

Introducing International Relations



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Introduction

This free course introduces you to the world of International Relations (IR). It introduces some of the tools scholars of IR use and insight into two important areas of contemporary international relations and the debates they raise. It is an excellent way to begin your exploration of what international relations is all about and to develop a feel for what studying international relations involves.

- In Section 1, you will learn about what International Relations (IR) is and how it seeks to analyse global challenges.
- Section 2 will focus on how IR analyses the interactions between various actors, while addressing key issues and debates to better understand global interactions and dynamics.
- Section 3 will introduce you to the first case study, which explores the competition among great powers for resources and influence in Africa, examining the interplay of actors, issues and debates within this context.
- Section 4 will explore the case of international terrorism and, in a similar way to Section 3, you will gain a basic understanding of the main actors involved and the key issues and debates addressed.
- In Section 5, you will be introduced to key theoretical approaches in IR – realism, liberalism, constructivism and postcolonialism – each offering different ways to analyse and interpret global interactions and their implications.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*D228 Exploring international relations: actors, issues, perspectives*](#).

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand what International Relations is, and how International Relations is studied
- understand two contemporary examples of international relations: great powers in Africa and international terrorism
- demonstrate knowledge of the kinds of problems and questions International Relations as an academic subject tries to address
- identify some of the different actors and issues shaping international relations
- have an awareness of different perspectives and debates on international relations.

1 What is International Relations (IR)?



Figure 1 A world of sovereign states.

International Relations (IR) is the study of global interactions between states, societies and people. While ‘international’ originally referred only to relations between countries, it now covers a wide range of interactions among different actors with global impact. The term ‘international relations’ (lowercase) generally describes real-world interactions, while ‘International Relations’ (uppercase) refers to the academic study of these interactions.

Since the world consists of many societies, each must consider others when making decisions. The way societies work together – or in opposition – shapes crucial global outcomes, such as peaceful coexistence, economic growth, and solutions for global challenges like climate change and human rights. IR explores topics like war, peace, trade, the environment and migration, making it a broad and dynamic field. Contemporary issues, like those seen in the daily news, frequently reshape the discipline of IR, demonstrating the importance of understanding these global interactions. IR also directly impacts everyday life. For example, international trade influences what we can buy, while international policies affect travel and job opportunities. These global decisions often begin with governments, but influence individuals and communities worldwide.

Activity 1



Allow about 10 minutes

Record some initial thoughts on what you think international relations means/ covers. You can then reflect on your initial answer after reading the next section.

Provide your answer...

1.1 The subject of international relations

Every academic discipline has a main focus, or purpose. For instance:

- geography as an academic subject focuses on space: how the place where things happen (the natural or built environment) matters
- history as an academic subject focuses on time and how things change or don't across time
- economics as an academic subject focuses on the distribution of resources.

Regarding IR, the core focus is 'the international', meaning the challenges and dynamics that arise from having multiple societies coexisting and interacting with each other. These interactions are often between states, but they also involve other actors such as organisations, corporations, and even individuals who impact global affairs.

Thus, IR is an academic discipline that aims to understand the interactions among societies, or what some scholars refer to as 'societal multiplicity'. This simply means that the world consists of many separate societies or states. Though human societies have taken many forms – nation state, kingdom, empire – there has always been more than one of them and they have always had other societies to deal with. No other academic subject (which often look at issues within a single society or state) takes this as its core purpose – to analyse the consequences of the international.

In practical terms, the coexistence of multiple societies can lead to various challenges and consequences, including conflict, cooperation and competition. IR seeks to understand and explain these challenges by addressing different questions. For example, how do states protect their security? To answer this question, IR examines how states manage their sovereignty, form alliances and collaborations with other states or other actors such as international organisations and try to ensure the safety of their citizens against internal and external threats.

Overall, the field of IR is essential for understanding and interpreting our increasingly interconnected world. IR examines the causes and effects of global interactions, offering insights into how societies manage conflict, work together on global challenges, and shape one another's internal and external realities. Whether dealing with peace, economic development or human rights, IR provides the framework to make sense of the world's complexities. For anyone looking to understand the forces shaping our world, IR is an invaluable field of study that clarifies how and why global interactions matter at both the societal and individual levels. In the next activity you will be asked to reflect how international politics may affect you on an individual level, on your day-to-day life.

1.2 International relations and you

Our personal lives are affected by events in different parts of the world or by international politics. For instance, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 contributed to an increase in fuel costs, which in turn caused the price of nearly everything to rise. Similarly, our lives might be influenced by events specific to where we live – some events have a greater impact on certain parts of the world than others.

Activity 2



Allow about 30 minutes

In the previous activity, you recorded some initial thoughts on what international relations mean to you. This follow-up activity invites you to think of an event in international politics and reflect on how it has affected your personal or everyday life. Note down your thoughts in the text box below.

Now reread your answer to Activity 1. Would you change what you initially wrote?

Provide your answer...

2 Analysing International Relations

To analyse IR effectively, it is important to understand and consider the various actors and issues involved and the debates they give rise to. They form the foundation for understanding how the global system works. In the next three sub-sections you can gain a basic understanding of these considerations. As you will see in sub-section 1, actors, ranging from states and international organisations to corporations and individuals, shape and drive interactions worldwide. Then, in sub-section 2, you can learn about 'issues', which are the main topics that actors engage with. For example, issues such as security, human rights, economics and the environment, are global challenges that impact societies, and different actors need to interact in order to deal with these. Finally, debates/perspectives offer different angles to understand motivations, conflicts, and potential cooperation among actors. These considerations – actors, issues and debates – can be a valuable tool to help in organising your knowledge about, and enquiries into, IR.



Figure 2 Actors, issues and debates.

2.1 Actors in international relations

'Actors' in international relations can be defined as the main organisations, groups or individuals who take part, or 'make things happen', in international relations. Actors can be divided into three broad groups, namely state, international organisations and non-state actors, with a number of sub-groups.

Traditionally, **states** have been viewed as the primary actors in IR, as they are the main entities with the power to make decisions on behalf of their citizens. A state in IR refers to the institutions that govern a specific territory and population, including entities like the military, civil service and public services. Unlike governments, which may change frequently, a state is a more enduring structure. States claim sovereignty, or ultimate authority, over their territories, and this sovereignty is normally recognised both internally by citizens and externally by other states and organisations. States form the foundation of the international system and have the authority to engage in diplomacy, establish treaties and international law. Of course, the power dynamics of states vary, with so-called 'great powers' like the US, China and Russia having significant global influence, while so-called 'weaker' states may exercise regional power. Nevertheless, over the years, globalisation has progressively introduced many other influential actors involved in IR:

- **International organisations:** Institutions like the United Nations (UN), World Health Organisation (WHO) and World Trade Organisation (WTO) work to address global issues by facilitating cooperation and setting standards.

Some of the main non-state actors include the following sub-groups:

- **Non-governmental organisations (NGOs):** NGOs such as Amnesty International or Doctors Without Borders advocate for issues like human rights, environmental protection, and health care, and have the potential to influence global policies.
- **Networks:** In its simplest form a network is any group of interconnected nodes – actors or groups – that doesn't have a formal authority structure (like governments or governing bodies) and isn't primarily commercial or market-based. While many

NGOs might be thought of as individual entities, many are connected to each other via relations of collaboration, reciprocity or shared goals in a network. They are referred to as 'networked actors'. As such there's an overlap between NGOs and networks.

- **Corporations and businesses:** Large multinational corporations impact global economies, labour practices, and even political decisions through their global presence and financial power.
- **Individuals:** Prominent figures like diplomats, activists and everyday citizens can influence international relations through advocacy, cultural exchange or migration.

All the above actors work together or in competition, forming a dynamic web of interactions that drive international relations. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, states, corporations, NGOs and local communities are all stakeholders in the global cobalt market – the cobalt mineral is a key ingredient in electric car and mobile phones batteries – which impacts policies on renewable energy and consumer goods. In a similar way global migration governance relies on the interactions of various actors, such as states, international organisations, NGOs, grassroots movements and migrants themselves.

2.2 Issues in international relations

'Issues' can be defined as the main topics or subjects that feature in international relations, and arise in the interactions between actors. The notion of issues is essential in defining the scope of international relations, or what they are 'about'. Also issues often overlap, showing how interconnected global challenges are. To mention only some of the most important issues in IR these include:

- **Political issues:** These include diplomacy, state sovereignty and international law. For instance, as you will see in Section 3 of the course, the sovereignty of some African states is central to how they negotiate with foreign states, balancing their independence with the benefits of foreign investment or military support.
- **Military and security issues:** Security issues are foundational in IR and include war, peace and terrorism. Traditionally focused on state protection, security involves non-state threats like terrorism and cybersecurity. For example, the UK's policies to combat international terrorism show how security concerns influence everything from foreign policy to local law enforcement, impacting the everyday lives of citizens.
- **Economic issues:** Economic issues in IR address wealth creation, trade, and inequality. They include trade agreements, investment flows, and labour standards. For example, global competition for resources like oil and minerals highlights economic competition, especially between powerful states like China and the US, who are competing for influence in African markets to secure access to raw materials.
- **Environmental issues:** Environmental issues have increasingly become prominent in IR due to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. These issues require international cooperation, as seen in global climate agreements. For example, competition over resources like cobalt has environmental implications, affecting mining practices in countries like Congo and influencing sustainable energy policies globally.
- **Social and cultural issues:** These issues involve cultural exchanges, identity conflicts, and social norms. IR examines how globalisation impacts local cultures, religious identities and migration patterns. Social issues often overlap with political issues, as seen, for example, in debates over human rights or refugee protection.

Consequently, each issue area can significantly affect others. For instance, military interventions may destabilise regions, impacting trade and human rights, while environmental crises like deforestation and pollution affect resource availability and can increase the risk of conflict.

2.3 Debates in international relations

Debates in IR help us interpret the motivations and outcomes of global interactions. For example, these debates might be competing views as to whether peace is possible, or how human rights can be respected, or how the environment might be protected. There are also different theories or traditions of thought in IR, that is, general academic approaches that seek to explain how international relations 'work' at a more general level. In particular:

- The first use of debates refers to the different views or positions there might be on a particular issue. In the main it refers to the different views that those analysing a problem or a challenge might take, but such things cross over into the 'real world' as well. Examples might include who was responsible for starting a conflict, or how it might be resolved; whether the action of a state is in its national interest; whether a country opening up to more international trade will improve livelihoods or whether changes to international law can help to improve the protection of human rights. So, in this substantive guise, debates tie in with both issues and actors discussed already.
- The second use of debates is somewhat more abstract – that is a further step removed from the 'nitty gritty' of everyday international relations and the problems it presents. This second use refers to the theories that scholars of IR use to research into and draw conclusions about international relations. Theories might be quite specific – a series of claims about a particular field of IR like security or peace. Or they might be general theories – broader, abstract ways of understanding IR. Debates in this theoretical sense also connects with the discussion of actors and issues you have already read about. In part, this is because different theoretical traditions have different takes on who the key actors are in international relations, and what the most important issues are. You can read more about these theories in Section 5 of this course.

Having explored the different debates in IR, you can now turn to the first case study, which examines the growing competition among powerful states for influence and resources in Africa. At this stage, the focus will shift away from theoretical traditions to the practical differences in debates on global challenges. This case study provides a lens for analysing competing interests and their broader implications for international relations.

3 Case study: great powers in Africa

The first case study in this course will explore the growing competition among powerful states for influence and resources in Africa. By reading this case study, you will gain a basic understanding into the main actors involved and the key issues – i.e. resources, diplomacy, and security – around which they compete. This will introduce you to the process of ‘doing’ International Relations analysis, by exploring who some of the most significant actors are, what are the main issues these actors have to deal with, and what debates arise from these issues and interactions among all these actors. As a result, you will be able to engage with ‘real world’ debates on a specific case.

3.1 Outline of the Africa case

In the twenty-first century, the African continent became a significant arena for global power competition. Leading powers like the US, France and Russia, as well as the so-called rising powers like China, India and Turkey started competing for influence in Africa. This increasing interest arose due to the fact that many African countries possess resources important to the economies of the world and are important markets. In addition, these countries possess considerable diplomatic influence in international organisations, like for instance the United Nations. At the same time, some African governments have been active in developing new relationships with various countries external to Africa and the financial, political and other advantages they might offer.

Consequently, despite sometimes being marginalised in the past, contemporary Africa has attracted global interest and started initiating collaborations with major powers seeking resources. Djibouti, the third smallest country in Africa with a population of under a million, exemplifies this shift. It is one of Africa’s key strategic locations, due to its position on the Bab al-Mandab Strait (see Figure 3), a critical point connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, through which a significant portion of global trade passes. By the 2020s, its geographic importance had attracted military bases from no fewer than eight foreign countries, motivated by objectives such as combating piracy, securing trade routes and supporting energy supply lines.



Figure 3 Map showing position of Djibouti in relation to the Horn of Africa and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Djibouti and many other African states have progressively collaborated with external powers to secure economic benefits, infrastructure investment and trade relationships. The *Economist* magazine, which infamously declared Africa 'the hopeless continent' in 2000, changed its tune, investigating a 'New Scramble for Africa' in 2019 in which there were new diplomatic and economic opportunities opening up (The *Economist*, 2019).

The term 'scramble for Africa' referred to the colonisation of Africa roughly between 1880 and 1910, with only Liberia and Ethiopia remaining independent. This period's legacy is evident in modern African borders, many of which align with those established during colonial rule (see Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4 Africa in 1914.



Figure 5 Africa in 2021.

It is important to note that this new reality has met with mixed responses within Africa. While some African countries welcome partnerships that provide economic or security advantages, concerns about labour, environmental impact, and local industry competition have given rise to protests and considerable criticism. For example, in 2013 protests erupted over labour conditions, environmental damage, and unfair business practices in Zambia, where workers clashed with Chinese managers at a coal mine, leading to government intervention. Similarly, in the 2020s, the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project, backed by European and Chinese investors, has faced environmental protests in Uganda and Tanzania due to ecological risks and displacement concerns. Thus, the African case shows the challenges of contemporary international relations, where global powers and African nations experience opportunities but also tensions arising from the growing competition on the African continent.

The following activity will review the categories of actors and how they have been featured in the Africa case study.

Activity 3

 Allow about 20 minutes

As you have seen, actors have been defined in this course as ‘the main organisations, groups or individuals who take part, or “make things happen”, in international relations’. Actors can be divided into three broad groups (state, international organisations and non-state actors), with a number of subgroups.

Watch this short report from the BBC’s Africa Service which touches on many of the actors covered in section 2 of this course: [Is this the ‘second scramble for Africa’?](#).

Identify which actors belong under each of the group headings.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



The slideshow below offers a specific example within the broader context of competition in Africa: the case of cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). (Note that the DRC is often just referred to as ‘Congo’ but is distinct from the much smaller country of Congo (Brazzaville) which isn’t included here.) This example shows how international relations – particularly the competition over DRC’s mining sector – extend across continents, influencing national policies (such as the push for net-zero emissions) and impacting the lives of people far beyond the original site. It also brings together various international actors, interconnected within the global system on issues including commercial interests, national development, environmental policies and diplomatic relations.

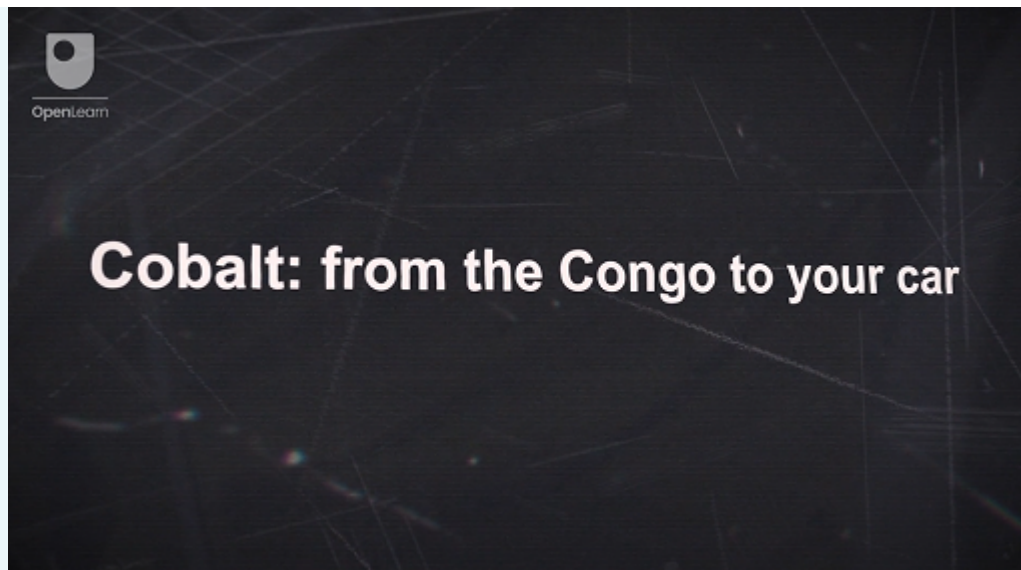
Activity 4

 Allow about 30 minutes

Watch the slideshow and then answer the following questions in the text boxes below.

Video content is not available in this format.

Slideshow 1 Cobalt: from the Congo to your car



1. Write a couple of sentences as to why, in your view, the slideshow presents an example of international relations? There's no single correct answer to this first question, so just write a couple of sentences to summarise your initial thoughts.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You might have noted the involvement of multiple states (countries); the way issues like trade and investment reach across international boundaries or that events in the DRC have impacts across the globe.

2. Try to identify some actors in this example

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In terms of actors, there are several you might have noted: the governments of DRC and China; the US president; mining companies and car firms; labour activists. Those consuming renewable technologies in the UK – electric and hybrid car owners are also perhaps actors in this case, as consumers.

3. Try to identify some international relations issues this example.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Issues raised by the example that you might have noted include economic rivalries between China and western states; environmental issues related to the growth of renewable technology and the impact of mining in DRC; and political issues such as

the cooperation agreement struck between the DRC and China. You may well have noted others.

You can now read the subsequent sub-section and compare your answers.

3.2 Key actors and issues in Africa

In this sub-section you can learn about the key actors in Africa and the emerging issues these actors need to deal with. In particular, the key actors involve both state and non-state actors.

Actors

- **State actors** include African states (e.g. DRC, Zambia, Djibouti and Zimbabwe), states outside the continent (e.g. China, Russia, US, UK and India), international organisations (e.g. the UN) and regional organisations (e.g. the African Union).
- **Non-state actors** include multinational corporations (e.g. Chinese mining corporations), NGOs (e.g. Greenpeace), interest groups (e.g. trade unions) and military groups.

Of course, African and external states are key protagonists, with countries like Djibouti forming strategic military (e.g. establishment of military bases) and economic partnerships with powerful countries such as the US, China, and France. It is also important to keep in mind that the actual influence different countries hold varies. The so-called great powers, like the US and China, have greater influence due to factors like economic strength and military force. In Africa, these powerful nations often make decisions based on their own strategic interests, such as accessing resources. For instance, China's involvement in Africa is largely motivated by its need for raw materials, rather than the priorities of African nations, creating an imbalanced relationship where African states may feel dominated by these external powers. Despite power disparities, African states exert influence by managing relations with multiple powers, sometimes even leveraging these relationships to counteract sanctions or pursue specific interests.

Other significant actors include multinational corporations (MNCs) and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), especially those involved in natural resource extraction and infrastructure projects. Also, interest groups, NGOs and activist networks within Africa influence diplomatic and economic relations, often challenging foreign investments based on labour, environmental, or human rights concerns. Non-state military groups, such as terrorist organisations, are also influential in certain regions, further complicating international relations and security policies in Africa.

Issues

All the above-mentioned actors have to deal with various emerging issues, that can be grouped into three main areas: military and security, economic, and political issues.

- **Military and security issues:** Several countries, including the US, China and European states, have established military bases, especially in strategic locations like Djibouti. China's military bases, for example, have been established to protect its interests in shipping routes and to protect Chinese citizens working in unstable regions. Respectively, the US focuses on counter-terrorism efforts, and European states aim to control piracy. Conflicts in various African regions also see intervention from external actors, the African Union and the UN aiming to stabilise the situation in such areas.

- **Economic issues:** Economic competition is intense as external powers compete for access to Africa's valuable natural resources, particularly energy supplies (oil and gas) and strategic minerals (like cadmium and lithium). China's focus on resource-rich countries like Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo leads to increasing rivalry with the US and European countries seeking to counterbalance China's influence. Control over these resources has impact on global supply chains and environmental goals.
- **Political issues:** Over the past twenty years diplomatic relations have become more complex as various powers with different agendas engage with Africa. On the one hand, western countries, including the US and the EU, promote democracy and human rights as central principles of their Africa policies. China and other emerging powers, on the other hand, generally emphasise economic partnerships without paying much attention on political reforms. This allows African countries to maintain relationships with multiple partners, enhancing their influence in international organisations like the UN General Assembly, where African states hold significant voting power.

The military, economic and political issues mentioned above are interconnected and, as you will notice in the next sub-section, they lead to various debates and competing views on how best to address them.

3.3 Debates on great powers and Africa

The case study on Africa involves numerous debates on great power competition with two of the most important focusing on what drives great power competition in Africa and who benefits from it.

External factors' influence versus African agency is a main debate on what drives competition in Africa:

- **External factors:** Great power competition is driven by the rise of China as an economic and political power. Many see China's rise as a global power, with its need for resources like oil, copper, and cobalt, as the main catalyst. This has led China to invest heavily in African countries, providing aid, loans, and trade in return for resources.
- **African agency:** The role of African states in pursuing new relations with rising powers such as China is a key area of debate. African states benefit from China's 'no strings attached' stance and have found ways to leverage competition among great powers to expand partnerships and gain influence.

The answer to the first question, as who is driving change, leads on to a second debate about who benefits from this competition. To address this debate, you will explore some of the 'issue' categories discussed in the previous section:

- **Economic impact:** Chinese investment has contributed to economic growth in many African countries, but concerns arise over resource exploitation without local communities gaining substantial benefit. African resources often being processed abroad, may lead to limited local industry growth, and cheap imports that negatively influence African businesses.
- **Political impact:** Great power competition gives African states new diplomatic options, but it also has mixed results for local governance. For example, China's 'non-interference' stance can support authoritarian regimes.
- **Military impact:** Military debates include whether the increase in great power competition fuels, or prevents, rising conflict. Some African coups (e.g. in Niger, Mali,

Sudan, Guinea and Chad) in the 2020s have caused concern over external influences like Russia's Wagner Group, which is thought to contribute to instability.

The interaction of these debates also shows how African countries have the potential to be not just passive players but actively shape global competition. Audio 1 in the next activity can help you better understand the various debates in international relations. It presents a discussion between two specialists in Africa's international relations. Both experts, Dr Frangton Chiyemura and Dr Folashadé Soulé, explore the roles that African states have played in driving great power involvement in the continent, some of the benefits and pitfalls facing African states in their relations with great powers and why it is important to consider different points of view in international relations.

Activity 5

 Allow about 1 hour

Listen to the audio.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 1 Africa's influence

The audio discussion offered some additional insights into two of the questions posed: what is driving great power competition and who benefits from it?

Having listened to the audio can you:

- identify some key benefits African countries may gain from great power competition?
- identify some of the actions Folashadé and Frangton say that African states could take to increase benefits from great power competition?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Some of the key benefits mentioned are: benefits to economic development that African states might gain by 'diversifying' their development partners. A number of examples are mentioned: Rwanda negotiating with a variety of external aid donors over development projects; Kenya's development of economic ties with China alongside its maintenance of long-standing security cooperation with the United States; and Zimbabwe's diplomacy.

Some suggested possible actions include that African governments need to take notice of the views and wishes of their domestic populations and electorates. Frangton revisits the case of Zimbabwe and the opportunity African states have to play great powers off against each other.

4 Case study: international terrorism

The second case study of this course is focused on international terrorism. In a similar way to the previous section, by reading about the case of international terrorism, you will gain a basic understanding of the main actors involved and the key issues addressed. This will introduce you to the process of 'doing' International Relations analysis by exploring who some of the most significant actors are, what the main issues these actors must address are, and what debates arise from their interactions.



Figure 6 The remains of the World Trade Centre after the attacks of September 11 2001.

4.1 Outline of the terrorism case study

Terrorism has been a challenge for states and international organisations throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Academics have defined terrorism in various ways and the United Nations has struggled to reach a consensus on the definition of terrorism among its member states. As a result, there is no universal definition of terrorism, but it is broadly understood as the use of violence to achieve political, religious or ideological goals. For the purposes of this course, 'terrorism' will be understood in a colloquial sense, that is, where groups or incidents are widely referred to as 'terrorists' or 'terrorism', then that terminology will be followed.

The case of Nelson Mandela highlights some of the challenges in defining terrorism. Mandela was a leading member of the African National Congress (ANC), an organisation formed to fight for the rights of South Africa's Black population, and a key figure in the movement against apartheid. He was labelled a terrorist by some because of his role in advocating violent resistance through uMkhonto weSizwe ('Spear of the Nation'), the ANC's armed wing. Mandela argued that violence was a necessary response to systemic oppression and white supremacy. This shift to violence shows how actions seen as justified and legitimate by some can be framed as terrorism by others. Mandela's later recognition as a global statesman and champion of democracy shows how difficult it is to define terrorism.



Figure 7 Alfred Kumalo and Nelson Mandela at the Rivonia trial in 1963.

Furthermore, one of the challenges with the term ‘terrorists’ is that it often implies a moral judgement – that terrorism is what the bad guys do. It is certainly the case that the liberation movement in South Africa, and uMkhonto weSizwe specifically, used violence to attain their political goals. This violence killed many, including civilians. Does their cause make them freedom fighters? Or do these acts of violence mean they are terrorists?

Activity 6

 Allow about 15 minutes

Terrorist or freedom fighter? Reflect on this question and make a note of your thoughts in the text box below.

Provide your answer...

One of the most significant events related to terrorism was the September 11 2001 attacks, when al-Qaeda (AQ), a militant organisation committed to a global Islamist revolution, hijacked planes to target the United States, killing nearly 3,000 people. Following this act of terrorism, states, airports and the aviation industry responded by implementing a new security regime. These attacks initiated the so-called ‘war on terror,’ including military interventions in Afghanistan, where the Taliban were accused of protecting AQ, and later Iraq, over controversial claims related to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. These conflicts would have significant implications, and AQ, and subsequently Islamic State, would mobilise into global insurgencies, prompting an equally global counterterrorism and counterinsurgency response. Furthermore, following the 9/11 attacks, other terrorist incidents followed, including major attacks in Madrid (2004), London (2005), Paris (2015), Brussels (2016) and Manchester (2017), causing significant loss of life and creating ongoing challenges to international security. Consequently, the

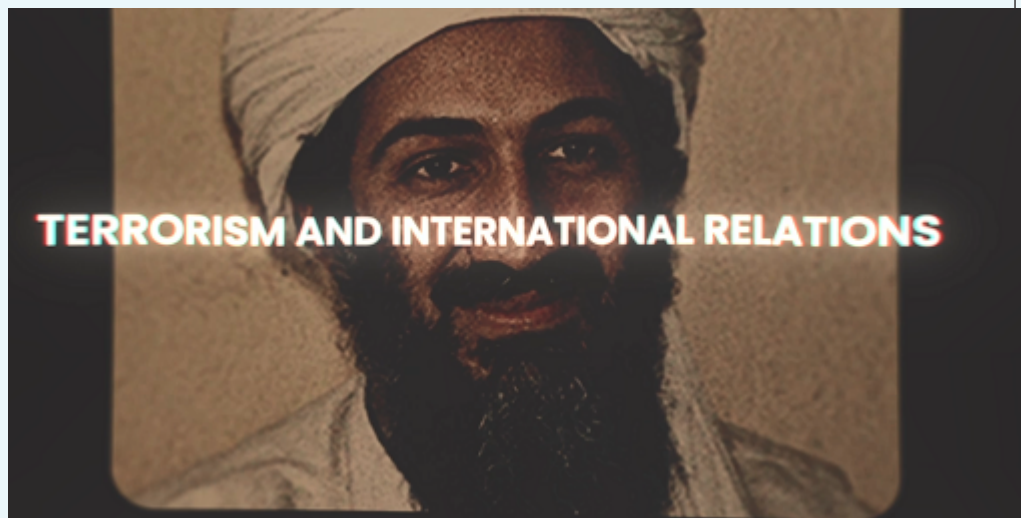
'war on terror' has transformed daily life, increasing surveillance, security measures, and debates about civil liberties worldwide.

Activity 7

 Allow about 45 minutes

You'll now watch a slideshow focused on terrorism, to gain a wider understanding of the different actors that have used 'terrorism' in the modern era and understand the effects that terrorism has had on international relations.

Video content is not available in this format.
Slideshow 2 Terrorism and international relations



Then answer the following questions in the text boxes below

First, the slideshow introduced a variety of actors who have been described as 'terrorists' or as having used 'terrorism'. Did any of these surprise you? Did any stand out to you? Why?

Reflect on these questions, writing down your thoughts in the text box below.

Provide your answer...

Second, the slideshow discussed some of the ways in which 'terrorism' has impacted on international relations. Which of these stood out to you? What do you think are the important effects that the issue of terrorism has had for international relations?

Reflect on these questions, writing down your thoughts in the text box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

There are lots of things that you could have identified or thought about when answering these prompts.

For many, it is interesting to learn about some of the groups that have been understood as 'terrorists' in the past, such as the anarchists of the late nineteenth century, or the liberation movements of the 1920s to 1960s.

Similarly, there are lots of ways you might have reflected on the international impacts of terrorism. You might have considered:

- the way in which terrorism has led to international cooperation between states in an effort to counter it
- the way in which some of the actors of national liberation movements have been considered terrorists, and the effects of decolonisation movements on the states that make up the international system
- the use of terrorism by state actors to suppress opposition.

You can now read the next sub-section and compare your answers.

4.2 Key actors and issues in terrorism



Figure 8 Taliban fighters in the Afghan city of Kandahar, August 2021, after the Taliban had retaken the country following US withdrawal.

When examining terrorism within international relations, several key actors play critical roles and various issues emerge. When considering which actors are important in the 'war on terror', terrorist groups, the networks they have developed, and the states and militaries opposing them are the most obvious.

Actors

- **Militaries:** States are key actors in international relations, with their militaries tasked to safeguard national security. States use their militaries to ensure national security, and respond to threats like terrorism. For example, US and UK militaries led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq during the 'war on terror'.
- **Violent non-state actors:** These are individuals or groups that use violence but are not state actors. These may include terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda, IS, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army.
- **Networks:** Networks represent the tangible and intangible connections that bring individuals, groups, states and international organisations together to pursue shared objectives. Examples include transnational advocacy networks, which are nonviolent groups pushing for global change; dark networks, which are covert groups enabling illegal activities like terrorism and trafficking; coalitions, including state alliances formed to address security threats. An example of a coalition is the 'coalition of the willing', which referred to the US-led coalition that invaded Iraq in 2003.
- **Security and intelligence agencies:** Agencies like the CIA and Interpol enforce security policies and protect national and international security, especially during the war on terror.
- **Insurgent groups:** Unlike terrorists, insurgents aim to overthrow governments or disrupt political systems. For example, IS acted as both an insurgent group and de facto state, controlling territory in Iraq and Syria.
- **Private Military Contractors (PMCs):** Not all non-state violent actors act in opposition to the state. Mercenary organisations offer military capabilities for profit, and sometimes act in alignment with states. For example, Russia's Wagner Group is seen to act as a proxy for the Russian state.

In summary, there are various important actors when examining the world of international relations through the lens of the 'war on terror'. At the same time, terrorism raises a wide range of important issues in international relations, including military-security, political-legal as well as some broader concerns.

Issues

- **Military-security issues:** Terrorist attacks by groups like Al-Qaeda and IS and the military responses to them have had significant impacts on a global scale. Such responses have disrupted entire regions, strained diplomatic relationships, and resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, injuries, and forced displacement of people. Various questions emerge, such as, how should states take action against terrorism and who is responsible for assisting displaced populations?
- **Political and legal issues:** The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan highlighted tensions between state sovereignty, international law, and human rights. For example, the Iraq invasion lacked UN approval, raising questions about the legitimacy of interventions. Questions arising include, when is it legitimate to intervene in another state's affairs and how bound are powerful states by international legal frameworks?
- **Broader implications:** Terrorism and counter-terrorism measures often destabilise regions, by also affecting neighbouring countries and global politics. Also, attempts to create liberal democracies in conflict zones have often failed. For example, in the case of Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of US troops, the Taliban regained control of the country, leading to questions as to whether the project to develop a liberal democracy in Afghanistan was the most suitable course of action.

Overall, the military-security and political-legal dimensions are the most pressing issues related to terrorism, but they are not exhaustive. These challenges continue to raise

debates about how best to address terrorism while respecting human rights, international law and global stability.

4.3 Debates on terrorism and international relations

As introduced in the previous case study on Africa, this section on terrorism will refer to the debates over substantive topics on which people will take different sides.

Assessing the 'war on terror', there are different debates on the effectiveness and appropriateness of its military interventions. One argument is that the 'war on terror', and the military interventions and engagements that characterise the conflict, have been broadly successful, effective in eliminating key terrorist leaders and organisational structures, and disrupting their operational capabilities. There are arguments, for instance, suggesting that, despite mistakes made during the 'war on terror', such as the invasion of Iraq, the war has largely been successful. However, an opposing point of view is that the 'war on terror' has increased the risk of terrorist attacks, given oxygen to the ideology of AQ and IS, and caused mass suffering and regional instability.

It has also been argued that the war on terror, and the legal questions surrounding the invasion of Iraq and the conduct of US and allied militaries, has led to a significant undermining of international law and respect for human rights. There is thus a question here as to whether the 'war on terror' has succeeded on its own terms.

You can now listen to an audio discussion with Professor Michael Clarke, the former Director-General of the UK's Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). In this discussion, Professor Clarke explores the impact of terrorism and the war on terror on international relations.

Activity 8

 Allow about 30 minutes

Listen to the audio discussion with Professor Michael Clarke and consider the question that follows. Make a note of your thoughts in the text box provided.

- What, as identified by Professor Clarke, are the significant impacts of the war on terror on international relations?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 2 Terrorism and international relations

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In the discussion, Professor Clarke identifies a few ways in which the war on terror has had impacts on international relations.

First, he makes the claim that the attacks of September 11 had, for perhaps the first time when it came to terrorism, a significant *strategic* impact: in this case, a

reshaping of international relations by the drawing of the United States and her allies, including the UK, into a series of wars that al-Qaeda wanted.

Second, he then goes on to make the argument that, within the war on terror, the term 'terrorism' itself has been used by states to legitimise the repression of internal opposition.

5 Theories on International Relations

In this final section, you will focus on the broader theoretical traditions that IR has developed. You will first explore the idea of theories as 'lenses', and then you will be introduced to four of these theoretical traditions:

- realism
- liberalism
- constructivism
- postcolonialism.

Finally, you can gain insights into how IR theories apply to the two case studies of great power competition and terrorism discussed in the previous sections.

5.1 Theories as lenses



Figure 9 Lenses to see the world.

One way to think about theories is to think of them as lenses. Lenses can help you to:

- see more clearly – as spectacles do
- see things up close – as magnifying glasses do
- see the 'bigger picture' or what might otherwise be out of view – as a panoramic lens on your camera might
- focus on something and see it in minute detail – as microscopes do.

Lenses also filter what you see. They can reduce brightness (as sunglasses do) or remove reflection (as polarising lenses might). They can even make the world seem better than it is – as in, if you're looking at it through rose tinted glasses. OK, maybe not that last one.

Using lenses

So, the first point to remember is that, just like lenses, theories can have different uses.

- Some are very general in their aims – focusing on the ‘bigger picture’ – and seek to say a few broad things about the world of international relations.
- Others are more specific, ‘magnifying’ a particular issue area such as security, peace or human rights, and seeking to set out key claims about that particular area.

The second point to keep in mind is that lenses help you see certain things, in certain ways. Different lenses have different foci, and different uses, so they allow you to see certain things better, or more clearly. But in doing so, lenses also distort. A microscopic lens, for instance, gives a very detailed picture of a very small piece of something, but at the cost of not seeing everything around it. A panoramic lens, on the other hand, can give a great view of a broad and expansive landscape, but you can lose the detail – such as, for instance, the people in the picture.

Lenses word cloud

You’ve been introduced to the idea that theories can function like ‘lenses’, sharpening, challenging or changing how you see the world, or approach a particular international relations issue. The next activity encourages you to reflect on what you have learned so far about how theories work and how they can be used.

Activity 9



Allow about 30 minutes

Based on what you have read in this course, think about how theories help us understand international relations. Write down up to five words or short phrases that describe how theories work. For example, you might think of words like lenses or perspectives to show how theories help us see the world in different ways. You can also use phrases like bigger-picture or minute-detail to describe how theories can focus on broad patterns or specific issues.

Type your words into the text box below. Using these words, think about how international relations theories work and can be used. Don’t worry if you’re struggling to think of some examples – just enter as many as you can.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In your text on how international relations theories work and can be used, you might have highlighted that international relations theories work like lenses: they highlight different aspects of a case or a problem, but in doing so, can distort, obscure or ignore others. You might have also said that, like lenses, different international relations theories have different uses – so, some are designed to focus on a specific issue area (such as security), whilst others offer broad-strokes or bigger-picture views of the international sphere as a whole. Finally, you might have said that given the different foci of different theories, and thus their ability to reveal some things but obscure others, it might be useful to analyse cases or issues in international politics using more than one lens or more than one theory – that is, to hold more than one theoretical lens over a case to get a better sense of its various aspects.

5.2 Four theories

International Relations theories are sets of ideas, assumptions or claims that can be grouped together into different traditions. Studying IR theories might be quite challenging at first due to their perceived complexity. However, theories are valuable tools that simplify and clarify different ideas and help us to understand and explain international relations. They can also help us to explain, predict, describe and critique relations among and between actors in international relations. Placing theories in dialogue with one another also brings to the surface their strengths and limitations. You will now be introduced to four theoretical traditions, namely, realism, liberalism, constructivism and postcolonialism.

Realism

Realism (Figure 10) has often been presented as a dominant theory in IR, emphasising power and competition. Realism has historically been, and to some extent still is, the dominant theoretical approach to IR. Its core claims and concepts are statism, self-help, and security.

According to

- *statism*, states are the central actors in IR, with non-state actors (e.g. non-governmental organisations, terrorist networks) exercising limited influence
- *self-help*, states must rely on their own resources for survival due to the anarchic nature (not to 'chaos' or 'disorder' as in common use of the term) of the international system, which lacks a global authority to enforce rules
- *security*, for realists, states' over-riding concern is their *security*, meaning that states prioritise survival by maintaining or increasing power, often relying on military strength. Power, for realists, ultimately rests on the military capabilities of states. These pillars lead to a competitive international arena where meaningful or sustainable cooperation is unlikely, as states prioritise power and security.

Realism traces its own history back a long way and claim a number of political thinkers such as Thucydides (fifth century BC), Niccolò Machiavelli (fifteenth–sixteenth century), and Thomas Hobbes (seventeenth century), and modern thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau (1904–1980) and Kenneth Waltz (1924–2013).

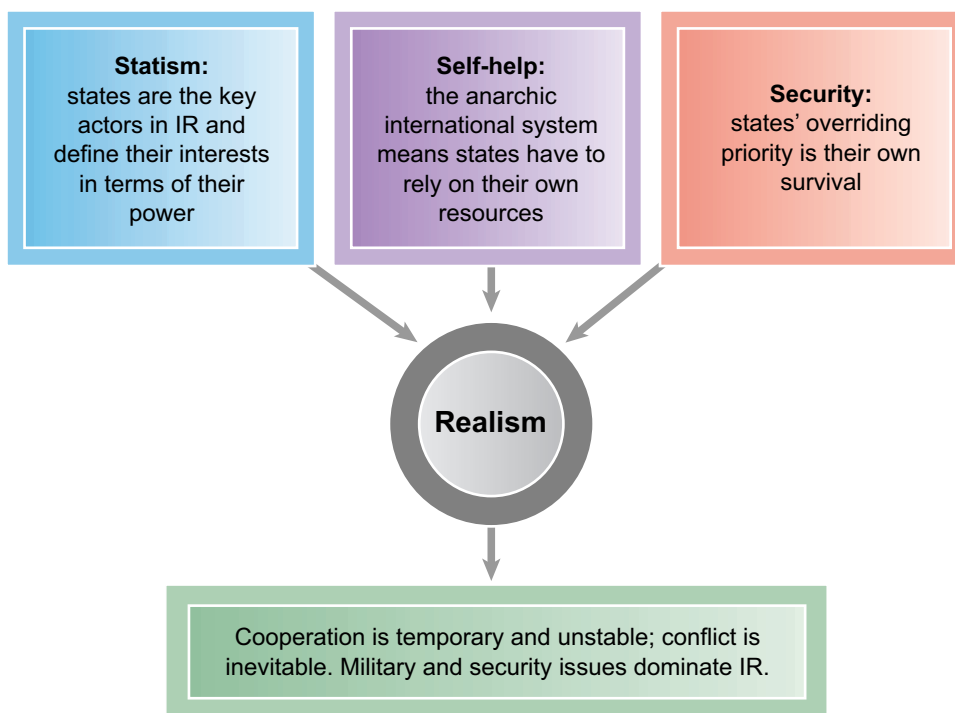


Figure 10 Realism, states, self-help and security.

Liberalism

Liberalism is often seen as a counterweight to realism, often emphasising the potential for cooperation, progress, and the role of non-state actors. While acknowledging the importance of states and the anarchic nature of the international system, the liberal tradition makes a number of distinct departures from realism.

First, unlike realism, liberalism rejects the inevitability of war, suggesting that change and cooperation can reduce conflict. Second, liberalism puts emphasis on the role of non-state actors. Thus international organisations, NGOs, and civil society can be influential in shaping state behaviour. Third, 'low Politics', such as trade opportunities, and human rights debates, can be as significant as military and security concerns. In that respect, 'interdependence' – the mutual reliance on each other to achieve shared interests – plays a crucial role in advancing cooperation among states. Fourth, liberalism promotes the 'democratic peace theory', which suggests that liberal democracies instead of going to war with each other, they aim to promote democracy worldwide. Fifth, liberalism advocates for protecting human rights globally, sometimes justifying humanitarian interventions or regime changes to address severe abuses.

Like realism, liberalism has a long historical ancestry and is closely associated with theorists including: John Locke (seventeenth century), Immanuel Kant (eighteenth century), and Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962), who put emphasis on human rights, democracy and international cooperation. Early twentieth-century liberalism, influenced by Woodrow Wilson, promoted peaceful relations through institutions like the League of Nations. Modern liberal theorists such as Robert Keohane and Helen Milner focus on institutional cooperation and interdependence, highlighting the well-being of human beings in international legal and political institutions.

Constructivism

Constructivism emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, partly in response to what some saw as the limitations of realism and liberalism. It has its origins in ideas drawn from sociology and psychology, particularly those focused on human identity. Its key claims and concepts include the following.

The International environment is a social system, meaning that states and other actors interact like individuals in society, shaping their identities, interests, and perceptions of others through these interactions. Furthermore, there are shared understandings and norms, that govern international behaviour. These norms are not fixed, but rather evolve over time, challenging by this way static assumptions like state sovereignty. Also, in contrast to a realist (and some liberal) accounts that see a fairly simple relationship between a state's interests and its actions in the international arena constructivists see a more complex process. Hence, unlike realists who view interests as fixed, constructivists suggest that interests emerge from identities, which are shaped by historical and social contexts. Finally, constructivists focus on how sustained interactions create new norms and expectations, which can influence even powerful states through a 'compliance pull'. However, norm development is uneven, and violations by major powers can undermine their influence.

Key thinkers include Nicholas Onuf, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink who focus on how norms and identities evolve through social processes. Alexander Wendt famously argued that 'anarchy is what states make of it' (1992) and suggested that state behaviour and relationships depend on constructed perceptions, ranging from enmity to friendship, rather than inherent competition.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism takes as its primary focus the lasting injustices and challenges created in the international system by colonial rule and its profound legacies in international relations. As with constructivism, its origins lie outside of IR – in this case in historical, cultural and literary studies.

There are two broad (linked) components to postcolonialism as a tradition in IR: an analysis of the ongoing inequalities in contemporary international relations; and a critique of the colonial inheritance within the discipline of IR itself, particularly the realist and liberal traditions. Unlike realism's concept of anarchy, postcolonialism views global relations as structured by hierarchy and domination, especially in interactions involving international organisations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

Postcolonial theorists adopt a bottom-up perspective, focusing on marginalised actors resisting inequality and exploitation, rather than the actions of powerful states.

Postcolonialism critiques not just the practices of international relations but also the theoretical foundations of IR as a discipline. These critiques argue that traditional IR theories (e.g., realism, liberalism) overlook marginalised voices and defend the interests of powerful Western states, reinforcing inequality.

Finally, postcolonialism challenges power imbalances and advocates for greater inclusion of diverse voices and alternative knowledge systems from the Global South to create a more equitable understanding of international relations.

Key postcolonial thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), emphasised the pervasive violence of colonialism and the need for resistance; Edward Said (1935–2003) analysed the dehumanising narratives of 'Orientalism', and Gayatri Spivak explored marginalised voices through her concept of the 'subaltern'. Scholars like Arlene Tickner advocate for

'Worlding Beyond the West', amplifying global perspectives in IR to challenge its Western-centric biases.

Summarising IR theories

Table 1 summarises the four IR theories.

Table 1 Summarising IR theories

Theoretical tradition	Which actors are key?	Which issues?	What kind of perspective?	Key thinkers
Realism	States	Conflict, security, power, national interest, polarity, continuity	'Outside-in' or 'top-down': The behaviour of state actors determined by the external character of the international system (anarchy is unchanging)	Waltz Mearsheimer Walt Ayoob
Liberalism	States, international organisations, non-state actors, individuals	Cooperation, democratisation, peace, collective security, free trade, human rights	'Inside-out': Interdependent states cooperating with one another pursue shared interests (the impact of anarchy can be mitigated)	Nye Milner Moravscik Slaughter
Constructivism	States, non-state actors	Norms, rules, values and expectations, social construction, ideational as well as material institutions, change	Interactive: States and institutions/organisations impact one another's identities and interests through social interaction (anarchy can be reimagined and reconstructed)	Wendt Onuf Sikkink Keck
Postcolonialism	Formerly colonised states, marginalised/minoritised individuals	Colonialism, neocolonialism, resistance, inequality, epistemic violence, emancipation	'Bottom-up': Highlight the experiences, needs and voices of those exploited and marginalised in the international system (Anarchy has been deployed as a justification for the colonial project)	Fanon Said Spivak Jabri Seth

5.3 Theories and the case studies

As an ending to the course, this sub-section will focus on bringing together the case studies and theory. You will listen to two audios.

In Audio 3, Claire Malcolm and William Brown discuss the different perspectives liberalism and postcolonialism might bring to scholars' understanding of great power competition in Africa.

Activity 10

 Allow about 30 minutes

Listen to Audio 3 and answer the questions that follow.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 3 Theoretical approaches to great power competition in Africa

1. According to the speakers, what are some of the key aspects of great power competition in Africa that liberal IR theory might focus on?
2. What are some of the aspects of great power competition in Africa that postcolonialism draws attention to?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have noted a number of points in response to the questions posed. Key aspects of the liberal approach that William Brown noted were that while states were key actors, NGOs, campaign groups and international organisations were as well; that human rights and economic issues were important alongside security; and that states could find ways to cooperate if conditions were right. Both speakers note aspects of great power competition in Africa that liberalism would highlight: the potential for cooperation, where there are shared interests (for example, between some African states and China), and the potential for conflict where you have clashing political agendas around human rights, for example. Key aspects of the postcolonial approach that Claire Malcolm mentioned were the importance of the legacies of colonialism, the inequalities between states and the importance of economic and racial inequalities and resistance to those. In terms of great power competition in Africa, postcolonialism might highlight the cooperation between states from the Global South or draw attention to the parallels between current intervention in Africa and that of the colonial era.

In Audio 4, Thomas Martin and Claire Malcolm discuss the different ways in which realist and constructivist IR theory might approach the issues of terrorism.

Activity 11

 Allow about 30 minutes

Listen to Audio 4 and answer the questions that follow.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 4 Theoretical approaches to terrorism

1. What are some of the key aspects of terrorism that realist IR theory might focus on?
2. What are some of the aspects of terrorism that constructivist IR theory might highlight?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

As Claire Malcolm notes, realists focus on states as the most important actors and security as the most important issue. Through this lens, terrorism is seen as a high priority for states and the use of violence to counter terrorism as a priority.

Tom Martin points out how constructivism emphasises the fluid nature of state identities and interests; these are formed through 'social' interaction between states. States are important but non-state actors, including NGOs and international organisations, are also important – it is they that create the ideas that states and others hold about the international system. In analysing terrorism, constructivism would ask questions about why some acts are deemed 'terrorist' and some aren't.

Conclusion

This course was dedicated to introducing the field of International Relations (IR) and exploring its importance in understanding the modern world and important global problems.

In Section 1, you began by examining what IR is and how it seeks to analyse global challenges, from peace and security to trade and environmental issues. In Section 2, you explored how IR focuses on the interactions between various actors – e.g., states, organisations and individuals – while addressing key issues and debates to understand global interactions and dynamics. In Sections 3 and 4, you explored two case studies: the competition among great powers for resources and influence in Africa and the global challenges posed by international terrorism. These examples highlighted the complex interplay of actors, issues and debates that shape international relations. Finally, you were introduced to key theoretical approaches in IR – realism, liberalism, constructivism and postcolonialism – providing different ways to analyse and interpret global interactions and their implications.

If you enjoyed this course, why not explore the subject further with the Open University course [D228 Exploring international relations: actors, issues, perspectives?](#)

References

The Economist (2019) 'The new scramble for Africa', 7 March. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/03/07/the-new-scramble-for-africa?> (Accessed: 19 June 2025).

Acknowledgements

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