


1-2010

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Understanding Terrorist Psychology

Chapter 2

In Andrew Silke (Ed.) **The Psychology of Counter-terrorism**

(Forthcoming) Oxon, UK: Routledge.

ISBN: 978-0-415-55840-2

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Introduction

Behavioural scientists have shown a longstanding interest in understanding and describing the psychology of individuals who become involved in terrorism (Borum, 2004; Davis & Cragin, 2009; Horgan, 2005; Victoroff & Kruglanski, 2009).

Understanding the causes, motivations and determinants of terrorist behaviour poses an enormous challenge, but pursuing this knowledge is vital to countering violent extremism's threat to global security. This chapter provides an overview of the major findings in this area and an account of our current understanding, introducing several concepts addressed in detail in subsequent chapters. It moves away from single-factor explanations and finger pointing at “root causes,” and aims toward a more diverse and dynamic view based on pathways into and through terrorist engagement and on how terrorist groups form, function, and fail.

Motivation and Mentation

Psychological researchers – like many in the general public – have been preoccupied with the notion of terrorist motivation (Crenshaw, 1986; Helmus, 2009; Hudson, 1999; Horgan, 2005; Victoroff, 2005). Acts of terrorism are relatively uncommon, often shocking, and sometimes self-destructive. They seem to defy easy explanation. No

psychological theory has emerged to explain all types of violence, and terrorism is a distinct form of violence. It is most often deliberate (not impulsive), strategic, and instrumental; it is linked to and justified by ideological (e.g., political, religious) objectives and almost always involves a group or multiple actors/supporters (Crenshaw, 1986, 1988; Laqueur, 2003). These issues all add complexity to the construction of terrorism as a form of violence and challenge the emergence of a unifying explanatory theory.

Even accounting for the influence of religion or ideology, it is vexing to discern how and why someone would come to adopt beliefs and behaviours that support his or her engagement in subversive and terrorist activity, particularly violence toward civilian non-combatants. Since the late 1960s, the academic research community has sought answers to these questions by analyzing a variety of individual, interpersonal, socio-cultural, and even inter-state influences (Victoroff & Kruglanski, 2009; Horgan, 2005).

Early efforts tended to predominantly focus on the individual level, assuming that the aberrant behaviour so prominently associated with the dramatic consequences of terrorism must reflect some mental or personality abnormality (Schmid & Jongman, 1988). This thinking led some to propose clinical explanations and gave rise to a multitude of attempts to identify a unique terrorist profile. However, forty years of terrorism research has firmly debunked the notion that only “crazy” people engage in terrorism and has yet to reveal a meaningful, stable, terrorist profile (Borum, 2004; Crenshaw, 1992; Horgan, 2008).

Research on the relationship between psychopathology and terrorism has been nearly unanimous in its conclusion that mental illness and abnormality are typically not critical factors in terrorist behaviour (Borum, 2004; Crenshaw, 1992; Horgan, 2008; Silke, 1998). Studies have found that the prevalence of mental illness among samples of incarcerated terrorists is as low as or lower than in the general population (Ruby, 2002). Moreover, although terrorists often commit heinous acts, they would rarely be considered classic

“psychopaths¹.” Terrorists typically have some connection to principles or ideology as well as to other people (including other terrorists) who share them. Psychopaths, however, do not form such connections, nor would they be likely to sacrifice themselves (including dying) for a cause (Martens, 2004).

Research also has not found or produced any favourable prospects of identifying either a “terrorist personality”, or any accurate psychological “terrorist profile” (Horgan, 2003). This consistent pattern of empirical findings probably comes as no surprise to many psychological researchers who are aware that personality traits alone tend not to be very good predictors of behaviour. Fortunately, with very few exceptions, most contemporary social/behavioural scientists studying terrorism have moved on (Silke, 1998; Horgan, 2005).

Building on prior studies, psychological researchers have realized that we are unlikely to find a new understanding of radicalization in static, ‘trait-based’ effects, but that viewing terrorism as a complex and dynamic “process” is much more promising (Horgan, 2008). At this juncture, however, the exact nature of that process remains poorly understood. Focusing on “vulnerabilities” to terrorism seems to be more promising and useful than looking for unique personality traits. Vulnerabilities may be viewed as “factors that point to some people having a greater openness to increased engagement than others” (Horgan, 2005, p.101). Rather than being simple causes, these vulnerabilities may be leveraged as possible sources of motivation or as mechanisms for acquiring or hardening one’s militant ideology. Three commonly occurring vulnerabilities are:

- (1) perceived injustice/humiliation;
- (2) need for identity; and
- (3) need for belonging (Borum, 2004).

¹ Psychopaths are persons who possess both a pervasive and persistent history of antisocial behaviour and severe, endogenous emotional/affective deficits such as callousness and lack of empathy and remorse.

Social scientists have recognized perceived injustice and humiliation as central factors in understanding violence generally and terrorism specifically, dating back to some of the earliest writings. In the mid-1970s, Hacker (1976) concluded that “remediable injustice is the basic motivation for terrorism”. Similarly, an individual’s search for identity may draw him or her to extremist or terrorist organizations in a variety of ways. The absolutist, “black and white” nature of most extremist ideologies is often attractive to those who feel overwhelmed by the complexity and stress of navigating a complicated world. Without struggling to define oneself or discern personal meaning, an individual may choose to define his or her identity simply through group membership, or identification with a cause (Taylor & Louis, 2004). Finally, in radical extremist groups, many prospective terrorists find not only a sense of meaning, but also a sense of belonging, connectedness and affiliation. Indeed, Crenshaw (1988, p.59) argues that “for the individuals who become active terrorists, the initial attraction is often to the group, or community of believers, rather than to an abstract ideology or to violence.”

Pathways to Terrorism

The pathways to, and motives for, terrorism are quite varied and diverse. Different people connect with violent ideologies and groups for different reasons at different times. For the individual, the process is often framed as comprising phases of radicalization, engagement (in terrorism), and disengagement. At the group/organization level, the corresponding processes are recruitment, mobilization and demobilization.

Understanding these processes of becoming and being a terrorist does not lend itself to simple, linear, sequential analysis (Horgan, 2008). Alternatively, by using a “pathway” approach, terrorism is not viewed as “*the product of a single decision but the end result of a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time*” (McCormick, 2003 p.492).

Prior research also supports the general proposition that no single pathway or theory exists that would satisfactorily explain how all – or even most – people come to adopt

violent extremist ideologies and engage in violent action (e.g. Borum, 2004; Horgan, 2008). Walter Laqueur (2003, p.22) has said of terrorism that the quest for a “general theory” is misguided, because: “Many terrorisms exist, and their character has changed over time and from country to country.” This seems to be equally true for the radicalization process itself. Moreover, researchers have begun to distinguish between reasons for joining, remaining in, and leaving terrorist organizations, finding that motivations may be different at each stage, and not even necessarily related to each other.

Conceptual Approaches: Several efforts have been made, however, to articulate a general sequence of stages, events or issues that might apply across and within group types. These are mainly conceptual models offering a logical narrative of a “typical” transformative process, often with reference to a particular extremist group.

One conceptual approach, for example, describes a four-stage process of acquiring or developing a “terrorist mindset” (Borum, 2003), understanding that this mindset may be the result, rather than the cause, of joining an extremist group. The individual-actor model attempts to explain how grievances and vulnerabilities are transformed into hatred of a target group, and how hatred is transformed – for some - into a justification or impetus for violence. Fundamentally, the process begins by framing some unsatisfying event, condition, or grievance (*It's not right*) as being unjust (*It's not fair*). The injustice is blamed on a target policy, person, or nation (*It's your fault*). The responsible party is then vilified – often demonized – (*You're Evil*) which facilitates moral disengagement and drives an impetus for aggression. This particular model was developed, though, as a training heuristic for law enforcement, not as a formal social science theory.

Alternatively, Fathali Moghaddam (2005) uses the metaphor of a “Staircase” to describe the process of becoming a terrorist. Like most theories, feelings of discontent and perceived adversity/deprivation are a platform for stepping initially onto the path to terrorism, though fewer people ascend to each successive level. In the beginning, according to his model, an individual’s attempts to alleviate adversity and improve her/his situation have been unsuccessful, leading to feelings of frustration and aggression,

which are displaced onto some perceived causal agent (who is then regarded as an enemy). As anger toward the enemy builds, some become increasingly sympathetic towards the justifications for violence and toward the terrorist groups that act against the enemy. Some of those sympathizers eventually join an extremist group, organization or movement that advocates for, and perhaps engages in, terrorist violence. At the “top” or final level are those who have joined, overcome barriers to violent action, and actually commit a terrorist act (Moghaddam, 2005).

The application of Social Movement Theory (SMT) to understanding terrorism represents an approach with a deeper theoretical grounding, greater social-contextual emphasis, and empirical support. Donatella Della Porta (1995) is among the first serious terrorism researchers to connect SMT concepts to violent extremism in her studies of the Italian and German militants. More recently, Quintan Wiktorowicz (2003, 2005) has applied SMT in extensive field work in the UK to understand how people came to join a militant jihadist group (Al-Muhajiroun) based in a Western democracy.

Wiktorowicz concurs with the general principle that “joining the jihad” and becoming a terrorist are processes that evolve over time. They rarely occur as a sudden, discrete decision. Importantly, he sees the process as one of persuasion involving ongoing interactions between the recruit and the members (Wiktorowicz, 2005). His SMT-based model has four key components. A breakdown at any stage can divert the individual from a path to joining or ultimately participating. Wiktorowicz describes those stages as follows:

1. “Cognitive Opening—an individual becomes receptive to the possibility of new ideas and worldviews;
2. Religious Seeking—the individual seeks meaning through a religious idiom;
3. Frame Alignment—the public representation proffered by the radical group “makes sense” to the seeker and attracts his or her initial interest;

4. Socialization—the individual experiences religious lessons and activities that facilitate indoctrination and identity-construction. The latter process often includes ideological precepts that tie the individual’s self-interest to the risky activism of the movement” (Wiktorowicz, 2005).

In addition to the conceptual models offered by social scientists, several law enforcement and security agencies have developed and disseminated their own ideas about the radicalization process. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (2006) has described the radicalization process, based principally on how it might apply to converts to Islam within the US, as comprising four sequential stages: *Pre-radicalization; Identification; Indoctrination; and Action*. Similarly, the New York Police department (Silber & Bjhatt, 2007) with input from terrorism researchers and other experts, suggest that citizens of a Western home-country who ultimately adopt a *Jihadi-Salafi* ideology do so through a linear four stage process as follows: *Pre-radicalization; Self-Identification* (exploring and adopting the ideological tenets); *Indoctrination* (intensifies beliefs and commitment to the ideas); and *Jihadization* (believe they have an individual duty to participate in [terrorist activities]). Finally, the Danish Ministry of Justice’s (2007) report on home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization in Europe also asserts that radicalization occurs in four stages: *Pre-radicalization; Conversion and identification; Conviction and indoctrination; and Action*.

Though the conceptual models posed by each of these three agencies are certainly consistent with each other and have become quite popular among some law enforcement groups, they seem more appropriately to describe a linear sequence of stages rather than a “process” or pathway. Moreover, the accuracy and stability of this type of sequence model has not been rigorously tested.

Two recent integrative approaches have been attempted. One is a general framework of political radicalization, based on social psychological principles (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2009). They identify key “mechanisms” of radicalization at individual, group, and mass-public levels, concluding that the following twelve are most prominent:

Personal victimization;
Political grievance;
Joining a radical group—the slippery slope;
Joining a radical group—the power of love;
Extremity shift in like-minded groups;
Extreme cohesion under isolation and threat;
Competition for the same base of support;
Competition with state power—condensation;
Within-group competition—fissioning;
Jujitsu politics;
Hate; and
Martyrdom.

The second is a project by The Joint Military Information Support Centre (JMISC) of the US Special Operations Command to discern “common factors” across different models of radicalization and terrorist psychology. The JMISC effort is described in detail in Chapter XX (Drummond, xxxx).

Empirical Research: Despite a surge in terrorism-related publications since 2001 and the burst of recent interest in radicalization, empirical studies are rare. Marc Sageman (2008), a forensic psychiatrist and former CIA Case Officer, has reviewed and collected information from media and open source documents (e.g. courtroom testimony) on a series of Al-Qaeda related cases, though the exact nature of the methodology employed is not immediately apparent from the published documents. He has discerned four “prongs” of radicalization - a sense of moral outrage, a specific interpretation of the world, resonance with personal experiences, and mobilization through networks – but concludes that these do not comprise stages, nor are they necessarily sequential.

Similarly, Hegghammer (2006) analyzed 240 biographies – including 70 “extensive” ones - of (post-2002) Saudi militants, compiled over a two-year period from a broad range of primary and secondary sources, mostly in Arabic. He also conducted numerous

interviews with former radicals as well as families and acquaintances of militants. He framed the analyses to ask who joined “al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula” [QAP] and why, and –to facilitate comparisons - what radicalization and recruitment factors might be specific to Saudi Arabia.

With a more in-depth and individualized focus, John Horgan (2009), recently conducted a series of 52 semi-structured interviews (29 former terrorists and 23 of their supporters, family members and friends) over an 18-month period from late-2006 to early-2008, producing some deeply personal, detailed and complex portrayals of former terrorists in Belfast, Beirut, Oslo, London, Paris, Tripoli, Jakarta and elsewhere .

Perhaps the most systematic and comprehensive effort to date to develop “data-based” knowledge on violent radicalization has been conducted not by academics, but by MI5’s Behavioural Science Unit. Their analysis is based on in-depth case studies on "several hundred individuals known to be involved in, or closely associated with, violent extremist activity" ranging from fundraising to planning suicide bombings in the UK. An overview of their findings was published in June 2008 in an "operational briefing note" titled: “Understanding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the UK.” The document is marked as "UK restricted", but its contents have been widely reported in the British media. Among their key findings, MI5 notes that no profile or single pathway to extremism existed. In most cases they note that some vulnerability existed that made the person receptive to the ideology, but as with earlier studies, the process of becoming “radicalized” appears to have occurred over time (Travis, 2008).

Terrorist Ideology

Ideology is often defined as a common and broadly agreed upon set of rules to which an individual subscribes, which help to regulate and determine behaviour. Ideology guides and controls behaviour perhaps by providing a set of behavioural contingencies that link immediate behaviour and actions to long-term positive outcomes and rewards, or it may

best be viewed as a form of rule-following behaviour. Culture is also a critical factor in the development of ideology, but its impact on terrorist ideologies specifically, has not been studied (Borum, 2004).

Ideologies that support terrorism, while quite diverse, appear to serve some common functions: they must provide a set of beliefs that guide and justify a series of behavioural mandates; those beliefs must be inviolable and must be neither questionable nor questioned; and the behaviours must be goal directed and seen as serving some cause or meaningful objective. A related question is whether common structures or patterns might exist across violent extremist ideologies, even when the content of the beliefs is dramatically different (Borum, 2004).

One simplistic approach, developed more as a teaching tool than as a social science theory, discerned four main characteristics of these ideologies summarized with the acronym PATH:

- *Polarized*: The essence of which is an “us vs. them” mindset, or what some would regard as in-group – out-group conflict.
- *Absolutist*: The beliefs are regarded as truth in the absolute sense, sometimes supported by sacred authority. This squelches questioning, critical thinking, and dissent. It also adds moral authority to framing us vs. them as a competition between good and bad (or evil).
- *Threat-Oriented*: External threat causes in-groups to cohere. Good leaders know this intuitively, if not from reading social psychological research. They persistently remind adherents that the “us” is at risk from the “them.” Because the “us” is seen as being good or right in the absolute sense, this works not only to promote internal cohesion but also external opposition.

- *Hateful*: Hate energizes violent action. It allows principled opposition to impel direct action. It also facilitates various mechanisms of moral disengagement – such as dehumanization – which erode the social and psychological barriers to engaging in violence that one believes is “justified” (an important point, since many more people endorse the justification for extremist violence than actually commit such acts).

More recently, Gerard Saucier – a social psychologist at University of Oregon – and his international team of colleagues sought to investigate this same question somewhat more systematically and on a larger scale (Saucier, et al, 2009). They began with a rationally-derived “working model of the major components of the militant-extremist mind-set,” then collected books, printed and web-based material from militant-extremist individuals or groups to see how often certain themes appeared. The project wished to include a broad range of groups, so they deliberately chose at least one from each of seven world regions. “To qualify, a group had to have been active within the last 150 years, had to fit the definition of militant extremism, and also had to have had a record of actual violence involving the death of multiple persons outside the group. A qualifying group also had to have sufficient written documentary evidence (i.e., original statements) that would clearly indicate its mind-set” (Saucier, et al, 2009, p. 258).

The precise methodology and procedures used are a bit sketchy. Saucier scanned these extremist documents looking for the presence of themes, then judged which themes were present in multiple statements “when, in Saucier's judgment, a reasonable person hearing the set of statements would acknowledge them to be making the same essential point” (Saucier, et al, 2009, p. 259). It is not clear from the described methodology, whether a coding scheme was used or whether any check was done on the inter-rater reliability of theme identification. Nevertheless, the authors identified 16 themes characteristic of a militant-extremist mind-set “based on fairly obvious correspondences that emerged in repeated reviews of the extracted statements. Each of these 16 themes was found to occur in three or more groups” (Saucier, et al, 2009, p. 259).

1. The necessity of unconventional and extreme measures.
2. Use of tactics that function to absolve one of responsibility for the bad consequences of the violence one is advocating or carrying out.
3. Prominent mixtures of military terminology into areas of discourse where it is otherwise rarely found.
4. Perception that the ability of the group to reach its rightful position is being tragically obstructed
5. Glorifying the past, in reference to one's group.
6. Utopianizing. There is frequently reference to concepts of a future paradise, or at least "the promise of a long and glorious future"
7. Catastrophizing. There is a perception that great calamities either have occurred, are occurring, or will occur.
8. Anticipation of supernatural intervention: Miraculous powers attributed to one's side, miraculous events coming to help one's side, or commands coming from supernatural entities.
9. A felt imperative to annihilate (exterminate, crush, destroy) evil and/or purify the world entirely from evil.
10. Glorification of dying for the cause.
11. Duty and obligation to kill, or to make offensive war.
12. Machiavellianism in service of the "sacred." This theme involves the belief that those with the right (i.e., true) beliefs and values are entitled to use immoral ends if necessary to assure the success of their cause.
13. An elevation of intolerance, vengeance, and warlikeness into virtues (or nearly so), including, in some cases, the ascribing of such militant dispositions to supernatural entities.
14. Dehumanizing or demonizing of opponents.
15. The modern world as a disaster. Among militant extremists, there is commonly a perception that modernity, including the consumer society and even instances of successful economic progress, is actually a disaster for humanity.
16. Civil government as illegitimate.

The authors suggest that militant-extremist groups use these thematic elements to craft a “narrative” frame for their ideologies. Drawing on these 16 themes, they offer the following of how they might cohere in a narrative:

“We (i.e., our group, however defined) have a glorious past, but modernity has been disastrous, bringing on a great catastrophe in which we are tragically obstructed from reaching our rightful place, obstructed by an illegitimate civil government and/or by an enemy so evil that it does not even deserve to be called human. This intolerable situation calls for vengeance. Extreme measures are required; indeed, any means will be justified for realizing our sacred end. We must think in military terms to annihilate this evil and purify the world of it. It is a duty to kill the perpetrators of evil, and we cannot be blamed for carrying out this violence. Those who sacrifice themselves in our cause will attain glory, and supernatural powers should come to our aid in this struggle. In the end, we will bring our people to a new world that is a paradise” (Saucier, et al, 2009, p. 265).

Terrorist Recruitment

Surprisingly little research or analysis has been conducted on terrorist recruitment (Daly and Gerwehr, 2006). Some debate even exists among contemporary scholars about the nature and extent of terrorist recruitment into militant jihadism. Marc Sageman and Scott Atran, for example, both well-known terrorism researchers, have argued that there is no recruitment per se to jihad or to Al-Qaeda. They believe that “enlistment” (because people want to join) is the mechanism by which new militants emerge. They report having data to show that nearly 90% “join the jihad” through friendship and kinship (Sageman, 2004). While it seems reasonable to assert that traditional recruitment - as the military does with a dedicated budget and personnel – may not be terrorists’ *modus operandi*, it seems nearly incontrovertible that militants seek new supporters, activists and members and that they engage in active efforts influence others to adopt their point

of view. That is arguably just a broader conceptualization of recruitment. How they do it becomes a very different field of debate than whether they do it.

Social movement scholars have studied activist recruitment for decades. One of the prevailing concepts is that when members of the movement look to recruit others, they operate as “rational prospectors” (Brady et al., 1999). They want to be efficient and effective, so they seek to identify those most likely to agree to act, if asked, and to act effectively to further the cause. They “conceive of the recruitment process as having two stages: (1) Rational prospectors use information to find likely targets; (2) after locating them, recruiters offer information on participatory opportunities and deploy inducements to persuade recruits to say ‘yes’” (Brady, et al., 1999, p. 154.) Central to both tasks is the existence and strength of relationships. Understanding relationships among potential prospects is critical to understanding recruitment networks.

Terrorist Mobilization

Ideology, by itself, is generally not sufficient to create a terrorist. Not all extremist ideologies facilitate violence, nor are all extremists violent. One potentially useful distinction to consider is the “direction of activity,” that is, whether the focus is more on promotion of the “cause” or destruction of those who oppose it. Even within destruction-oriented extremism, however, it usually takes more than ideology to compel violent action.

Getting people to *act* in service of a cause, not just to espouse a set of beliefs or maintain nominal allegiance to a group (what some refer to as “radicalization”), is a process that social movement theorists call *mobilization* (Zald & McCarthy, 1987). Working from the assumptions of a rational actor model of behaviour, mobilizing people to act involves increasing their perceived benefits and minimizing the perceived costs. These

assumptions cohere with basic approach-avoidance psychological models of human motivation (Elliott & Church, 1997).

The perceived benefits or terrorism – such as a sense of belonging, personal meaning, and approval of god/others – were discussed earlier, but manipulating “costs” is also a critical factor in mobilization (Munger, 2006). Many more people believe that violence in service of a particular cause is justified than actually commit acts of extremist violence. Activists must provide incentives, but also remove disincentives. They must leverage the psychological and social influences to erode the powerful, naturally-occurring barriers that inhibit widespread human killing. The barriers often involve how we think that others will appraise our behaviour well as our own self-appraisal. The avenues of assault on those barriers may be externally (i.e., effects of the group or social environment) or internally driven (i.e., making an internal cognitive adjustment about how to perceive the environment or situation).

Four of the major group/external influences to reduce psychological “costs” are diffusion of responsibility, deindividuation, obedience, and social identity. Diffusion of responsibility is a social-psychological phenomenon by which individuals feel less responsible (or less culpable) for transgressive behaviour when they commit it either in the presence of, or on behalf of a group (Darley & Latane, 1968). Deindividuation is a state or situation in which the focus of judgment is on a collective rather than on an individual. This reduces an individual’s inhibition or restraint either by reducing their self-awareness or by facilitating conformity to situation-specific norms (Silke, 2003). Obedience to authority is another phenomenon that diminishes personal responsibility because the actor, transfers his moral agency from self to the authority (Milgram, 1983). Finally, social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) - the ways in which we view ourselves in relation to social groups or categories – also can weaken individual responsibility by boosting the salience of group norms.

Eroding internal psychological barriers to violence typically requires modifying self-appraisals. Once humans have developed a basic capacity to control their behaviour and

regulate their actions, their internal moral code typically guides their choices. Violating one's own moral code may bring negative self-appraisals and feelings of self-condemnation (Bandura, 1990, 2004). Psychologist Albert Bandura notes, however, that these self-sanctions can be selectively "activated and disengaged" to facilitate behaviour that would otherwise violate one's own moral standard. He describes this process of breaking down barriers as "moral disengagement", which can operate through a variety of processes. One way to remove the barrier of self-sanction is to change one's interpretation or appraisal of events so that they justify the act (moral justification). Terrorists typically have some justification for their action, whether it is personally construed or derived from the group's ideology. A second mechanism is "blaming the victim," since targeting aggression at people who have caused harm or are considered blameworthy or deserving of retribution is more acceptable. Another mechanism of moral disengagement is to dehumanize the victims in one's personal appraisals. Della Porta (1992), for example, describes how Italian "militants justified their use of political violence by depersonalizing their victims, defined in the documents of the underground groups as "tools of the system" and, later as 'pigs' or 'watch dogs'."

Terrorist Group Vulnerabilities

Terrorist groups, like all social collectives, have certain vulnerabilities to their existence (Cronin, 2006; Jackson, 2009). Some come from within the organization, some operate from outside. Internal mistrust, for example, can be a disabling affliction for a group. It causes member to focus energy inward and not externally toward operations or goal directed activity; it potentiates interpersonal tensions and strains relationships. Periods of boredom and inactivity can also threaten group cohesion. McCauley and Segal (1989, p.177) note that "without action and external threat, the group may destroy itself." Internal competitions and power struggles can undermine group unity and effectiveness. Substantive disagreements about tactics, strategy or leadership are also frequent sources of vulnerability, particularly when they lead to factioning.

External vulnerabilities include disruption in the support network, disapproval of constituencies, and conflicts with other groups. No political or ideologically-driven organization can survive and thrive without a support network. “The types of support are financial, training, weapons, organizational, and operational. A group must be able to raise the resources necessary to provide sufficient incentives to attract and maintain a membership.” (Oots, 1989, p.166). Beyond the instrumental support network is a broader social network of sympathizers, which comprise the constituency of a terrorist organization. Changes in the attitudes of the supporters can lead to changes in the organization (Cronin, 2006). Finally, conflicts that arise between groups can threaten the integrity or even the very existence of a terrorist organization as well (McCauley & Segal, 1987).

Terrorist Group Functioning

Terrorist groups must be able to maintain both cohesion and loyalty to sustain their existence (Jackson, 2009). Leadership can be an important factor in that effort. While the prototypical terrorist group leader is believed to capitalize on his or her charisma, the truth is that extremist leaders operate in a variety of ways and sometimes change over time. Terrorist groups require that certain functions be served, regardless of how they are stylistically implemented. First, the group needs a guardian to maintain its collective belief system, to deter dissent, and prevent ideological or commitment drift. A related aspect of this function is diverting conflict externally and maintaining a persistent sense of threat from the adversary. Second, a group must have organizational routines that help to keep action going, since boredom and inactivity are enemies of cohesion. Third, the flow of communication through the organization must be managed and controlled, so that the group’s identity and narrative are carefully preserved. Fourth, incentives must be managed and manipulated to attract new members and to keep existing members focused on group objectives and motivated to act (Borum, 2004).

Conclusion on the State of Research

Social science researchers in the field of terrorism studies are nearly unanimous in their conclusion that research in this field of study largely lacks substance and rigor (Gurr, 1988, Schmid & Longman, 1988; Silke, 2001; Horgan, 2005; Victoroff, 2005; Victoroff & Kruglanski, 2009). Several fundamental problems remain unresolved. First, there still is no agreed upon definition of terrorism, though more than 100 different ones have been proposed in the professional literature (Levy & Sidel, 2003). Second, most of the existing research is not empirical or based on any data. Silke's (2001) review found that 80% of terrorism research articles published between 1995-1999 were "thought pieces" or based on information taken from media sources, with less than 20% providing substantially new knowledge based on previously unavailable data. Third, psychological researchers who have more of an empirical orientation seem to focus on questions that either lose the focus on observable behaviour, or are disconnected from issues that are important to practitioners. This is not meant to suggest that only applied research in terrorism studies holds any value. Rigorous basic social/behavioural science research on terrorism-related processes would also be welcome, and might provide a foundation of knowledge for an empirically-informed psychology of counterterrorism.

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