able to do anything about these conditions. Whether the conditions are improving, seen purely objectively, is less important. For the anarchists in Russia in the period leading up to the assassination of Alexander II it was a gradual process where political violence appeared as a more and more attractive alternative for certain groups after they experienced how difficult it was to mobilise a politically apathetic population. This despite the fact that Alexander II was a relatively progressive tsar who worked to promote reform. In Palestine, Zionist political violence was partly a response to Arab political violence and partly caused by British decisions on immigration quotas. In other cases, personal factors and vengeance have been important trigger factors.29 The bombing of Café Terminus in Paris in 1894 was revenge for the execution of another anarchist. EOKA was founded soon after Georgios Grivas came to Cyprus in 1954. The Red Army Faction described their

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first actions as a reaction to Benno Ohnesorg having been shot by the police. The violence in Italy in the 1970’s was triggered by the bomb at Piazza Fontana. The Australian officer and researcher David Kilcullen’s book, *The Accidental Guerrilla,* shows how foreign military powers often convert farmers with no ideological connections into ‘accidental guerrillas’ who decide to take part in the action, for example against Russian or Western forces in Afghanistan.30 Kilcullen’s main point – which he came to after many years of research among and interviews with terrorists and terrorist groups – is that ordinary people can relatively easily take up arms against foreign military powers without basically sharing the ideological or political agendas the terrorist organisations or organised rebel groups profess. Kilcullen’s observations point to an important problem in the fight against terrorism: many military style actions against terrorists have unforeseen consequences and can easily produce more new recruits for terrorist organisations than they eliminate.

*Why Individuals Choose Terrorism*

On the individual level too, we can distinguish between explanations which regard terrorism as a phenomenon and those that see it as a strategy and a type of political violence. Kilcullen’s ‘accidental guerrillas’ are a good example of the latter. They could just as appropriately be called ‘accidental terrorists,’ as the distinction between political violence in the form of rebellion and political violence in the form of terrorism is so unclear in the type of circumstances which prevailed in Iraq and Afghanistan after 2003.

On the other hand, terrorists such as Émile Henry, Anders Behring Breivik and Andreas Baader had opinions which bordered on (or crossed the border of) insanity. Focussing on the terrorist as wholly or partly mad – psychotic or of unsound mind – is a common feature of many studies of individual terrorists. Burleigh’s study of terrorism’s ‘cultural history’ is a good example: Burleigh is mainly concerned with the cultural, personal and psychological features among terrorists and sees terrorists as extreme or pathological versions of more normal ideologues.31 The Baader-Meinhoff Group, for example, was associated with the protest-orientated, radical left in Western Europe in the 1960s, but built on and

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attracted both criminal and mentally disturbed individuals. Griffin takes the idea that terrorists have psychological traits in common a step further, on the basis that all terrorists’ political aims are subordinate to what he calls ‘metapolitical’ aims connected to identity and value systems.32 The most important element in this literature, however, focuses on the process of radicalisation and especially the steps from frustration to aggression and the development of a world view in which terrorist activity is justified.33 Most psychological studies of terrorists and terrorism restrict themselves to concluding that the explanations for terrorist activity require a combination of psychological, structural and organisational factors, and that most terrorists are neither psychotic (in the sense that they cannot distinguish right from wrong) nor sociopathic (in the sense that they are not concerned about the consequences of their activities for others).34 Three questions are particularly important in this context.

The first question is why individuals choose to take part in terrorism. The most convincing answers are to do with individual motivation, as in the case of Kilcullen’s ‘accidental guerrillas.’ In her book, *What Terrorists Want*, the American researcher Louise Richardson puts forward three main motives: vengeance, a sense of belonging, and reaction.35 The motive of vengeance is central in many studies of terrorist campaigns and interviews with terrorists, from Émile Henry (avenging other anarchists who had been executed) to Ulrike Meinhof (political violence) and from Leila Khaleed (Israeli fighter) to Osama bin Laden (US forces in Saudi Arabia).36 A sense of belonging to a social group and the wish to win honour and recognition within the group can be part of the explanation why so many terrorist cells are built up from below by a small group of friends or acquaintances. The CIA officer Marc Sageman describes this as ‘bunch of guys’ terrorism in his book, *Leaderless Jihad*.37 In addition, an important part of the motivation for individual acts of terrorism is often to provoke an over-reaction by the state. The attacks on more than twenty British intelligence officers in Dublin in 1921 and Irgun’s attack on the British in Palestine are good examples of this.

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The second question is about how radicalisation proceeds. In this respect, terrorism can be compared with other illegal activities (crime) as well as with other membership organisations.38 Rich and poor alike carry out criminal activities for many different reasons; rich and poor also support terrorist groups and perpetrate political violence for different reasons. This is most often described as a gradual process where individuals progress from sympathising with a group involved in terrorism, to supporting the group, to giving ancillary help around operations, to finally taking an active part in terrorist actions.39 Particular incidents such as ‘Bloody Sunday’ in 1920 and in 1972 are often prominent in individuals’ explanations of why they took the final step of joining a terrorist group. Recruitment in prisons through minor criminals meeting and getting together with terrorists is another well-known technique, from Frongoch Prison in Wales (where 1,800 Irish were interned after the Easter Rising in 1916, and which rapidly came to be known as ‘The University of Revolution’), to right extremists in the USA and Camp Bucca.40 The recruitment of members depends on a combination of individual objectives, local groups, social networks and not least, reaction to the state’s anti-terrorism activities. But the most important step in many instances is to take part in armed actions, which in hierarchical organisations requires a gradual rise through the ranks.

The third question is how terrorists justify their activities. If membership of organisations and participation in actions are deliberate choices, and violence is seen in principle as wrong (Most terrorists criticise their opponent’s use of illegitimate violence.), political violence requires some sort of justification. The most frequent element in such explanations is that violence is necessary because there is no other way out. This can be because all other methods have been tried (for example Elisée Reclus), or because the problem is so acute that one cannot wait for a peaceful political solution (for example Menachem Begin). The use of terror is often justified as a response to the other side’s use of terror, and therefore as proportional use of power (for example Yasser Arafat). In addition, many groups really do expect that armed struggle will succeed, pointing out for example the establishment of Ireland in 1921, Israel in 1948, Cyprus in 1960 and Algeria in 1962. Terrorism is also inexpensive in comparison with other forms of rebellion and armed confrontation, and can give great propaganda benefits even though it does not lead to political victory in the short term. Finally, some

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terrorists maintain that violence against randomly selected civilians can be morally justified: Émile Henry said during the trial in 1894 that ‘there are no innocents,’ and Breivik said of his killings that ‘It would be immoral to do nothing about the danger the whole of Europe is facing.’

The answers to these three questions vary not only between groups but also within groups. It is well known from sociology and political science that organisations consist of different types of people with different motivations. An example is Anthony Down’s 1967 study of bureaucracy which challenged the myth that all bureaucrats want the biggest possible bureaucracy, and pointed out that organisations are made up of a mixture of egoists, climbers and loyalists.42 Likewise, most large terrorist groups consist of a mixture of extremists fully dedicated to armed struggle; ideological members dedicated to the organisation’s political aims who see terrorism as a useful strategy; pragmatists who are willing to consider other strategies or sometimes accept compromises in line with the organisation’s target; and many members who have joined for different reasons but who have not committed themselves either to the ideology or to terrorism as the only strategy.43 The British researcher and UN Adviser Tom Parker describes the first type as ‘the terrorist prototype,’ an almost mystical being who gives up his personal identity and self-interest and commits himself wholly to the struggle. This model can be traced back to the writings of Sergey Nechaev, but has been revived many times in the form of leaders so diverse as Michael Collins, Nelson Mandela, Menachem Begin and Osama bin Laden.44 It was precisely their fame as fearless leaders which enabled Collins and Mandela – who in reality were extremely pragmatic – to negotiate compromises with the British and the South African Governments. It is well known that terrorist organisations are divided over strategic questions because different members have different opinions about the role armed struggle plays in their organisation and its identity. This phenomenon can be seen from IRA, ALN and Irgun in the struggle against imperialism to ETA, PIRA and Al-Qaeda in more modern times. A less well-known point is that this is also important for the fight against terrorism: Even the most radical and uncompromising terrorist group may have members who could be tempted away from terrorism.

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The most important recurring theme in all attempts to explain terrorism, whether from a societal or an individual perspective, is legitimacy. Terrorism often includes a combination of idiosyncratic personal motives and more systematic political motives. Individuals can have several different motives; the political motives are shared by the terrorists engaged in a particular campaign. As terrorism involves the use of violence with a view to achieving political goals, the use of violence has to be justified. The main basis for this justification is that it is absolutely necessary to turn to violence to change the power relationships. The British researcher and leading IRA expert Richard English sums this up well: ‘Terrorism is a method used by people who collectively consider themselves as participants in a war.’45 From the terrorists’ perspective, terror campaigns are nearly always part of a war, but a big difference is that groups who make use of terror seldom emerge victorious from the conflicts. The question of legitimacy is important in all phases – start, escalation and finish. The main problem most terrorist groups face is how they can build up and maintain a sufficient degree of legitimacy among their supporters to enable them to survive. When terrorist organisations become marginalised and disintegrate, it is usually because they are opposed and/or lose legitimacy. In the few cases where terrorist organisations have ended up wholly or partly on the winning side, it is because they are part of a broader movement alongside non-violent social and political organisations which have the same aims.

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Sample translation by Frank Stewart

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