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The psychology of terrorism

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The Global Polity

The Psychology of Terrorism

The Challenges

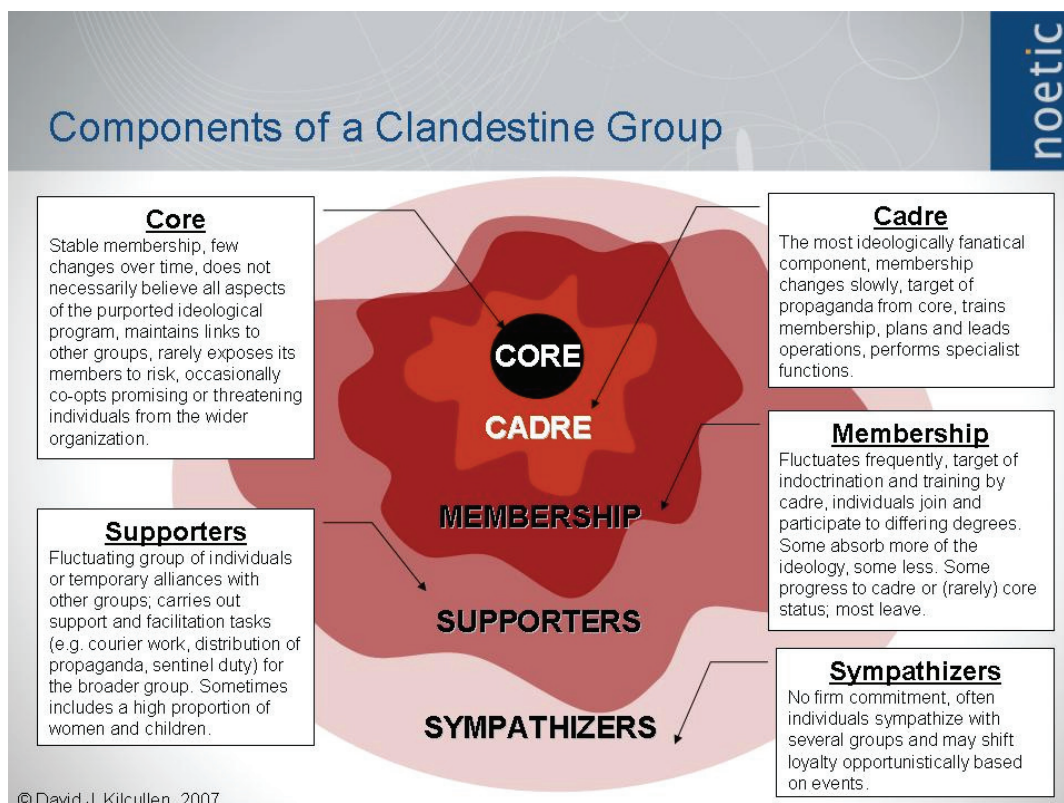
In all parts of the world the processes of globalization have produced winners and losers. Socioeconomic disparities, which exist not only between nations but also inside the societies of all states, are regarded as the major cause for political or political-religious radicalization. Today, the most extreme form of this radicalization is represented by terrorist organizations.



The transnational, non-state nature of terrorism and insurgencies has evolved into one of the most prominent threats for international security, stability, and prosperity.

Since it has proven impossible to counter terrorism solely with physical means, it became widely acknowledged that the threat of terrorism has to be also addressed on the psychological level.

This means, in general terms, to reduce the support for terrorist organizations in societies. Extremists generate support for their cause in socially and economically disadvantaged groups prone to political radicalization. The supporters not only become the recruiting pool for new volunteers willing to kill and die for the cause but—maybe more important—represent the primary source of legitimacy for the extremists. Thus, since it is almost impossible to cut off the malign influence of extremist ideologies on already politically radicalized groups, it is necessary to reduce political radicalization in the first place.





Methods to undermine radical ideologies and to prevent disadvantaged social groups from joining violent extremist organizations have to accompany today's counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategies. According to most scholars and practitioners this is the path to a truly comprehensive and lasting approach of addressing the challenge of terrorism in the 21st century. However, how to achieve this in practice remains unclear:

- What are successful recent long-term counterterrorism/counterinsurgency strategies of selected states?
- In which ways can states (or international organizations) integrate private companies, NGOs, and the media in long-term counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategies?
- Is a fusion of state and private actors a reasonable/functional approach in the first place?
- How can private companies and NGOs operating in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq positively affect the “hearts and minds” of the local population and, thus, actively contribute to ongoing counterinsurgency and state-building operations?
- How can globally operating companies use their influence in developing (and least developed countries) to reduce political radicalization beyond the simple formula of “jobs, jobs, jobs?”
- How can the media and private companies undermine or “disenchant” extremist ideologies?

Proposed Solutions

Gregory Berns

Professor of Neuroeconomics; Director, Centre for Neuropolicy, Emory University School of Medicine

Using neuroscience to understand the mind of a terrorist

Understanding the mind of a terrorist is important for the formulation of effective counter-terrorism strategies. The first, and most salient, dimension is the question of motive. To formulate an effective counter strategy, it is necessary to understand the “why” of a terrorist act. Uncovering the “why” is a difficult operation because terrorists may not be available to explain their actions after the fact, public announcements may reflect political posturing rather than true motives, and captured terrorists may not have sufficient incentive to reveal their true motives.

The usual explanations of terrorist acts derive from rational decisions that optimize strategies for attaining sociopolitical goals: the religious “bargain” of mostly young men dying for a promising afterlife, or the ultimate sacrifice that improves the lives of family or compatriots and offsets the “opportunity cost” of an educated life lost prematurely, or “trading life” for a social identity that is affirmed in death but devalued by continued living. However, several anthropological studies of heroism and suicide terrorism support the idea that sacred values motivate such acts without regard to consequences. Rather than obey a utilitarian “logic of rational consequence” these actors perhaps more closely follow a “logic of moral appropriateness.” If the latter is true, then counter terrorism strategies based on the use of consequences (e.g., military and economic) may fail because the terrorist actor is insensitive to consequences.

Part of the problem is that scientists and policymakers do not have a good model of how people make decisions for so-called sacred values. How does the human mind represent the value of God or ethnic identity, for example? How does an individual trade-off one sacred value for another (Sophie's or tragic choices)?



One solution for building better models of how the human mind represents sacred values is to use brain imaging technology. We have begun a research program to determine when brain systems are engaged that represent the value of outcomes (in a rational choice framework) versus when systems that represent rules (sacred values) are engaged. Early results suggest that incentives in one system may not be commensurate with the other. The next research program will examine how rules and sacred values become fixed in the brain, and which methods are effective at changing them.

John M. Deutch

Professor of Chemistry, MIT; Former Director of CIA

Managing catastrophic terrorist threats

Catastrophic terrorist attacks, if successful, result in massive civilian casualties and/or major disruption of civil society. Such attacks conceivably could involve the use of nuclear or biological weapons, disruption of the information infrastructure, or coordinated use conventional explosives. Avoiding catastrophic terrorism events should be the principal objective of counter terrorism. A large, disciplined, and well-financed terrorist organization is required for successful execution for this class of attacks. There are perhaps two dozen such organizations around the globe with such a capability, for example Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Hamas. Most of these organizations have international reach involving operations in several countries and the involvement of many different nationalities. The beginning of a strategy to defeat this threat is to recognize that such organizations seek to achieve political and social objectives, not just to cause kill innocent people or create economic disruption. For the organization, in contrast to individual fanatical foot soldiers, attacking non-combatants is the means to an end, not an end in itself. These organizations depend upon the support and forbearance of the countries in which they operate. Since the host country will have different political, economic, and social objectives, a successful strategy should work on the differences between the host state and the guest terrorist group by diplomatic, economic, and unconventional means. The focus should be on neutralizing or destroying the terrorist organization. Achieving this objective places exceptional demands on intelligence: to provide objective assessment based on local knowledge about the success of counter terrorism measures to guide policy makers, to warn of impending terrorist attacks, to disseminate actionable intelligence on terrorist operations and personnel. A measured capability to interdict terrorist groups is also necessary. However, an aggressive counter-insurgency strategy, intent on changing the nature or government of the host country, may only serve to bring host country and guest terrorist group closer together. Some argue that is what has happened in Afghanistan: Foreign involvement and military occupation has brought unity to Taliban and Al Qaeda objectives. A more ambitious strategy begins with the proposition that amelioration of social and economic inequities is necessary to remove the causes of extremism that are the source of support for terrorist organizations is open to question. However, reengineering a country's society to eliminate social, political, and economic inequities by outsiders parties—whether governments, private companies, and NGOs—has few successful historical precedents and runs the danger of equating progress with transplanting values of a foreign culture. Western institutions have shown themselves to be remarkably inept at effectively blending military and civilian instruments to improve political, economic, and security conditions in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Nor is it evident that social and economic progress would necessarily reduce extremism and support for terrorism; for example, consider the case of Iran. Certainly external economic and technical assistance can speed a country attainment of social progress and equality, but how this translates into less extremism remains elusive.



Robin Schröder

University of Kiel

Solution 1: Disaggregation strategy

In his essay “Countering Global Insurgency” David Kilcullen argues that Islamist/Jihadist trans-national terrorism relies on a network of actors who successfully link local insurgencies with other local insurgencies, thus turning regionally confined grievances into a global Islamist struggle. To effectively counter terrorism it is necessary to cut the linkages between the various local insurgencies and the small group of people representing the “global” terrorist networks. This way the idea of “global jihad,” which is the ideological framework for al-Qaida et al., loses momentum and subsequently supporters. Once these links are severed, the grievance leading to local Islamist insurgencies can be addressed one at a time. This strategy of disaggregation can not solve all of the problems in the Muslim world at once, but it would reduce the issue of Islamist terrorism from a global to a local one, which in turn would be easier to address for national governments supported by international community.

Solution 2: Detecting and disrupting networks of social solidarity

Referring to organizational theory, Max Abrahms of Stanford University claims that terrorist organizations often do not follow a strategic logic. He argues that terrorists are primarily motivated by the desire to find social solidarity in a peer group of socially disenfranchised rather than by the idea of achieving clearly defined political goals. In tracing back the social network of known terrorists Abrahms sees one of the most effective ways to detect and disrupt terrorist organizations. Today, the three main counter-terrorism strategies all rest on the assumption that terrorists act under the premise of strategic thinking explicable with rational-choice models. Thus the counter-terrorism strategies of (1) deterrence, (2) appeasement, and (3) economic development & democracy promotion are designed to divest terrorism of its political utility and strategic value. However, when a terrorist’s primary motivation is social solidarity and not the trust in a strategic concept, these counter-terrorism approaches lose effectiveness. In focusing on the psychological motivations inducing people to join the rank and file of terrorist groups Abrahms thus encourages to put more emphasis on the socio-psychological point of view when debating counter-terrorism strategy.

Solution 3: The “classics”

The most often formulated counter-terrorism strategy is a mix of deterrence and good governance. Most of all official declarations by national governments and international organizations assure that they do not negotiate with terrorists and are determined to combat terrorist groups with all necessary means (this includes law enforcement as well as military options). This way the costs of terrorist activities are supposed to become so high for the perpetrators that it loses its strategic value. Simultaneously, good governance, democracy promotion, and economic development shall win the hearts and minds of those parts of a population which would otherwise sympathize with terrorist organizations. Social integration and equal opportunities are the main components of a hearts and minds strategy in developed countries with large diaspora societies. According to the assumption that terrorists think rationally and strategically, terrorist acts of violence would not make sense if they diminish popular support for the terrorists’ cause. Some argue that—to a certain degree—it would even make sense to appease terrorist organizations making concessions to them. For terrorists such concessions could be a relative gain worth enough to stop violence. However, these classic approaches are based on a rational and strategic perspective which often does not comply with the terrorist state of mind.



David Tuckett

Professor of Psychoanalysis, University College London

Recognizing divided state thinking and addressing it

Psychoanalysis can be seen as the branch of psychology that deals with the impact of subjective emotional experience on thinking. Its principles have not been easy to substantiate within standard academic frameworks but recent developments in cognitive neuroscience and developmental psychology mean that the importance of subjective emotional experience is increasingly recognized.

Psychoanalysts have interlinked theories of thinking, individual and group identity and human development based on the significance of impulses and affects—especially excitement and anxiety. To think realistically requires an integrated emotional state in which any bad feelings (anxiety and frustration generating) that reality throws our way are not divided off. The alternative divided state is one in which seriously conflicting beliefs are held and actions taken with no proper awareness of consequences. Realistic thinking is a developmental achievement which none of us fully attain and which is disrupted by trauma.

Anxiety reaches traumatic levels when we are terrified and so is very likely to create “regression” to primitive good-bad and us-them divided thinking. The incentive not to think—to obliterate our knowledge of our thoughts and to externalize them and identify them in the other—is motivated by primitive efforts to hold on to sanity under extreme duress when feeling helpless; recreating childhood experiences. Large groups are conceptions such as nations or religions or localities. Members within them achieve collective security through shared myths and projective conceptions of “us” and “them” passed on in the nursery in childhood as individuals dealt with their own bad feelings towards those close to them on whom they depended. Anxiety can be reduced by externalization of hatred but at the cost of hidden paranoia of the outside. Large groups are powerful amplifiers of primitive externalizing mechanisms and lead to groupthink—in which realistic and differentiated individual thinking about reality can be lost.

Terrorism threatens life and makes people helpless provoking the most primitive reactions. It derives from large group processes within the host society and it creates dangerous counter group processes in the target society.

Solution 1

Avoid comfortable divided state thinking in target societies by recognizing reality; it is not realistic to suppose we can predict who will become a terrorist from psychological or other profiling and nor will we deter this behavior by counter-threats, massive power, revenge and hiding behind walls (divisions).

Solution 2

Take all possible steps to reduce the excitement terrorism creates and its potential to inflame grievance and paranoia in both host and target societies. Minimize terrorist acts by treating them as criminal acts; keeping them within a “blue” (criminal) rather than “green” (war) perspective; so reducing the opportunity for grievance and the strengthening of large group myths of the “dammed.”

Solution 3

Advertise and embrace integrated state thinking and the human capacity for empathy and mourning. In seeking to prevent terrorism we should recognize a main issue is the support and excitement terrorists are able to obtain from onlookers (even in target societies) via their



capacity to provoke and then evoke identification with their cause or their plight when confronted with unequal force or unfair circumstances—they represent what Franz fanon called “the damned” of the earth (not the “wretched” which was a significant mistranslation). In this connection we need to pay very careful attention to the risk of overreaction and divided state (not) thinking in target societies, such as using an attack to justify normally illegal practices or failing to recognize the real suffering and experiences of damnation which terrorist causes rely on for legitimation. We need to help in the development of counter narratives for traumatized groups and back them by actions which support them—rather than turning a blind eye.

Solution 4

Understand how Groupthink operates in host and target societies. Groups offer individuals existential security by creating boundaries between insiders and outsiders which help individuals manage maddening and near catastrophic anxiety to feel sane and safe. Being attacked is felt by host and target society—both are fighting for the right to live and to stay sane.

One consequence is to recognize (for instance) that if the representatives of large-group enemies are brought together in unofficial or official diplomacy even with a “neutral” facilitating team for finding peaceful co-existence, these representatives’ ability to hold on to their respective large-group identities may be threatened. This, in turn, may create severe large-group identity problems, complicate negotiations, and create stubborn resistances against making peace. The aim therefore, is not to mend or remove, but only to narrow the psychological gap between the host and target group identities and to strengthen opposing representatives’ hold on their large-group identities so they can make more realistic agreements,

Solution 5

Understand how Super-ego (moral) judgment is frequently the enactment of a divided state. Encourage realistic thinking from everyone—which is an emotionally based activity not just “rational” and cognitive and which recognizes all of us as struggling with the large questions of life. In seeking to reduce identification with terrorist actions take every possible step to recognize and respect underlying differences and to understand the potential support for terrorist causes arising from group experiences of humiliation and grievance and how these might be more effectively redressed. This extends particularly to diplomacy. Take steps to educate populations, political leaders, journalist and diplomats in understanding the reality of the emotional response to terror and trauma in their own populations and the tendency to create (short-term) divided states of mind, them and us thinking and basic assumption group functioning (fight/flight) rather than integrated state mourning processes leading to (long-term) realistic adjustment. All such processes involve the willingness to experience loss; to mourn.

Solution 6

Face the limits to dominion and the problems of entitlement and understand the psychological issues at stake. To be safe from terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction requires everyone giving them up; not just some states. In a similar vein recognize that ideas such as “making the world safe” are contentious divided state ideologies unless we are very careful to ask for who? Divided state thinking justifies some to have weapons while others do not and so integrated state thinking requires mourning the loss of the simplistic idea that owning them provides security. Domination is a very primitive phantasy which goes hand in hand with the fear of retaliation:

Who is king of the castle? Get down you dirty rascal!