



Understanding the Terrorist Threat: Policy Implications of a Motivational Account of Terrorism

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Abstract

Terrorism is a tool designed to reach political objectives. Terrorism emerges in a social and political context, representing a form of psychological warfare aimed at achieving political goals by eliciting an emotional response in the populace of a perceived adversary. As such, terrorism requires both the ability to penetrate the enemy's defenses and the motivation to justify violence. This article presents a means-end motivational account of terrorism, reviewing (a) the scope of the terrorist threat, (b) what drives perceiving terrorism as an instrumental means of reaching political goals, (c) how the quest for personal significance motivates adopting terrorism-justifying ideologies, and (d) how this understanding of terrorism may inform counter-terrorism policy considerations.

Keywords

terrorism, terrorist, counter-terrorism, quest for significance, asymmetric conflict, psychological warfare, fear, stress, motivation

Tweet

Terrorism is a political tool requiring motivation and ability, which determine its scope, origins, ideology, and counter-strategies.

Key Points

- Terrorism is a political tool, which defines its scope, origins, ideology, and effective counter-strategies.
- Terrorism is psychological warfare, aimed at instilling a sense of insecurity among members of the targeted group.
- Terrorism requires both motivation to justify aggression and ability to penetrate the enemy's defenses.
- Terrorism is a means to an end, a tool designed to reach political objectives, used when believed to be instrumental for reaching those aims.
- A quest for personal significance can motivate people to form and accept terrorism-justifying ideologies.

Introduction

Terrorism constitutes an extreme form of aggression, in which non-state actors attack civilians to reach a political objective through the spreading of fear. The threat of terrorism has captured the world's attention, including media depictions, lay concerns, government policies, and scholarly analyses. Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, terrorism

has accounted for such a massive volume of media attention that quantifying the amount of time and space devoted to it is likely impossible. The United States spent more than 1.2 trillion dollars in the fight against terrorism in the 10 years between the attacks in 2001 and the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011 (Belasco, 2011). Scholarly interest in terrorism has also soared since 2001, with more than 11,900 publications on the topic of terrorism or terrorists listed in the PubMed database and more than 7,400 items in PsycINFO.

Beyond merely receiving attention, terrorism is considered to be of utmost importance, even representing an existential threat. American Presidents have maintained a strong commitment to addressing terrorism, with George W. Bush declaring that "we will rid the world of the evil-doers" and launching a "War on Terror." Barack Obama stated that "we must finish the work of defeating al Qaeda and its associated forces" in 2013. Senator John McCain, who was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam Conflict, said, "I do believe that the things we're seeing in the world today, [which is] in greater turmoil than at any time in my lifetime . . ." (CNN, July 2014). Mirroring these sentiments, terrorism expert

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Ganor (2011, p. xv) asserted that “[Terrorism] has become an unprecedented danger to world peace.”

Even though terrorism has captured the attention of policymakers, so far strong policy solutions have proved elusive. The number of terrorist attacks has increased since 1970:

Total terrorist attacks increased in the mid to late 1970s, remained fairly stable throughout the 1980s, and increased again in the early 1990s, reaching a total of 3,654 events in 1992. Terrorist activity then declined during the late 1990s to levels as low as those observed in the late 1970s—1,151 attacks in 2000. However, after 2001, attacks increased again, reaching a series high of 6,660 in 2006. (LaFree, Morris, & Dugan, 2010, p. 631)

Continuing this general trend, “While terrorist attacks have in large part moved away from Western Europe and North America to Asia, the Middle East and Africa, worldwide terrorism is reaching new levels of destructiveness” (LaFree in National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START] Report, 2013). Advances in media technology (first satellite television, then cable television, and now the internet) and spreading news about attacks have (at least partly) precipitated the rise in attacks (Breckenridge & Zimbardo, 2007; Moghaddam, 2008; Sparks, 2005; Weimann & Winn, 1994).

Terrorism is specifically designed to garner attention and elicit a psychological impact, and is therefore crafted in such a way to maximize this effect. “Terrorism is about one thing: psychology. It is the psychology of fear” (Philip Zimbardo, as cited in Bongar, 2007, p. 3). Terrorism is a form of *psychological warfare*. Terrorists want to engage in a revolution that *will be* televised and are, in fact, not as interested in seizing property or killing people as they are in communicating a message through striking in ways that will make the targeted groups *feel* as if symbolic damage has been dealt. Terrorism is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, in which terrorists “want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening, not a lot of people dead” (Jenkins, 1975, p. 158). Otherwise, as a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization said, “we would throw roses, if it would work” (Schmid & De Graaf, 1982, p. 32).

Terrorism as a Means to an End

Why, then, have terrorists adopted a tactic of seeking media coverage and psychological impact rather than territorial control? Terrorists perceive their adversary to be more skilled in traditional military battles. Because of this, terrorists target civilians to compensate for what they lack in might by striking where their opponent is vulnerable, leading countless authors to regard terrorism as a “weapon of the weak.” Analyses have confirmed that when smaller and less equipped armies use unconventional military tactics, they increase their likelihood of victory (Arreguin-Toft, 2005). “Terrorism is a logical choice when oppositions have such

goals and when the power ratio of government to challenger is high. The observation that terrorism is a weapon of the weak is hackneyed but apt” (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 387).

Targeting civilians can encourage criticism due to its inconsistency with norms relating to warfare. Terrorists rely upon a group of supporters who create a shared social reality that justifies using the terrorist tactic. Terrorist organizations form a pyramid-shaped structure with a small number of militants making up the pyramid’s apex and their supporters constituting the base (McCauley, 2004, 2006). Supporters at the base play a vital role, by providing material support, operational cover, social justification, and future recruits.

Circumstances can lend terrorism-justifying ideologies heightened appeal. Although enacting terrorism is detrimental to some of each actor’s goals (e.g., not harming children, preserving one’s physical safety), terrorism-justifying ideologies can gain support when terrorism appears to be the most—and sometimes only—instrumental means toward attaining one’s political goals. To embrace terrorism as a viable possibility, a person must believe that (a) a culprit harmed the individual or the group, (b) only aggressing against this culprit will remedy the situation, and (c) attacking civilians is warranted (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011; Pape, 2005).

Yet, beyond being perceived as justifiable, terrorism must be perceived as an effective tool (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006) in reaching political ends to be adopted. Terrorists may believe terrorism to be instrumental in attaining their goals for at least three possible reasons (Orehek, 2012; Orehek et al., 2010). First, terrorists may request that the targeted group concede to specific terms, such as an end to occupying territory, holding prisoners, or economic sanctions. Of terrorism directed toward this objective in 13 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2003, 7 were successful in getting the target to yield at least partially to a demand (Pape, 2005).

Alternatively, terrorists may seek to destabilize the targeted group’s current government to demonstrate its weakness, thereby increasing the likelihood that the governing organization will lose support among its constituents. From this point of view, social structures and governments that appear to be strong may be toppled through terrorist attacks. Governments perceived in this manner have been referred to as “paper tigers” or “spider webs.” Osama bin Laden said (ABC News, 1998),

After our victory in Afghanistan and the defeat of the oppressors who had killed millions of Muslims, the legend about the invincibility of the superpowers vanished. [. . .] Our boys were shocked by the low morale of the American soldier, and they realized that the American soldier was just a paper tiger.

Hezbollah has said the same about Israel, referring to it as a spider web (Shavit, 2002):

The Israeli army is strong, Israel has technological superiority and is said to have strategic capabilities, but its citizens are

unwilling any longer to sacrifice lives in order to defend their national interests and national goals. Therefore, Israel is a spider-web society: it looks strong from the outside, but touch it and it will fall apart.

Finally, terrorists may want to elicit extreme responses from the targeted group. These extreme responses may be questionable on moral grounds, thus motivating others of the terrorists' ingroup to join forces and may also have the potential to drain the opponent of valuable resources, ultimately contributing to its defeat (Bueno de Mesquita & Dickson, 2007; Crenshaw, 1981). This method has been termed "Jujitsu politics" (McCauley, 2006) for its ability to use an opponent's strength against itself. Indeed, the strong response of the British to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) may have heightened support for the IRA among its potential constituents (Callaway & Harrelson-Stephens, 2006) and increased the rate of terrorist attacks (Lafree, Dugan, & Korte, 2009).

The effectiveness of Jujitsu politics seems to be well understood by modern terrorists. Revolutionary Carlos Mariaghella (1971) wrote that the way to win support was to provoke the enemy in this way. Osama bin Laden stated (Al Jazeera, 2004),

All that we have mentioned has made it easy for us to provoke and bait this administration. All that we have to do is to send two Mujahidin to the furthest point East to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al Qaeda, in order to make the Generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic, and political losses without their achieving for it anything of note . . . we, alongside the Mujahidin, bled Russia for 10 years, until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat . . . So we are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy.

Each of these strategies rests on the assumption that terrorism has a psychological impact on the targeted group. Research has strongly supported this assumption. Stress increased following the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 across the United States (Galea et al., 2002; Schlenger et al., 2002; Schuster et al., 2001; Zhou, Kanouse, Morrison, & Berry, 2001). Similar stress responses followed attacks in England (Rubin et al., 2007), Israel (Bleich, Gelkopf, Melamed, & Solomon, 2007; Bleich, Gelkopf, & Solomon, 2003; Hobfoll, Canetti-Nisim, & Johnson, 2006), and Spain (Miguel-Tobal et al., 2006). The more that people are exposed to media discussing attacks, the more stress they experience (Propper, Stickgold, Keeley, & Christman, 2007; Soffer-Dudek & Shahar, 2010).

Motivational Reasoning Behind Adopting Terrorism as a Means

Given the same political goals, why do some people view terrorism as a justifiable means while others do not? That is, not all individuals who have perceived another group as responsible for their plight engage in violent activity. As with

forming any belief (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2009), justification for using terrorism has its roots in the individual motivations to adopt such reasoning. A "social identity" framework helps explain the motivation behind terrorism (Louis & Taylor, 2002). According to social identity approaches, individuals in a low-status group desire to act on their own behalf and move into a higher-status group. To do this, group boundaries must be sufficiently permeable to allow the individual to gain membership in the high-status group. When the high-status group appears impermeable, the only recourse for those who feel trapped in a low-status group is to work together to increase the status of their group. Supporting this analysis of why terrorist groups aggress against other groups, Sageman says,

Even though most al Qaeda members possessed advanced degrees, their attempts to ascend from their minority status by becoming respected members of Western society were largely unsuccessful. Indeed, membership in a terrorist organization may bestow on the individual a sense of personal significance that could not be gained by (partial) membership in other groups. (Sageman, 2004)

Quest for Significance as Motivating Force Behind Terrorism

A "quest for significance" framework (Kruglanski et al., 2009; Kruglanski, Bélanger, et al., 2013; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011) helps explain the motivational force behind justifying terrorism as an instrumental means. Proposed motivations for accepting terrorism have included social exclusion (Sageman, 2004; Stern, 2003), personal loss and trauma (Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2005), humiliation and injustice (Bloom, 2005; Stern, 2003), and poverty (Stern, 2003). Such potential causes of terrorism indeed seem to constitute special cases of a more general motivating force, termed the "quest for personal significance." From this perspective, each of the listed motivations reflects a desire to perceive the self as valuable and important.

Threats to one's sense of personal significance or the significance of one's social group propel the individual to aim at restoring that sense of significance. A "collectivistic shift" can accomplish this (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011): People construe themselves as members of a collective, rather than as individuals, upon encountering threats to their personal significance, and therefore prioritize the interests of their group over concerns about personal aspirations and physical safety (Orehek, Sasota, Kruglanski, Ridgeway, & Dechesne, in press). Being part of a collective, in turn, allows people to figuratively extend themselves through space and time by means of their social linkages, hence providing them with a sense of symbolic immortality (Castano & Dechesne, 2005). Because of these processes, threats to personal significance impel individuals to draw intergroup distinctions and derogate outgroups (Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004;

Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). This makes aggression against outgroups seem justifiable (Staub, 2002) and leads to actual violence toward groups perceived to be in conflict with one's own (Triandis, 2000). Construing the self as interdependent with others mitigates fear of death and increases willingness to become a martyr for the sake of the group (Orehek et al., in press). From this perspective, "terrorism is a tactic by which individuals with multiple risk factors, and who may have limited alternatives, seek to acquire 'vast personal importance'" (Victoroff, 2009, p. 398).

Summary of Basic Principles

1. **Terrorism is psychological warfare.** Terrorist attacks aim at instilling a sense of insecurity among members of the targeted group. This insecurity is fostered by media reports and political statements that frame attacks as noteworthy threats to the group. Without the emotional response, terrorism cannot be an effective form of warfare.
2. **Terrorism requires both ability and motivation.** Potential terrorists must be motivated to believe there is good reason to aggress, and they must have the resources necessary to penetrate the enemy's defenses.
3. **Terrorism is a means to an end.** Terrorism is a tool designed to reach political objectives, used when perceived to be the most, or only, instrumental means toward reaching those aims.

Policy Implications of a Motivational Account of Terrorism

The incidence of terrorism continues to rise, as do the technological advances that facilitate attracting the attention and emotional impact terrorists seek. Therefore, policymakers face an important challenge as they respond to this threat. The three basic principles just listed have several implications. Each case must consider multiple goals (Kruglanski, Köpetz, Bélanger, Chun, Orehek, & Fishbach, 2013; Orehek & Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, 2013). A successful compromise, balancing among these goals, is most likely to produce effective solutions.

Terrorism is Psychological Warfare

Attackers attempt to elicit an emotional response among the targeted group. This observation has several policy implications related to whether an attack actually provokes an emotional response. Many policies must balance goals related to risk awareness, appearing strong, and identifying someone as responsible and dangerous, on the one hand, with the goal of mitigating the emotional experience elicited by terrorism, on the other hand. If the targeted group does not have an emotional response, then the attack cannot have its intended

effect, and terrorism cannot be an effective psychological warfare.

Risk awareness and terror prevention. Campaigns often attempt to make the public aware of terrorist threat, with the intention of having the public assist in prevention. For example, 2004 London subway posters, under the heading "terrorism," suggested to passengers that they should monitor the presence of unaccompanied bags and report them to police. Similar audio and visual announcements are repeated on public transportation across the world. What are the consequences of these messages? On the one hand, the posters may increase the likelihood that a planned attack is thwarted. As far as we know, no research has investigated this possibility. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the "underwear bomber" on December 25, 2009, the "shoe bomber" in December 2001, and the SUV (sport-utility vehicle) parked in Times Square in 2010 were thwarted by citizen responses. Note, however, that none of the warning signs that alerted these citizens to potential danger specifically appears on posters, and the often-depicted abandoned backpack did not stop the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. On the other hand, the posters themselves may elicit the emotional response that terrorists are seeking. Indeed, laboratory studies have demonstrated that reminders of terrorist attacks increase felt insecurity (Landau et al., 2004; Orehek et al., 2010; Slone, 2000).

Similarly, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security instituted a color-coded warning system in which citizens were alerted to the daily level of terrorist threat. It is not clear what citizens could be expected to do in response to the warnings, but it did have a psychological impact on society members insofar as support for President George W. Bush increased following increased levels of warning (Willer, 2004), presumably out of an attempt to rally around the flag in response to a threat (Mueller, 1973).

Although raising terror awareness and increasing citizen vigilance to potential terrorist threats could thwart attempted attacks, awareness and vigilance may also augment the psychological impact terrorists seek to induce. The London posters serve as reminders of previous bombings, thereby continuing to induce an emotional response months or years after the latest attack. Policymakers should balance these two potential outcomes: Consider both the emotional response to counter-terrorism awareness messages and to consider the extent to which whether they reasonably could effectively thwart or deter potential attacks.

Identifying terrorist acts and psychological impact. Many commentators seek to identify, label, and elaborate on the individuals and motivations for terrorism. Reasons for doing so include clearly depicting a perceived threat, denouncing the action as immoral, and attempting to understand the attack. One example is identifying the "mastermind" behind an attack as a way of villainizing the person and calling for

action to kill or capture that person (and sometimes supporters). Many times an attack may be ambiguous as to its status as terrorism, whether it was an orchestrated attempt to induce terror or what motivated it. For example, fierce debate raged in the United States regarding whether the attacks on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012 reflected a pre-planned attack by terrorists or the spontaneous action of an enraged mob.

Although identifying someone as responsible and identifying the work of a well-organized, dangerous agent comes with the listed advantages, it also can advance the attackers' mission. By trumpeting the attack as a highly coordinated action carried out by individuals who pose a serious threat, media and politicians add fuel to the emotional fire. Attacks physically harm a finite set of people and property. The way the attack is communicated determines how much the psychological harm spreads among the population.

Again, policy prescriptions must balance these goals. First, identifying the responsible agent and suggesting that the agent is dangerous may gain support for operations designed to prevent future attacks (security efforts, capture, or killing). Surely, the United States would not have killed Osama bin Laden had the populace not perceived him as a dangerous person responsible for killing innocent civilians. On the other hand, when attacks that are specifically limited in their physical harm are then perceived as threats to a broader social group, the emotional impact can spread to individuals who are not physically influenced by the attacks. Therefore, communicators should consider balancing these goals when shaping their rhetoric in response to specific attacks or threats.

Terrorism Requires Both Ability and Motivation

Ability. Responses to terrorism may focus on reducing the ability to carry out attacks. Increasing airport security, targeting training compounds, building walls along borders, and installing counter-rocket systems may all reduce terrorists' attacking ability. Such efforts have the clear advantage of dismantling the weapons that harm people. Without attempting to stop individuals who have already decided to aggress, one simply allows terrorist violence to be effective. In addition, reducing the ability to attack may deter individuals from adopting terrorism as a means (e.g., it may be viewed as less instrumental). However, targeting terrorists' ability has the potential to fail for several reasons. Attempting to stop a specific tool, such as building a wall to stop terrorist movements or destroying a weapon storage facility, may temporarily slow terrorists, but they can usually find a new target or tactic (e.g., launching rockets over the wall, finding a new storage facility). Stopping terrorists' ability to launch attacks usually requires strong force, which itself may increase terrorist motivation through Jujitsu politics.

Motivation. Responses to terrorism grounded in removing terrorists' ability may ignore terrorists' concerns, frustrations, and perceived injustices that give rise to their agenda. Military operations aimed at reducing terrorists' ability, which sometimes include killing of innocents or destruction of property, may create a "boomerang" effect (LaFree & Dugan, 2007); this further strengthens commitment to terrorism and may increase the number of new recruits who perceive that their group has been harmed. It may also reduce worldwide support for one's position. Waging war against an attacker requires identification of an enemy, which has additional implications (Kruglanski, Crenshaw, Post, & Victoroff, 2007). Rather than contemplating one's own role in instigating or escalating the conflict, it labels the perceived enemy as evil, thereby creating a zero-sum conflict in which one party must defeat the other for the conflict to end. This does not reduce the motivational source of conflict. As long as another is motivated to take up the cause, they are likely to find a way to attack. Unlike conventional war, terrorism requires the actions of only a small group of people to continue, so complete defeat using force may be essentially impossible.

Terrorism Is a Means to an End

Terrorism is a means perceived by those who use it as instrumental toward reaching political objectives. Based on what is known about the adoption of means during goal pursuit (Kruglanski, Köpetz, et al., 2013; Orehek & Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, 2013), specific ways to reduce its use follow.

Instrumentality of terrorism to focal goals. Terrorisms' instrumentality toward pursuit of the focal political objective can be undermined in several ways. For example, demonstrating that attacks do not attract attention or elicit an emotional response in the populace undermines the major assumption underlying the justification for its effectiveness. The policy considerations just outlined make this point. Second, demonstrating that terrorism does not lead to concessions, instability, or a large state response (the three terrorism strategies outlined earlier) would deem it less instrumental. Taking the stance that the United States does not negotiate with terrorists was presumably aimed at addressing the first of these. Also, oftentimes, a large state response aims at addressing the instability threat. However, because of the Jujitsu politics strategy, it may not undermine the instrumentality of attacks, and may instead be precisely what terrorists want to accomplish. The individual-level significance quest can also be targeted in this manner. Reducing terrorism as an instrumental means toward attaining a sense of significance, because it garners attention, allows one to achieve the status of martyr, or to be labeled a "mastermind," would undermine its instrumentality for reaching personal goals.

Inconsistency between terrorism and alternative goals. Highlighting the inconsistency between terrorism and other important goals reduces the overall ability to justify the use of terrorism. For example, some Islamic clerics, who preached that aggressing against unarmed civilians goes against the teachings of Islam, substantially decreased the endorsement of terrorism by Muslims who were imprisoned for terroristic acts in Egypt and Algeria (Ashour, 2008; Kruglanski, Gelfand, & Gunaratna, 2012).

Availability of alternative means to focal goals. An alternative means of reaching political ends must be available. Increasing the perceived instrumentality of negotiation and other non-violent means is just as important as reducing the perception of terrorism as instrumental. Again, this should also function at the individual level. Bringing alternative means to the attention of committed terrorists and presenting other ways for attaining personal significance decreased support for violence among incarcerated members of the Tamil Tigers. Enrolling detainees in a vocational education program (i.e., an alternative path toward a sense of significance and perhaps reminding participants of alternative goals) was associated with decreased support for terrorism (Kruglanski, Bélanger, et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, no simple solution can end violence in general or terrorism in particular. A motivational account of terrorism suggests specific policy considerations, but does not identify which course of action most reduces violence. The complexity of intergroup conflict means that multiple actors, each with multiple goals, interact dynamically. Appreciating the psychological nature of the attacks and how means serve goals suggests particular aspects of terrorism policymakers should consider, but it does not tell us exactly what long-term outcome will result from particular decisions.

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