

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL BASES OF TERRORISM: INDIVIDUAL, GROUP AND COLLECTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

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In March 2005 the Club de Madrid convened a major international summit on Terrorism and Democracy on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Madrid train station bombings. I was honored to serve as chairman of the committee exploring the psychological roots of terrorism, and recruited a group of ten international experts on terrorist psychology. This essay which I drafted and presented to the summit was drawn from our committee's deliberations through a web log over a four month period.

EMERGING PRINCIPLES

INDIVIDUAL VS. GROUP PSYCHOLOGY

Explanations of terrorism at the level of individual psychology are insufficient in trying to understand why people become involved in terrorism. Indeed, it is not going too far to assert that terrorists are psychologically “normal” in the sense of not being clinically psychotic.

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They are neither depressed, severely emotionally disturbed, nor are they crazed fanatics. Indeed, terrorist groups and organizations screen out emotionally unstable individuals. They represent a security risk. There is a multiplicity of individual motivations. For some, it is to give a sense of power to the powerless; for others, revenge is a primary motivation; for still others, to gain a sense of significance. Within each group there will be motivational differences among the members, each of whom will be motivated to different degrees by group interest versus self-serving actions as well as those inspired by ideology.

It is not individual psychology, but group, organizational and social psychology, with a particular emphasis on “collective identity,” that provides the most powerful lens to understand terrorist psychology and behavior. For some groups, especially nationalist/terrorist groups, this collective identity is established extremely early, so that “hatred is bred in the bone.” The importance of collective identity and the processes of forming and transforming collective identities cannot be overemphasized. This, in turn, emphasizes the socio-cultural context, which determines the balance between collective identity and individual identity. A clear consensus exists that it does not understand individual psychopathology but group, organizational and social psychology which provides the greatest analytic power in understanding this complex phenomenon, a phenomenon where collective identity is paramount. Terrorists have subordinated their individual identity to the collective identity, so that what serves the group, organization or network is of primary importance.

LEADERS VS. FOLLOWERS

It is important to distinguish leaders from followers. The role of the leader is crucial in drawing together alienated, frustrated individuals into a coherent organization. They provide a “sense-making” unifying message that conveys a religious, political or ideological goal to their disparate followers. The crucial role of the leader is identifying the external enemy as the cause, as well as drawing together into a collective identify otherwise disparate individuals who may be discontented and aggrieved, but who, without the powerful presence of the leader, will remain isolated and individually aggrieved. The political entrepreneur or hate mongering leader plays a crucial organizing role. Osama bin Laden has become a positive identification object for thousands of young



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Photo by Juliette Schmidt

Arab and Muslim youth, a major recruitment incentive. For them, he serves as the heroic avenger, with the courage to stand up against the superpower. And in following his lead, the individual follower can be seen as unselfish, altruistic, heroic to the point of self-sacrifice. And it is important to understand the process by which followers enter the leadership echelon, which is extremely important to the viability of the group, a dynamic which is not well understood. Systematic study of autobiographical accounts can help identify the salient features of this dynamic, which will be expected to differ from group to group. While it is easy to understand how a religious fundamentalist leader can use his religious authority to interpret religious scripture to justify extreme acts to his “true believer” followers, in fact charismatic leaders can persuade their “true believer” followers to carry out such acts in pursuing their non-religious secular cause, as demonstrated by the willingness of members of the Kurdish separatist PKK or the Tamil Tigers LTTE to commit suicide terrorism for their nationalist cause.

SUICIDE TERRORISM

Suicide terrorism is a function of a culture of martyrdom, an organizational decision to employ this tactic, and a supply of recruits willing to give their lives in a “martyrdom operation” for the cause. Social psychological forces are particularly important, leading some, with reference to Palestinian suicide terrorism, to speak of the “suicide terrorist production line,” with first the social contract established, then the identification of the “living martyr,” which accrues great prestige within the community, and, the culminating phase, the production of the final video. After one has passed successively through these three phases, to back away from the final act of martyrdom would bring unbearable shame and humiliation. Similar but fuzzier marker phases may occur for other groups as well. Thus, suicide terrorism is very much a function of group and collective psychology, not individual psychopathology.

THE TERRORIST LIFE CYCLE

The terrorist life cycle is important to understand. The process of becoming a terrorist involves a cumulative, incrementally sustained and focused commitment to the group. It is useful to unpack the life course of terrorists to consider the psychological process they are undergoing at different phases of the terrorist life cycle. Given that the attraction to and entrance into the terrorist path is a gradual process, which for some groups begins in early childhood, where “hatred is bred in the bone,” changing the influences upon this pathway will necessarily occur over an extended time frame, for generational change will be necessary, and this will require a sustained program over decades. In particular, what initially attracts a potential terrorist to the terrorist group will differ from what he or she experiences within the group in terms of radicalization and consolidation of group and collective identity, which in turn will differ from what leads the terrorist to carry out acts of violence, and finally, from what leads a terrorist to become disillusioned and leave the group. For the majority of contemporary terrorists, there is an early entrance onto the pathway into terrorism, whether religious or secular, with many way stations along the way and there is a continuing reinforcement by manipulative leaders, consolidating the collective identity, externalizing, and justifying and requiring violence against the enemy. This implies that early intervention is required, for once a youth is embedded within the group, his extremist psychology will be

continually reinforced, and doubt diminished. The power of group dynamics, especially for the closed group, is intense, and once an individual is in the group, it is very difficult to penetrate his psychology and extricate him. As important as understanding what leads youth in the path of terrorism is understanding what leads terrorists to leave, as well, of course as the requirement to better understand the processes that occur within the group/organization. Each of these phases will differ from group to group, from terrorist type to terrorist type. Better understanding of what leads terrorists to leave a group has important implications for counter-terrorist policy. Thus the life course of the terrorists in this spectrum of groups must be understood in detail in order to develop optimal strategies for influencing these processes. What actions have an impact upon the course of terrorism is not well understood, and many actions designed to counter terrorism have counter-productive effects.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF TERRORISM

Terrorism is an extremely complex and diverse phenomenon. In considering the psychology of right-wing, nationalist-separatist, social revolutionary and religious fundamentalist terrorists, given how different their causes and their perspectives, these types would be expected to differ markedly. So we should be discussing terrorists psychologies-plural-rather than searching for a unified general theory explaining all terrorist behavior. Thus there is not a “one size fits all” explanation, and, the nature of the followership, different group and organizational dynamics and decision patterns will ensue. And while psychology plays a crucial role in understanding this phenomenon, to fully understand this complex phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating knowledge from political, historical, cultural, economic, ideological and religious understandings. It is important to consider each terrorism in its own political, historical and cultural context. For terrorism is a product of its own place and time. It is an attractive strategy to a diverse array of groups which have little else in common.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Organizational structure has an important impact on terrorist decision making. Groups may adhere to the same underlying ideology but differ remarkably in organizational structure. Thus both HAMAS,

Islamic Jihad and al Qaeda find justification in the Koran, but the organizational form of HAMAS and Islamic Jihad is traditionally more hierarchical and authoritarian with followers in action cells being directed from higher organizational levels to carry out an action, a decision that cannot be questioned, and having only limited say in the conduct of operations. On the other hand, al Qaeda has a much looser organizational form with distributed decision making, reflecting the leadership style of bin Laden. This is particularly so after the effective destruction of al Qaeda command and control in Afghanistan in 2001, so that what has been termed “the new al Qaeda” is considered by many to be more an ideology than an organization, and al Qaeda is deemed by some to be functionally dead as an operational organization.

The successor global Salafi jihad network is widely distributed and semi-autonomous, operating more out of hubs than nodes, with wide latitude to plan and execute operations. The 3/11 Madrid train station bombing is a reflection of this emerging network. This “netwar” poses particular challenges for counter-terrorism. Although most Muslim immigrants and refugees are not “stateless,” many suffer from an existential sense of loss, deprivation and alienation from the countries where they live. They are often exposed to extreme ideologies that increasingly radicalize them and can foster entering the path of terrorism. The diaspora has been identified as particularly important for the global Salafi jihad, with a large percentage (80%) of recruits joining and becoming radicalized in the diaspora. (Note: Both the Madrid train station bombing and recent London transit system bombings were perpetrated by militant Islamists socialized with the diaspora.)

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: NEW STRATEGIES NECESSARY

The “war on terrorism” is a war unlike other wars, and will require concerted efforts over decades to counter. As the “collective identity” has been shaped gradually over many years, so too the attitudes which have been formed and hardened that are at the foundation of terrorism will not easily be altered. When “hatred has been bred in the bone,” when socialization to hatred and violence begins early and is reinforced and consolidated into a major theme of the collective identity, this implies that there is no short term solution, and that interventions designed to break this cycle must begin early before that identity is consolidated. The nature of those interventions in turn should be informed

by study of the lives of terrorists, differentiating among terrorist types in general and groups in particular, and understanding each terrorism in a nuanced manner within its own particular cultural, historical and political context.

If the goal of terrorism is to terrorize, terror is the property of the terrorized. Programs that reduce vulnerability to terror and promote societal resilience represent a key component of anti-terrorism. This in turn requires research designed to understand better what steps can immunize society against terror and promote societal resilience.

Given that terrorism is a vicious species of psychological warfare, waged through the media, one does not counter psychological warfare with smart bombs and missiles; one counters psychological warfare with psychological warfare. Each phase of the terrorist life cycle is a potential focus of intervention. Particularly important is reducing the attractiveness of the path of terrorism. In other words:

- a. Inhibit potential terrorists from joining the group in the first place. Once in the group, the power of group dynamics is immense, continually confirming the power of the group's organizing ideology and reinforcing the member's dedication to the cause. Nevertheless, it will be important to do the following:
 - b. Produce dissension in the group.
 - c. Facilitate exit from the group. It is important to stimulate and encourage defection from the group. A number of nations with significant terrorism problems—Italy, Spain in the Basque region, and Great Britain in Northern Ireland, in particular—have creatively employed amnesty programs to facilitate terrorists leaving the group.
 - d. Reduce support for the group and its leader. If for every terrorist killed or captured there are ten more waiting in line, it is critical to marginalize the group, de-romanticize and delegitimize the leader. This, in the case of radical Islamist terrorism, can only be done from within Islam. The goal here is to alienate the terrorist organization from its constituency, which is required to provide a reservoir of new recruits for the organization. This, in turn, will facilitate the goal of inhibiting potential terrorists from joining the group or organization in the first place.
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These all represent components of public diplomacy and strategic communication programs, an area insufficiently addressed by the West in its attempts to counter terrorism. It will require decades to change the culture of hatred and violence. It is important in this struggle to maintain the moral high ground, in strengthening the rule of law and exemplifying good governance and social justice, for to depart from these standards is to lower ourselves to the level of the terrorists. This emphasizes that the struggle against terrorism is by no means solely a military and security responsibility but one that involves the entirety of society. Having said that, the military assuredly has a crucial role to play in countering terrorism, in particular in “sanctuary denial,” for without the existence of sanctuaries like Afghanistan, the training and planning required to support large complex operations like 9/11 will be extremely difficult. But the 3/11 bombing, which this conference commemorates sprang from the global Salafi jihad, which emerged from al Qaeda, and does not require a complex infrastructure to support, emphasizing the importance of Policy Recommendation 5 below.

Optimally to counter a terrorist group or organization requires optimal understanding of the psychology of the specific group in context. Given the different demographics, pathways, attitudes, and motivations, this in turn requires field work, with interviews of captured or defected terrorists. One cannot counter a group that one does not understand.

Western governments should directly support the development and implementation of community based interventions aimed at promoting community and individual level changes that would support greater incorporation and integration of refugees and diaspora youth into the political culture of Western liberal democracies. The growing population of alienated Muslim youth in European societies represents a growing internal threat.

OUTLIER ISSUES

Two issues which are at heart psychological deserve further consideration.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION TERRORISM: PSYCHOLOGICAL INCENTIVES AND CONSTRAINTS

It is a broad consensus of terrorist scholars that for most terrorist groups weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear) terrorism would be counterproductive; most terrorist groups seek to influence the West or establishment and call attention to their cause, and mass casualty terrorism would be counter-productive for their cause. It is necessary to distinguish between discriminate and indiscriminate terrorism, for some terrorist groups would entertain the use of such weapons on a limited tactical basis if they would not injure their own constituents. Exceptions in terms of motivation are religious fundamentalist Islamist terrorists, especially the Salafi jihadists, and right wing terrorists, who often seek revenge, and in the case of the radical Islamist terrorists are not interested in influencing the West, but in expelling the West with its corrupt modernizing values, and having revenge against the West. The Salafi jihadists who are not embedded in a particular nation are without constraint and are particularly dangerous, in contrast, for example, to the Egyptian Islamic jihad which is more constrained in its actions. For both radical Islamist extremists and right wing extremists, in addition to motivations and psychology, resources and expertise are required, and many would opine that the assistance of states would be necessary in terms of weaponization, especially of nuclear terrorism. Without the assistance of states, biological terrorism is the most threatening WMD terrorism in which sub-state groups might become engaged.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF THE NEW MEDIA.

The impact of the new media, both the 24/7 cable news environment and the internet, on the shaping of the terrorist identity and broad support for the activities is a serious dilemma in terms of counter-terrorism. Identifying the impact of the new media and grappling with the approaches to countering these influences is a serious challenge. The new media, particularly the internet, probably play an important role in establishing a sense of community among otherwise widely dispersed alienated youth, a virtual community of hatred. 
