

The silence behind the waves: The political significance of intermissions in Rapoport's theory

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Abstract: This study aims to reassess David C. Rapoport's "Four Waves of Modern Terrorism" theory by focusing on a dimension that is largely overlooked in the model: the periods of "silence" or transitions between waves. While Rapoport's theory conceptualizes each wave of terrorism as a roughly forty-year period marked by ideological and operational intensity, this article argues that the inter-wave silences should not be viewed merely as phases of inactivity, but rather as periods of ideological and organizational restructuring. A comparative historical analysis of the transition periods - Anarchist to Anti-Colonial, Anti-Colonial to New Left, and New Left to Religious - reveals common structural features of these phases: ideological exhaustion, ruptures in the global political context, and the reconstruction of organizational frameworks. The silent periods represent critical thresholds during which the ideological foundations of new waves are laid and strategic realignments are actively pursued. The study proposes three theoretical contributions: (1) the conceptualization of silence as a distinct phase of transformation rather than inactivity; (2) a structural model of terrorism history based on ruptures and re-alignments rather than linear continuity; (3) a heuristic framework to interpret potential signs of a forthcoming fifth wave. By problematizing the passive reading of transition periods, the study calls for a revised understanding of terrorism's temporal rhythm - not as a smooth progression, but as a discontinuous sequence shaped by crisis, collapse and reconstruction.

Keywords: four waves theory, terrorism, David Rapoport, problem of continuity

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Introduction

Academic research on terrorism has predominantly focused on the ideologies, tactics or targets of terrorist organizations, while structural models aiming to explain the historical evolution of the phenomenon remain relatively limited. One of the most influential theoretical frameworks in this field is David C. Rapoport's "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism" theory, which seeks to explain terrorism through approximately forty-year periods characterized by distinct ideological mobilizations. The model identifies four main waves -Anarchist, Anti-Colonial, New Left and Religious- each emerging with a specific ideological momentum, gradually declining and subsequently giving way to a new wave.

Despite the centrality of the "wave" metaphor in the theory, the transitional periods between these waves commonly regarded as phases of "silence" have received comparatively little scholarly attention. Yet these moments of transition are not merely defined by a decline in organizational activity but also by intensified ideological vacuums, organizational restructuring and critical shifts within the global political context.

The primary aim of this study is to revisit the concept of "silence" by focusing on these relatively neglected transitional phases within Rapoport's model and to reconceptualise them as active periods of transformation. Through a historical-comparative analysis of three key transitions - Anarchist → Anti-Colonial, Anti-Colonial → New Left and New Left → Religious, this study argues that these phases should be understood not only as the dissolution of previous waves but also as the structural groundwork for the emergence of new ones. In doing so, the paper offers a perspective that views the temporal rhythm of terrorism not as one of continuous linear development but as one shaped by cycles of crisis, collapse and reconstruction.

This study seeks to examine the political significance of the relatively "silent" periods within Rapoport's theory by focusing specifically on these zones of discontinuity. These transitional phases should not be regarded merely as pauses; rather, they constitute critical thresholds in which new ideological formations are constructed, organizational structures are transformed, and novel definitions of hostility emerge at the international level. In this context, silence is not simply a state of "inactivity", but a dynamic process marked by transformation, uncertainty and rupture.

Accordingly, this section begins by summarizing the core assumptions of the wave theory, after which the concepts of discontinuity and transition will be reconsidered as structural components of terrorism's historical development. In doing so, the analysis adopts not only a supportive but also a critical perspective toward the theory, opening a discussion on how periods of silence can be interpreted through concepts such as cyclical historicism, ideological exhaustion and organizational evolution.

Theoretical background: Wave theory and the problem of Continuity

Among the various classifications concerning the causes of terrorism, the most widely accepted in the literature is David Rapoport's wave theory, first introduced in 1999 and revitalized in the post-9/11 era. Rapoport argues that the history of modern terrorism has evolved through four distinct waves, each lasting approximately forty years. The first of these is known as the *Anarchist Wave*, which began in the 1880s and continued into the 1910s. Initiated by the Russian terrorist organization Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will) during the Tsarist era, the anarchist wave rapidly spread across the globe. The defining feature of the Anarchist Wave was the widespread use of firearms and explosives. This period is often referred to as the "golden age of assassination," marked by the targeted killings of heads of state, prime ministers and monarchs by political assassins (Rapoport 2005, 23-24).

The Anarchist Wave, which came to an end with the outbreak of World War I, was followed by the *Anti-Colonial Wave*, lasting from the 1920s to the 1960s. The primary catalyst for this wave was the principle of national self-determination promoted by the victorious powers of the First World War as they sought to dismantle the defeated empires. Although this principle was intended to legitimize the transition of colonial territories into sovereign states, it was simultaneously accompanied by the assertion that such populations were not yet ready for independence. As a result, these territories were placed under the mandates of the League of Nations, to be governed by the victorious powers until they were deemed prepared for self-rule.

However, this process inadvertently undermined the legitimacy of the colonial powers themselves (Rapoport 2013, 295). While the defeated states dismantled their empires following the Second World War, the formerly mandated territories no longer aspired to temporary tutelage but instead demanded full independence. This gave rise to a

wave of anti-colonial violence, often labelled as terrorism, despite being driven by nationalist and liberationist motivations. This context revived one of the most well-known dilemmas in terrorism studies: the distinction between the “terrorist” and the “freedom fighter” (Rapoport 2004, 60-61).

A distinguishing feature of this wave was the strategic use of softer rhetoric by terrorist groups, who framed their actions as resistance against state terrorism. Unlike the previous wave, where assassinations were prominent, the Anti-Colonial Wave prioritized guerrilla warfare and hit-and-run tactics. Moreover, actors within these waves engaged with the international arena more actively and effectively than their predecessors. Rapoport noted that during this period, foreign states with ethnically or culturally linked populations became more actively involved and diaspora communities significantly increased their political activities in unprecedented ways (Rapoport 2022, 125-126).

The third wave, referred to by Rapoport as the *New Left Wave*, is essentially described as an evolved form of the leftist activism that characterized the Anarchist Wave. The most significant catalyst for this wave was the Vietnam War. The effectiveness of rudimentary weaponry against the sophisticated military technology of the United States inspired hope among anti-establishment organizations that even dominant systems could be vulnerable (Rapoport 2002, 8).

During this period, the persistent state of war and widespread disillusionment with the existing global order led to the emergence of leftist-oriented groups, particularly among youth, both in the Third World and in the West. The existence of the Soviet bloc played a dual role: it provided ideological encouragement as well as material support, including training and arms, contributing to the proliferation of revolutionary groups. A notable feature of this wave was the increased visibility of women, both as leaders and combatants within terrorist organizations (Rapoport 2013, 298). This period was also marked by a surge in transnational operations, particularly aircraft hijackings and hostage-takings, which became emblematic tactics of the era.

Rapoport attributes the decline of the third wave, beginning in the 1980s, to two primary factors: the military defeat of revolutionary movements in their respective countries, and the growing international cooperation among state security agencies, which significantly limited the operational space of such groups. Throughout the first three waves—what Rapoport refers to as “old terrorism”—terrorist actors generally

operated with the precision of surgical strikes, deliberately avoiding large-scale attacks that might alienate potential supporters. The primary objective was not mass casualties, but rather the dissemination of propaganda. The conclusion of the third wave gave rise to the fourth, known as the *Religious Wave*. Due to its distinct methods and motivations, this wave is often labelled “new terrorism.” While earlier waves sought to establish secular states, the fourth wave was characterized by groups aiming to found religious states governed by divine law (Rapoport 2001, 422). Unlike the previous waves, in which there was a temporal gap between a triggering event and the onset of terrorist activity, this delay vanished in the fourth wave, where radical responses followed almost immediately.

Although religious terrorism in this wave was not exclusive to one faith -featuring groups associated with Christianity, Judaism and Islam- Rapoport emphasized that Islamist-inspired organizations proved to be the most enduring and globally influential. A defining feature of the Religious Wave was the adoption of suicide bombings, closely tied to the concept of martyrdom, which added a devastating and symbolic dimension to violence (Rapoport 2002, 11). Another distinguishing element was the dual role of some Islamist groups, which engaged in extensive social service campaigns within their own communities. In many authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, where overt political opposition was heavily suppressed, religious communities (jamaats) provided a tolerated form of opposition. These organizations operated schools, hospitals, places of worship and soup kitchens, effectively functioning as parallel state structures facilitating recruitment and community support (Rapoport 2004, 65).

Rapoport also noted a significant trend in the fourth wave: despite being more deadly and operationally sophisticated, it produced fewer terrorist organizations. Whereas the 1980s saw nearly 200 groups associated with the third wave, this number dropped to around 40 in the following decade. However, these fewer groups tended to possess larger memberships compared to their predecessors (Ibid, 70).

Analyzing transitional periods: The silence between the waves

Although the “wave” metaphor in Rapoport’s theory is used to designate distinct periods, it does not imply definitive beginnings or endings. Each wave may originate from a shared grievance perceived by different organizations and there can be cyclical elements between the waves. Successive waves often emerge as reactions to the

preceding ones and are typically accompanied by a marked ideological rupture (Süruri 2024, 72-73). Each wave lasted for roughly four decades, gradually declining because of negotiated political concessions, increasingly effective counter-terrorism measures, and the generational aging of militant actors, which reduced organizational vitality and recruitment (Millington 2024, 500). However, transitions between waves are neither instantaneous nor automatic; they have generally been shaped by silent periods lasting between 10 and 20 years. These intervals not only reflect a decline in organizational activity but also encompass deeper processes such as shifts in global power dynamics, ideological realignments, and transformations in technological and sociological structures.

The following sections will provide a comparative analysis of each of these transitional periods:

Anarchist Wave → Anti-Colonial Wave (1910–1920)

The transition from the Anarchist Wave to the Anti-Colonial Wave marked the first significant intermission in Rapoport's wave theory of modern terrorism. This period, spanning approximately from 1910 to 1920, was shaped by a complex interplay of ideological exhaustion, organizational decline, and shifting international dynamics. By the early 20th century, anarchist movements -once transnational and highly active- began to lose momentum (Rasler and Thompson 2009, 34). Key leaders were killed or imprisoned, and the movement suffered from strategic fragmentation and declining public support.

The outbreak of World War I further accelerated the decline of anarchist terrorism. Wartime nationalism and the expansion of state surveillance suppressed revolutionary networks, while the international focus shifted from domestic instability to global conflict (Kaplan 2016). In this environment, the appeal of individual anarchist violence diminished, and broader anti-state movements went dormant or were absorbed into wartime political agendas.

However, this period also witnessed the emergence of new ideological aspirations rooted in the discourse of national self-determination. The post-war settlements, particularly U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's advocacy of self-determination, created both hope and disillusionment in colonial territories (Jensen 2013, 20-22). While colonial subjects were promised eventual independence, many were instead subjected to the League of Nations' mandate system -governed directly by the victorious powers. This contradiction laid the

groundwork for the Anti-Colonial Wave, as nationalist groups increasingly turned to violence in response to imperial retrenchment (Kaplan2008, 18).

Thus, the silence between the anarchist and anti-colonial waves was not merely a phase of inactivity; it represented a profound ideological and structural shift. The focus of terrorism moved from individual acts of symbolic resistance to organized campaigns aimed at ending foreign domination and achieving national sovereignty.

Anti-Colonial Wave → New Left Wave (late 1960s - early 1970s)

The transition from the Anti-Colonial Wave to the New Left Wave unfolded during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period characterized by deep ideological reevaluation and shifting geopolitical contexts. As many colonial territories achieved formal independence by the early 1960s, the legitimacy of anti-colonial violence began to erode. With decolonization processes largely underway, the foundational cause that had driven the previous wave lost its mobilizing power (Parker and Sitter 2016, 205). National liberation movements either transitioned into formal state structures or became mired in post-colonial governance challenges, leading to internal fragmentation and diminished revolutionary momentum.

Simultaneously, the post-World War II international order - dominated by Cold War bipolarity gave rise to new forms of dissent, particularly among disillusioned youth in both the Global South and the West. The Vietnam War played a crucial catalytic role in this transformation. The asymmetrical success of the North Vietnamese forces against a technologically superior United States inspired radical groups to believe that entrenched global systems could, in fact, be destabilized (Kurt 2023, 35-37). This ideological shift, from anti-colonial nationalism to broader anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist critiques, laid the foundation for what Rapoport (2001, 422) termed the *New Left Wave*.

Unlike their anti-colonial predecessors, New Left organizations often emerged in urban settings and adopted hybrid forms of organization -neither entirely guerrilla- based nor conventionally hierarchical. These groups drew ideological nourishment from Marxist, Maoist, and Guevarist thought, but also adapted their rhetoric to resonate with local grievances, such as racial injustice, economic inequality, and political repression (Hughes 2021, 60). Notably, the rise of student movements, anti-establishment activism, and

transnational solidarity networks helped shape a new generation of terrorists who saw themselves not as national liberators but as global revolutionaries.

The inter-wave period thus reflected not a vacuum, but a reorientation of political violence from decolonization to systemic opposition. The global diffusion of revolutionary thought, combined with technological advances in media and communication, enabled these groups to amplify their messages across borders, ushering in a new era of ideological militancy.

New Left Wave → Religious Wave (late 1980s - early 1990s)

The transition from the New Left Wave to the Religious Wave marks one of the most ideologically profound shifts within Rapoport's wave model. While earlier waves were rooted in secular ideologies - anarchism, nationalism, and Marxism - the emergence of the Religious Wave in the late 1980s and early 1990s signalled a reconfiguration of political violence around spiritual and theological frameworks (Rapoport 2013, 300). This shift was not abrupt; rather, it unfolded during a transitional period shaped by ideological exhaustion, organizational fragmentation and significant global realignments.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the revolutionary fervour of New Left movements had begun to wane. Many groups suffered operational defeats, lost popular support, or were dismantled through intensified international counter-terrorism cooperation. At the same time, the bipolar structure of the Cold War, which had sustained much of the ideological polarization of the third wave, began to disintegrate (Laqueur 2001, 28-29). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the ideological crisis of Marxism left a vacuum in the global oppositional landscape.

Into this vacuum emerged a new form of political violence rooted in religious conviction. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, the rise of political Islam, the mobilization of mujahedeen fighters during the Soviet Afghan War and the growing disillusionment with secular nationalist regimes in the Middle East all contributed to the ideological foundations of the Religious Wave (Kaplan 2011, 75-77). Unlike previous waves, in which there was often a temporal gap between catalyzing events and the onset of violence, the Religious Wave was characterized by the immediacy and simultaneity of ideological radicalization and operational action.

Another distinguishing feature was the organizational structure: religiously motivated groups often operated in decentralized, network-based formats, emphasizing transnational solidarity over national identity (Rapoport 2005, 33). Suicide bombing emerged as a key tactic, imbued with theological significance through the concept of martyrdom. In many cases, these groups combined militant action with extensive social service provision establishing schools, hospitals, and welfare systems within their communities. This “dual functionality” not only enhanced their local legitimacy but also facilitated recruitment and long-term resilience (Martin 2017, 50-55).

Thus, the inter-wave period between the New Left and Religious Waves represented not merely a tactical or demographic shift but a paradigmatic transformation one in which the justification, language and targets of terrorism were redefined in accordance with religious worldviews. As Rapoport (2004, 67) noted, although fewer in number, religious terrorist organizations tended to be more lethal, more globally connected and more enduring than their secular predecessors.

Conceptualizing silent periods: Inactivity or reconstruction?

Rapoport’s wave theory conceptualizes each wave of terrorism as an approximately 40-year period characterized by distinct ideological and operational patterns (Rapoport 2002, 3). While the “wave” metaphor at the core of the model implies a cyclical rise and decline, it does not explicitly define the nature of the transitional phases between waves. As a result, these periods have often been interpreted merely as phases of declining activity or diminished organizational capacity. However, such periods of “silence” contain critical structural and ideological ruptures that are essential to understanding the broader evolution of terrorism. In conventional readings, “silence” is often equated with a lack of action. However, historical analysis reveals that such periods frequently function as phases of reconstruction times when new ideological discourses begin to take shape, organizational structures are reconfigured, and actors seek strategies that can adapt to evolving state security frameworks.

In this context, silence should not be viewed as a political void; rather, it represents a transitional space in which the direction, form and legitimacy of radical violence are renegotiated. These periods embody a convergence between the causes of the preceding wave’s dissolution and the conditions enabling the emergence of the next.

The so-called silent periods in the wave transitions reveal several recurring structural characteristics, which include the following:

- *Ideological vacuum and crisis of legitimacy*: Each new wave of terrorism emerges as the preceding one loses its legitimacy; the resulting ideological and strategic void necessitates the construction of a new narrative.
 - *Organizational transformation*: The collapse of traditional hierarchical structures gives way to more network-based, cell-oriented, or individual formations.
 - *Shifts in state responses*: Periods of silence are often when states develop more sophisticated tools and strategies for counterterrorism.
 - *Reshaping of the international context*: Structural transformations such as the end of the Cold War, decolonization processes, or digitalization have accelerated wave transitions.
- These structural trends suggest that periods of silence should not be interpreted as mere organizational dormancy but rather as phases of strategic realignment.

Conclusion: An alternative reading of the theory through periods of silence

David Rapoport's four-wave theory of terrorism offers a compelling framework for understanding the development of modern terrorism through historical cycles and ideological continuities. However, the existing literature tends to concentrate primarily on the "waves" themselves, often sidelining the transitional phases that occur between them. This study's central argument is that the so-called "silent" periods are, in fact, arenas of strategic, ideological, and structural transformation that enable the emergence of subsequent waves. In this study, the wave theory has been extended through a focus on structural discontinuities and periods of silence. Approaching the history of terrorism not as a linear progression, but as an intermittent, fragmented, and continuously reconfigured narrative offers a critical contribution to the theory. Silence is no longer seen merely as a transitional phase but as a period that warrants analytical attention.

Historical and conceptual analyses reveal that:

- Periods of silence represent not only the exhaustion of the previous wave but also the incubation phase in which the ideological foundations and organizational structures of the next wave begin to take shape.

- Each transition is linked to a specific moment of international rupture -such as wars, geopolitical polarization, or systemic collapse- which provides fertile ground for new forms of radicalism.
- Silent periods encompass multidimensional processes, including transformations in organizational models, recalibrations of state responses, and shifts in the forms and legitimacy of political violence.

Within this framework, the study offers three key contributions to Rapoport's theory:

1. *Independent conceptualization of silent periods*: The transitional phases between waves are shown to be not merely "passive intervals" but theoretically significant processes of "active reconstruction." Silence is framed not as a space of inaction, but as a domain of preparation and transformation.
2. *A structural rupture model over historical continuity*: The dominant emphasis on "continuity" within the wave theory is reinterpreted in this study through the lens of ruptures and transitional moments. In doing so, the historical evolution of terrorism is rendered intelligible not merely through ideological persistence, but also through systemic breakdowns and periods of crisis.
3. *Conceptual groundwork for a fifth wave*: By understanding the early signals and dynamics of silent periods, it becomes possible to develop informed projections about the emergence of a subsequent, yet uncrystallized wave. Although Rapoport suggests that a fifth wave may emerge around the year 2025, he does not offer a clear prediction regarding its characteristics or timing; he merely notes that it could arise as a reaction to various unresolved political issues.

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