

Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective

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The present article outlines the role of personal, social, and cultural identity in religiously and ethnically motivated terrorism. It is proposed that terrorism represents the confluence of a cultural identity strongly based in collectivism and in fundamentalist adherence to religious or cultural principles, a social identity based in sharp contrasts between one's own group and groups perceived as threats, and a foreclosed and authoritarian sense of personal identity or, less often, a diffused and aimless personal identity. Examples from religious-extremist and ethnic conflicts in which terrorism has been employed are used to illustrate the tenets advanced here. Recommendations for addressing and preventing the threat of terrorism are discussed.

Terrorism is a major social problem around the world and has gained considerably increased media attention in recent decades. Although terrorist tactics have been in use for a very long time, terrorists' increasing use of sophisticated weaponry and the consequences in terms of increased potential for mass casualties have led scholars in the social and political sciences to place high priority on understanding the "causes" of terrorism and the means by which it might be prevented.¹

The Scope of Terrorist Conflicts to Be Covered in the Present Analysis

For the purposes of this article, terrorism is defined as the deliberate targeting of civilian sites for attacks designed to result in destruction of those sites and/or the injury and death

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of noncombatant civilians. The article will limit the analysis to two types of terrorism: (a) terrorism carried out by native insurgent groups as part of a religious and/or ethnic conflict within a nation; and (b) terrorism carried out by international groups seeking to influence the outcome of such conflicts or to wage their own terror campaigns for the purpose of influencing geopolitical conditions more broadly. Thus, the article excludes from consideration state-sponsored terrorism carried out by agents of a national government and terrorist attacks that are the work of isolated individuals unaffiliated with religious and/or ethnic groups or movements.

Although the majority of the examples of terrorism cited involve the use of terrorism in the conflict between Islam and the West, the authors intend the analysis of the role of identity issues in terrorism to apply far more broadly. For example, the present analysis is intended to apply not only to terrorism used by Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups, but also to the reciprocal terrorist attacks among the Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds in Iraq; the terrorism that has been used by Palestinians against Israelis and by Israeli settlers against Palestinians; by the Chechens against the Russians; the sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, including IRA attacks in England; and terrorist activities by the Tamils against the Singhalese; by the Basque ETA separatists against the Spanish; and by various religious sects in India against members of other sects. (Nor do the authors wish to have this list be considered exhaustive.) The authors fully recognize that there are a host of unique elements within every conflict in which terrorism is employed, elements that affect the frequency with which it has been used, the targets selected, the tactics employed, and the results generated. However, the authors also believe it essential to try to identify commonalities across conflicts where they exist, because those commonalities are particularly likely to promote a broader understanding of the nature of terrorism and to carry implications for policy development.

Just as it is important to identify the breadth of the range where the authors believe their analysis applies, it is also necessary to explain their exclusion of individual and group-based terrorism that do not involve religious and ethnic issues. The authors do not see the analysis to be provided in this article to be applicable, for example, to the understanding of the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing by Timothy McVeigh and associates, the Atlanta Olympic bombing carried out by Eric Rudolph, or the attacks carried out by various abortion opponent groups, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or various eco-terrorist groups. Similarly, the authors do not see this analysis as relevant to the understanding of terrorism carried out by various antigovernment, antiwar, and/or anticapitalist groups at the time of the Vietnam War. This would include the activities of the Weather Underground, Students for a Democratic Society, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, and the Red Brigades, among other groups. The exclusion of these individuals and groups is based on the belief that the identity processes taking place during development for the participants in such activities are considerably different from those in which normative religious and ethnic group affiliations provide the basis for a willingness to engage in terrorist behaviors.

The goal of this article is to explore the role of identity in religious- and ethnicity-based terrorism and terrorist movements. Although terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon, and although no one theoretical perspective can provide an all-encompassing "explanation" of terrorism,² it is important to advance theories that can explain *some* aspects or forms of terrorism. The authors' identity theory perspective is based in empirical research to the extent that such research is available in the literature. However, like much of the literature on terrorism, it is conceptually grounded, because the database of existing empirical evidence is limited.³ While remaining cognizant that each of the conflicts cited has its

own unique elements, the objectives here are threefold. First, to identify those elements of commonality across diverse religious and/or ethnic conflicts and to use those elements in building an integrative theory. This theory will focus on the multiple roles that identity plays in generating community support for terrorist activities, the recruiting efforts of terrorist organizations, and the types of activities in which terrorists choose to engage. Second, to generate specific hypotheses that can serve to guide future empirical research endeavors. Third, to use the theory developed to advance specific recommendations for countering the efforts of terrorist organizations.

Problems Identified With Efforts to Understand Terrorism

This article will heed the advice of Brannan, Esler, and Strindberg,⁴ who argue that Westerners studying terrorism have made a number of critical errors that have limited the ability to understand the roots and underpinnings of terrorism. One such error has been a tendency for Western politicians and writers to adopt an antagonistic and condescending view of terrorists—one that precludes a full, perceptive understanding of their motives and goals. To deal effectively with the problem of terrorism, it is essential to attempt to understand the terrorists' actions from their perspective. Only in that way can one design responses that address the roots of terrorism rather than responding to its expression in specific, often dramatic, acts of violence.

A second error is to consider terrorism a product of psychopathology on the part of individuals who have failed to complete fundamental developmental tasks or to fulfill basic ego needs.⁵ Unlike individuals who commit suicide, or carry out murder-suicides, or school or workplace shootings, the perpetrators of terrorist acts, including suicidal terrorist acts, do not display signs of depression, psychoticism, or sociopathy.⁶ Rather, as Lester and colleagues⁷ point out, terrorists involved in suicidal attacks often display a heightened sense of purpose, group allegiance, and task focus. Similarly, although terrorism may occur in the context of widespread group poverty, terrorism is likely not an outgrowth of personal poverty.⁸

A third error is to class terrorists with those engaged in criminal or antisocial behavior. Terrorists do not see themselves in that manner.⁹ Rather, they believe their actions are legitimate and sanctioned by religious authorities or community leaders. An important distinction between terrorists and criminals is that terrorists often attribute their actions to "selfless goals."¹⁰ That is, terrorists often engage in violence as a way of promoting the agenda or goals of the group to which they belong.¹¹

Still another error, which is of special relevance to the current article, is maintaining that individuals engaged in terrorism do so because they are "searching" for an identity. On the contrary, they engage in it as an *expression* of the identity they have already developed or have been assigned.¹² Nearly all of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Russia, Israel, the United States, and Iraq, for example, were very clear regarding why they were engaging in terrorist behavior.

The Need for an Analysis of the Role of Identity in Terrorism

A review of the burgeoning social science literature on terrorism and conflict suggests that identity plays a central role in this literature.¹³ For example, according to Huntington's¹⁴ popular and influential book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, identity is referenced on 39% (119 of 302) of the pages of primary text. Despite the explicitly stated importance of identity in these analyses, however, identity is treated as a "black box"

within and between individuals, groups, and cultures, with little explanation about what it is or how it operates. The present analysis is designed to address this gap by opening the “black box” and examining the identity dynamics that may lead to terrorism.

Various individuals have suggested that cultural,¹⁵ social,¹⁶ and personal¹⁷ identity processes underlie terrorism. However, the present article adopts the position not only that *all three* of these identity dimensions are associated with terrorism, but also that it is the interaction among specific cultural, social, and personal identity configurations that plays the greatest role in determining the likelihood that one will engage in terrorism. Accordingly, one contribution here will be to outline ways in which cultural, social, and personal identity elements interact to increase the likelihood of participation in terrorism. The authors will use various examples from recent or ongoing terrorist conflicts to illustrate their points. In each case, examples were selected so as to be illustrative and representative of the phenomenon being discussed, but there may be other examples that could serve equally well.

The Roles of Cultural, Social, and Personal Identity in Terrorism

The term “identity” refers to a complex theoretical construct involving elements originating at three levels: (a) cultural identity, (b) social identity, and (c) personal identity. *Cultural identity* represents the specific cultural values a person incorporates throughout life as guiding principles for behavior, such as collectivism, absolutism in belief, and familism.¹⁸ Such values are internalized perspectives derived from multiple sources including involvement with national, ethnic, religious, cultural, and educational communities, exposure through various media, as well as participation in personal social networks.¹⁹ *Social identity* represents the self-ascribed significance attached to the social groups to which one belongs and with which one interacts directly,²⁰ along with the feelings associated with participation in these groups’ activities.²¹ Social identity also reflects the beliefs and feelings about those groups that one perceives as standing in opposition to the groups with which one is affiliated, that is, groups that are “not us.”²² Whereas the values comprising cultural identity are abstract and may be vague, the loyalties to those groups associated with one’s social identity are likely to be intense and specific. *Personal identity* represents both (a) one’s chosen or ascribed goals, values, and beliefs, and (b) the personal perspectives a person uses to make sense of the world.

The study of terrorism requires not only understanding the “main effects” of each level of identity, but also appreciating the “interactions” among these levels. For example, feelings of disenfranchisement from mainstream society are not uncommon among young people,²³ but in few cases does this prompt a person to become a suicide bomber. However, such feelings of disenfranchisement, when coupled with fervent adherence to traditional, dichotomous “us versus them” religious principles justifying violence against those perceived to threaten one’s religious or cultural group,²⁴ a strong prioritization of the group over the individual,²⁵ and a belief that one’s group is morally superior to the group being attacked,²⁶ may combine to make terrorism considerably more likely. The interactions among these various identity levels are clearly complex, and a theoretical analysis capable of untangling this complexity must be ambitious, multidimensional, and integrative.

Cultural Identity

One of the first prerequisites for terrorism is collectivism, that is, prioritizing the group over the individual.²⁷ Clearly, people who value themselves more than the cultural and

social groups to which they belong are unlikely to sacrifice themselves to advance the agendas of such groups. It is therefore no coincidence that the large majority of suicide attackers are strongly collectivist themselves or are based in (or have roots in) countries or regions characterized as strongly collectivist. In societies characterized by a predominance of collectivism over individualism, social identity takes precedence over personal identity.²⁸ One would expect, therefore, that individuals in these societies would seek to protect and advance the goals of the groups to which they belong to a greater extent than they would seek to advance and protect their own personal goals. However, terrorism takes this to its extreme; Schwartz²⁹ has characterized terrorism as a “maximally collectivist” position, where the interests of the terrorist “becomes fused with [those of] the group [s/]he represents.” This view has also been advanced by Post.³⁰

Terrorism requires having divided people into two categories: those whose interests are to be advanced through terrorist activities (“us”) and those against whom the terrorist activities are to be directed (“them”). This cognitive dichotomization may be based on religious, ethnic, racial, or other cultural criteria. It extends beyond mere descriptive differentiation to include an intense evaluative component as well. Those associated with “us” are viewed as moral, right, good, and strong. Those associated with “them” are seen as immoral, wrong, bad, and weak. The greater the extent to which cultural influences promote dichotomous cognitive structures, the less willing and able members of the culture may be to view the world from the perspective of the “other.” This is a process that Erikson³¹ referred to as “pseudospeciation.”

One of the more powerful cultural forces contributing to “us versus them” thinking is the presence of absolutist religious belief systems. Religions are absolutist in nature when they advance the view that they have precise and complete understanding of truth, and that therefore all other religions are in error. Such absolutism promotes dichotomous “us versus them” thinking in which the world is divided into believers and nonbelievers. Such thinking, in turn, provides an intellectual rationale for efforts to convert, subjugate, or eliminate those identified as nonbelievers. Religious concepts contrasting believers and unbelievers, such as “infidels,” “sinners,” and “heretics,” can provide justification for attacking outgroup members. Today, religious grievances of this type most often, but not exclusively, involve Islam,³² although in earlier times similar conflicts have occurred involving most other major religions.

There is evidence that religiosity is associated with participation in terrorist acts.³³ Within certain religious faiths, the more rigid and radical one’s religious beliefs are, the greater the possibility that one will participate in terrorist attacks.³⁴ Further, certain sects of Islam hold that self-sacrifice, often in the form of suicide attacks, will win God’s favor and redemption from one’s sins.³⁵ There appear to be, then, at least three ways in which religion at the level of cultural identity may lead to participation in terrorist attacks—religious absolutes promoting dichotomous “us versus them” thinking, intense religiosity, and belief in the promise of redemption or in having been commanded to protect the faith. These factors may interact with personal and social identity, as discussed later.

“Us versus them” thinking is also evident in ethnicity-based conflicts. In these types of conflicts, as in religiously based terrorism, the cleavage between groups is based on differing cultural perspectives. Here, race and perceived nationality (e.g., Basque versus Spanish, Irish versus English, Tamil versus Singhalese) also play important roles. Ethnic grievances can involve any group that believes that its territory or rights have been wrongly usurped. As with religion, elements of culture associated with ethnicity provide a system of values by which to live and to relate to others within and outside of the group. Those cultural values may promote, tolerate, or oppose the use of terrorist tactics in efforts to

establish independence, or at least autonomy, from the groups perceived as the sources of threat or persecution. When a group's cultural values include strongly collectivist principles, "us versus them" thinking, perceived threats to the group's existence, and derogation and dehumanization of outgroup members, the conditions for terrorist activity are present.

Still another cultural element of cultural identity that can serve to promote terrorist activities is familism. Within many cultural groups, there is a hierarchy of loyalties running, in inverse order, from the nation-state, to the tribe, to the clan, and to the extended family. Such cultural arrangements typically place obligations on individuals for upholding family honor and avenging wrongs done to the family. When familial and cultural obligations result in violence directed against members of one's own cultural community, they can be interpreted as normative, even by those toward whom the aggression is directed. When directed against members of other cultural groups, comparable forms of aggressive action may meet the criteria for terrorism.³⁶

Although a cultural identity embodying collectivist values, religious absolutism, dichotomous "us versus them" thinking, and an emphasis on familial obligations is conducive to the emergence of terrorism as a tactic in the response to a grievance, identity at this level is not sufficient for explaining terrorism. There are numerous "collectivist" societies in which terrorism is not a response to conflict. "Us versus them" thinking, whether based on religious or ethnic differences, may as readily result in efforts to remain separate from the "other" as it may in conflict between groups. And it is also true that terrorism has been engaged in (albeit less frequently) by individuals raised in Western nations characterized primarily by individualistic values.

Social Identity

Social identity theory³⁷ holds a number of important implications for the study of terrorism. The elements of social identity, such as identification with members of one's own group and derogation of groups that stand in opposition to one's own group, are learned through a variety of direct interpersonal interactions. These social identity dynamics form an important topic of conversation within the family and peer group, they are inculcated through school curricula (both in textbooks and the statements of teachers),³⁸ and they may be incorporated into religious prayers, sermons, and religiously sponsored activities. In addition, "us versus them" distinctions may occupy a central place in the media, including newspapers, radio, TV, cinema, art, and music. Whereas dichotomous "us versus them" thinking functions at the level of cultural identity, it is at the level of social identity that such dichotomization will directly impact the daily living of individuals in societies where there are few opportunities for direct interactions with members of the outgroup. Social identity theory holds that one's own group—the "ingroup"—may often be threatened when "outgroups"—groups regarded as standing in opposition to the ingroup—are perceived to be encroaching on the ingroup's physical or psychological territory.³⁹ Indeed, terrorism is most likely to occur in groups and societies that draw sharp distinctions between the ingroup and the outgroup(s) and where outgroup members are dehumanized (e.g., labeled as "infidels" and lumped into a single "enemy" group⁴⁰). Dehumanization is achieved when outgroup values are contrasted sharply with those of the ingroup and judged to be inferior.⁴¹ Such groups or societies may then encourage members or citizens to displace their anger onto the outgroup.⁴² For example, some oppressive Middle Eastern and South Asian regimes seeking to discourage popular revolts, and thus maintain their grip on power, blame Western societies and their indiscretions for the people's suffering. Even in countries with which Western countries maintain political alliances, there may be social undercurrents

that incite public anger against the West. In some cases, these groups may blame Western countries for supporting the regimes that purportedly cause the people's suffering—despite the fact that the governments that these groups seek to establish would likely restrict public freedoms even further.⁴³

Threat is a central element in the understanding of relationships between groups. This threat need not be to the physical safety of a group or of its members; in fact, cultural threats may be at least as salient as—if not more than—physical threats.⁴⁴ The issue then becomes the nature of the threat and how it is construed and interpreted. It is therefore important to appreciate the potential (or actual) terrorist's view of the world⁴⁵ and to examine the meanings that she or he assigns to a given situation.⁴⁶ In the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, for example, there are several types of threats—physical, political, and ideological (see Abdel-Khalek⁴⁷ and Orbach,⁴⁸ respectively, for Muslim and Israeli perspectives on this conflict). However, in the conflict between fundamentalist Islam and the West, the threats are largely ideological and identity-based.⁴⁹ For example, fundamentalist Islamic groups often regard the pervasive spread of Western culture as a threat to their way of life.⁵⁰ Images of scantily clad women, expletive-filled music, and blatant disregard for authority are common in many Western countries but are forbidden in Islam and other non-Western contexts. Groups whose self-described mission is to protect Islam, then, claim to be morally obligated to destroy the Western influences that threaten the sanctity of their faith.

When members of a group, typically a minority group, have been subject to discrimination at the hands of a larger or more powerful group, in addition to the anger associated with the grievance, members of the smaller or lower-status group may be likely to develop feelings of moral superiority to their oppressors. Such feelings reinforce the derogation and dehumanization directed at outgroup members. Self-serving attributions of moral superiority in turn serve to justify the adoption of whatever tactics are seen as necessary for removing the threat or redressing the grievance.

Adding to the tensions between groups is the fact that members of a persecuted group are likely to be alienated from those societal institutions seen as controlled by the larger and/or more powerful group. Such alienation may be actively imposed by the larger and/or more powerful group in the form of exclusionary practices, but may exist even in the absence of such practices. Because members of the minority group lack control and direction of cultural institutions, there is a natural tendency to distrust the motives of outgroup representatives of those institutions. The result is that potential avenues for redressing grievances and reducing tensions between groups go unutilized. In the absence of dialogic opportunities to reduce threats and redress grievances, aggressive alternatives, including terrorism, may become perceived as the only alternatives available.⁵¹

In the absence of participation in the institutions of the larger society, members of minority groups will often create parallel institutions exclusively serving the members of the minority group.⁵² Although separation in itself does not necessarily promote conflict between groups, the existence of separate institutions for disenfranchised individuals may provide a vehicle for those seeking to promote such conflict to gain the attention of potential recruits for terrorist enterprises.⁵³ The formation of social support networks for oppositional activities, including terrorism, can thus be facilitated within the context of such institutions even when the institutions themselves do not advocate such action. Because outgroup members have difficulty gaining entry into these ingroup institutions, they may well be unaware as to whether or not these institutions are being used to promote conflict. The absence of clarity in this regard can lead the outgroup to take repressive actions against ingroup institutions, thus intensifying the grievance and exacerbating the intensity of conflict between groups.⁵⁴

Muslim youth living in the West are a particularly important case to examine, as they may represent both religious and ethnic conflicts. In many Western European nations, for example, much of the population growth is due to Muslim immigration and childbearing.⁵⁵ This trend is resulting in large immigrant communities that differ, both religiously and ethnically, from the mainstream populations of these countries. In some cases, terrorist responses can emerge from these communities—such as the attacks on the London Underground, the Glasgow Airport, and the Spanish rail system.

Personal Identity

Personal identity refers to individuals' self-definition, particularly with respect to those goals, values, and beliefs that they hold in such domains of concern as vocation, religion, politics, family roles, gender roles, ethnicity, and personal interests.⁵⁶ There is a large body of theoretical and empirical literature on the processes involved in establishing a personal sense of identity. The identity status paradigm developed by Marcia⁵⁷ conceptualized identity formation in terms the dimensions of exploration (the active consideration of alternative identity possibilities) and commitment (the forming of strong, unwavering investment in particular identity elements). Within this paradigm, two potential outcomes have particular relevance for the emergence of a terrorist identity: (a) authoritarian foreclosure and (b) aimless diffusion.

Foreclosure represents the adopting of commitments without considering other alternatives, whereas diffusion represents being uncommitted and engaging in little or no systematic exploration (see Marcia et al.⁵⁸ for a collection of reviews of relevant research literature). The foreclosed and diffused statuses share the element that group ideals are adopted and internalized, either actively or by default, without questioning and without active consideration of alternative possibilities.⁵⁹ For example, individuals classified as foreclosed or diffused have been found to be significantly less religiously mature, and to actively understand their faith to a lesser extent, compared to those who have undergone a period of active exploration and developed a set of identity commitments.⁶⁰ Individuals with a less open-minded approach to identity issues may be more likely to interpret their faith literally than symbolically.⁶¹ There is evidence that authoritarian individuals—especially those who perceive themselves as “outside the mainstream”—may be threats to society because they have the ability, the single-minded and unbothered vision, and the desire to attract followers and form groups based on destructive principles.⁶²

The foreclosure process involves the development of personal identity commitments through identification with significant others and typically results in the adoption of normative standards and expectations held within the community.⁶³ In many instances, there is no perceived choice involved in the establishment of such commitments and, thus, they can be thought of as ascribed, even when other possibilities are potentially available. Commonly, foreclosed commitments are held in a rigid, dogmatic fashion that then becomes the basis for dichotomized, “us versus them” thinking.⁶⁴ Although the concept of identity foreclosure has not been explicitly utilized in reference to terrorism, work by a number of prominent terrorism scholars has linked a strongly authoritarian and foreclosure-like identity structure with terrorism.⁶⁵ In the theoretical perspectives and case studies reported by these authors, with respect to terrorism, authoritarian-foreclosures may be likely to place those aspects of religion and/or ethnicity associated with a grievance as most salient to their sense of self. To be “a terrorist” becomes the central and organizing element in their self-definition and in the way in which they present themselves to others (although the term they would apply to themselves would more likely be “freedom fighter,” “defender of the faith,” or something

similar). The potential of authoritarian-foreclosed individuals to engage in (or even lead) terrorist movements may be especially dangerous in parts of the world where hatred of out-groups is “bred to the bone” beginning in early childhood, and where independent personal identity exploration is not encouraged.⁶⁶

The second identity status relevant to the development of a terrorist, identity diffusion, is characterized by the absence of personally meaningful identity commitments and by confusion about how such commitments might be formed. The task of identity formation may be experienced as overwhelming. There is typically an aimless quality to functioning within the community that is then contrasted with the purposefulness perceived in other people. In an effort to obtain some sense of purpose, aimless-diffuse individuals may attach themselves intensely to some group, expressing a willingness to unquestioningly do whatever the leaders of the group ask them to do.⁶⁷

Aimless-diffused individuals are particularly vulnerable to the allures of terrorism because terrorist ideologies are espoused with certainty, purpose, and commitment that can provide a sense of direction to a previously unguided life. Aimless, diffused individuals who have turned to terrorism include Westerners who have felt disenfranchised from their societies of origin. As discussed in Schwartz,⁶⁸ the cases of Richard Reid, the British “shoe bomber”; José Padilla, the Puerto Rican American who was arrested for plotting a “dirty bomb” attack; John Walker Lindh, the “American Taliban”; and Adam Gadahn, the American member of Al Qaeda who has been charged with treason by the U.S. government, exemplify the mechanisms by which aimless-diffused people become vulnerable to terrorism. Feeling unable to make identity decisions, these individuals sought out groups that could “give” them an identity. Such individuals are particularly vulnerable to manipulation, being willing to go to their deaths for ideas that they have appropriated from others, rather than ideas that they have chosen through independent and thoughtful reflection.

Although the leadership of terrorist organizations may use aimless-diffuse adherents for various purposes, including suicide bombings, they are seldom accorded full membership in the group because it is recognized that their motivation has less to do with the cause itself than with compensating for an internal identity deficit. Overall, the aimless-diffuse identity process plays a far smaller role in terrorist activity than does the authoritarian-foreclosure process.⁶⁹

Nonetheless, the attraction to terrorism among aimless-diffuse Westerners may be, at least in part, a result of difficulties in coping with the challenges of late-modern Western cultural contexts. Although late-modern societies offer flexibility and greater breadth of identity opportunities, they also pose increasingly difficult identity challenges for youth,⁷⁰ especially those with limited personal and material resources.⁷¹ Thus, there may be an increasing attraction to rigid Islamic ideologies among aimless, diffuse Western youth in search of a sense of personal identity.

Interactions among Personal, Social, and Cultural Identity

As stated earlier, it is contended here that the likelihood that a given individual will engage in terrorism is influenced by the interactions of a number of factors operating at the three levels of identity functioning. The elements predictive of terrorism include:

At the cultural identity level:

1. Acceptance of the cultural value of collectivism, in which the person places the interests of the group above personal interests;

2. Dichotomous (“us-versus-them”) thinking, particularly with respect to matters pertaining to religion, morality, and culturally appropriate behaviors;
3. Religious absolutism, particularly when there is a belief that one’s religion sanctions any means deemed necessary to protect and advance the interests of the faith;
4. Adherence to familism, including values associated with the honor of one’s family or clan and the consequent obligation to avenge perceived wrongs done to one’s family or clan.

At the social identity level:

5. Inculcation of an ingroup identification by family, schools, religious, and civic institutions accompanied by derogation and demonization of members of the outgroup;
6. The belief that there either is an ongoing or imminent threat to the survival of the ingroup or to the political rights of its members, or a history of persecution at the hands of the outgroup;
7. A belief in the moral or cultural superiority of the ingroup despite ongoing persecution, justifying whatever efforts are taken to redress the perceived wrong;
8. Alienation from established social institutions perceived to be controlled by members of the outgroup—creating missed opportunities for intergroup dialog and resulting in exacerbated tensions;
9. The presence in the community of ingroup institutions conducive to the creation of social support networks advocating, supporting, instigating, and carrying out terrorist activities.

At the personal identity level:

10. A personal identity that is either authoritarian and foreclosed or, less frequently, aimless and diffuse;
11. The building of a personal sense of identity centered on an ingroup social identity such that redressing the group’s grievances becomes more important than other aspects of identity including work or career, family responsibilities, or personal interests.

Of these elements, only the perception of a threat to the ingroup (6) appears to be a necessary condition without which terrorism will not occur. It can be argued that the combination of a perceived threat and a belief in religious sanctioning of any means necessary to protect the interests of the faith (3) approaches the status of a sufficient condition for terrorism, and helps to account for the overrepresentation of Islamic fundamentalists among the perpetrators of terrorist attacks. However, as will be discussed later, this combination does not account for differences among people in the types of terrorist activities enacted, and personal identity may be especially important in accounting for these differences. Beyond these two elements, the contribution of the other predictors appears to follow the “staircase to terrorism” proposed by Moghaddam,⁷² in that the greater the total number of predictors present, the greater the likelihood that terrorist activities will be enacted in some form. Space does not permit a complete treatment of all of the various ways in which these elements interact in generating terrorism, so only a few examples will be provided here to illustrate the processes involved.

The first example involves the elements of personal identity and social disenfranchisement. Authoritarian-foreclosed and aimless-diffuse identities are both relatively common

in Western societies,⁷³ where they bear no relationship to terrorism. However, when such identity processes are combined with social disenfranchisement, vulnerability to terrorism increases dramatically. In some non-Western contexts, fairly rigid and foreclosed identities are the norm.⁷⁴ These identities can become oppositional quite easily because of a grievance. For example, many members of the Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad reported having joined these groups because they believed that their advancement in conventional life paths had been blocked by the Israelis.⁷⁵ Pedhazur, Perliger, and Weinberg⁷⁶ note the typical Palestinian suicide terrorist was a “young, vulnerable person with strong religious affiliations . . . [that] had been skillfully manipulated to persuade him into taking part in the terrorist operation.” Similarly, Al Qaeda is known for recruiting young men who were “black sheep,” who had been ostracized by their families and friends, or whose life paths had been blocked by other societal forces.⁷⁷ In this way, an aimless-diffuse or authoritarian-foreclosed identity is accompanied by frustration and anger toward the establishment. The terrorist group offers an opportunity to direct that anger toward what is framed as a common enemy—evil and godless Zionists and Westerners.⁷⁸

This is consistent with what Erikson⁷⁹ wrote 40 years ago about the attraction to terrorism in young people who perceived their personal and group identities as being threatened:

Where historical and technological development, however, severely encroach upon deeply rooted or strongly emerging identities (i.e., agrarian, feudal, patrician) on a large scale, youth feel endangered, individually and collectively, whereupon it becomes ready to support doctrines offering a total immersion in a synthetic identity (extreme nationalism, racism, or class consciousness) and a collective condemnation of a totally stereotyped enemy of the new identity. The fear of loss of identity which fosters such indoctrination contributes significantly to that mixture of righteousness and criminality which, under totalitarian conditions, becomes available for organized terror and for the establishment of major industries of extermination.

A second example of the interaction of the predictors of terrorism involves religiosity and an “us-versus-them” worldview. In most respects, religiosity has been shown to be associated with positive well-being and contributions to society.⁸⁰ However, when coupled with sharp distinctions between “us” and “them,”⁸¹ religiosity breeds scorn toward others who do not share one’s specific beliefs. Social identity theory holds that nearly all groups hold the implicit or explicit belief that they are somehow unique or superior to others.⁸² However, such a belief, when combined with the thought that God specially favors one’s religious group, often leads to prejudice⁸³ and to violence against nonbelievers.⁸⁴

A third example of interactions producing increased probabilities of terrorism involves collectivism paired with perceived persecution by an outgroup. Whereas strongly collectivist values are widely expressed in many non-Western contexts, in most instances they are not associated with belligerence, violence, or terrorism. However, where there is a perceived grievance involving prejudice and persecution in a strongly collectivist society, the probability of terrorist activities is considerably greater than when such grievances exist in primarily individualistic societies. In some instances where a persecutory grievance and a collectivist orientation are both present, terrorism is not practiced because of the absence of an important third contributor. For example, the Tibetan grievance with China has not resulted in terrorism in part because the religion practiced does not foster “us-versus-them”

attitudes. In contrast, in the Chechen grievance with Russia, terrorism has been particularly violent because perceived persecution, collectivism, and religiously promoted “us-versus-them” thinking are all present.

Using Identity Theory to Explain Choices in Types of Terrorist Activities

It is essential to recognize that all forms of terrorist activity are not equivalent and that different types of terrorist activities involve differing psychological motivations and dynamics.⁸⁵ The authors propose here a four-fold typology for differentiating terrorist activities (see Victoroff⁸⁶ for another example of such a typology): (a) providing financial, material, attitudinal, and social support for, but not participating in, terrorist activities; (b) engaging in terrorist activities that place the actor at risk of retaliation, imprisonment, or death, but that do not involve suicidal acts; (c) engaging in suicidal terrorist activities; and (d) adopting a leadership level in terrorist activities that places the actor at risk of imprisonment or death and that involves sending others to their deaths. Although there is some potential for an individual to move among these types of activities, it is hypothesized that changes in a variety of contextual factors impacting on identity are necessary for such movement to occur.

Providing Financial, Material, Attitudinal, and Social Support for Terrorist Activities

Individuals who provide various forms of support for terrorist activities, but who do not themselves actively engage in attacks, generate a social milieu that condones and promotes terrorism. Without local, and sometimes international, support, those engaged in terrorist attacks would find it substantially more difficult, if not impossible, to conduct their activities.⁸⁷ There is a double-sided question to be addressed: Why do these individuals support terrorism, and why do they not participate in the terrorist attacks themselves?

At the level of cultural identity, terrorist supporters are likely to share a common value system with the perpetrators of terrorist acts, and most importantly, they share a common perception of the grievance considered to justify the terrorism. At the level of social identity, sympathizers and supporters of terrorism very likely share a set of common group affiliations, including religious, educational, and civic. Although the anger felt in response to the grievance may not be experienced as intensely as by those carrying out terrorist acts, it is sufficient for the person to identify with those engaged in terrorist acts and perhaps to wish to be a part of the action. For sympathizers living under more comfortable conditions than their religious or ethnic compatriots, such as those living abroad and away from the geographical center associated with the grievance, the intensity of group exposure is attenuated and there is a wider array of social groups to which they are exposed, perhaps creating some cross-pressures. The person may experience guilt over this greater degree of comfort. Providing financial and moral support for terrorist activities may thus function as a means for assuaging that guilt.

The most powerful forces differentiating sympathizers from perpetrators of terrorist violence, however, may operate at the level of personal identity. For the person actively engaged in terrorist activities, the grievance and the role of fighter are the central elements in their personal identity. In contrast, for the supporters, their beliefs about the grievance are balanced by other identity commitments such as investment in a career or overriding responsibilities to the family. These may be sufficient to restrain what impulses toward action may be present. It may also be the case that sympathizers lack the physical courage necessary to put themselves at risk of capture, injury, or possible death, or they may have moral qualms about causing injury to others.

Engaging in Non-Suicidal Terrorist Acts

Individuals who perpetrate terrorist acts that could result in the death or injury to others, for example, by detonating car bombs or by distributing and releasing chemical or biological agents, may do so in ways that seek to avoid detection and in ways that do not put their own lives directly at risk. Causing injury or death is viewed as an acceptable means toward redressing the grievance giving rise to the conflict and promoting the overall outcome being sought. On the level of cultural identity, individuals engaged in such acts express primarily collectivist values that put the interests and welfare of their group above their own, and they endorse dehumanization of the group perceived as responsible for the grievance.⁸⁸

Although the acts involved are not intended to be suicidal, there is a recognition that they are not without significant risks to the perpetrator. There is the possibility of apprehension, either before, during, or after the attack, or that something will go wrong in such a way that could cause personal injury or death. The terrorist's dedication to the cause, on a cultural level, is seen as worth the risks involved.

As will be addressed later in greater detail, the cultural identity of those involved in covert and repeated terrorist attacks is similar in most respects to that of terrorists engaged in suicidal attacks, with the major exception that there is no desire to sacrifice one's own life on behalf of the cause. Nor does it seem likely that this critical difference arises at the level of social identity, given that terrorists engaged in both types of activities are likely to have had similar developmental experiences with respect to schooling and community groups. It appears likely, therefore, that the decision to engage in non-suicidal versus suicidal terrorist attacks is based on personal identity elements. If, as the authors have contended, the identity of "terrorist" is central for participants engaged in such activities,⁸⁹ for individuals involved in conflicts in which both suicidal and non-suicidal tactics are used, there must be some countervailing identity element(s) that hold some individuals back from activities certain to result in death. Given that these conflicts mostly involve efforts on behalf of primarily collectivist societies, the familism in such societies may provide the countervailing force. When individuals feel emotional or financial responsibility to their families of origin as a salient part of their personal identity, this may place a limit on the extent of their involvement in activities on behalf of a terrorist group. The single event most likely to induce a change in the type of involvement is the death of family members at the hands of those responsible for the grievance.⁹⁰ Not only do such deaths cause the person to lose the role of parent, child, sibling, and so on, but in societies in which honor is a primary cultural value, an obligation is then placed on other family members to avenge the wrong that has been experienced. It is for this reason that large body counts in an insurgent struggle can actually lead to an increase in the number of individuals fighting for the insurgency.

Engaging in Suicidal Terrorist Attacks

Suicidal terrorist attacks appear to require a special set of cultural conditions. Not only must there be primarily collectivist values that place the interests of the group above those of the individual, combined with the derogation and dehumanization of those perceived as responsible for the grievance, but there must also be a cultural value placed on martyrdom for the sake of the cause. The society or group to which the person belongs must also have an agenda that is furthered by the fear that suicide attacks create in members of the group or country being attacked.⁹¹ The fact that suicidal terrorist attacks have occurred with by far the greatest frequency on behalf of Islamic causes appears to be a function of the value placed on the defense of the faith.⁹² Further, the social groups to which the prospective

bombers belong, along with the rewards offered to the families of suicide bombers by some Islamic governments, serve to reinforce suicidal terrorist attacks as an honorable use to which to put one's life.⁹³

Leadership of Terrorist Movements

The most complex set of motivations to analyze are those contributing to emergence as a leader of a terrorist movement. Here the authors are not only referring to the top echelon of leaders within a movement, but also to those making the day-to-day tactical decisions about where and when to launch a terrorist attack. The cultural and social identity influences on emerging leaders are likely very much the same as those engaging in terrorist activities at other levels, but with an added recognition that leaders play an active role in shaping the cultural and social identity messages. What distinguishes activity at this level from the activities previously discussed is the autonomous decision making displayed. Terrorist leaders may therefore be viewed as "identity entrepreneurs."⁹⁴ Whereas individuals at other levels are typically content to allow those above them in an organizational hierarchy to make the critical decisions, those who would take a leadership role seek out the opportunities to make such decisions. They display a level of initiative that, in other circumstances, would be considered admirable. In highly collectivist, authoritarian societies, displays of individual initiative are frowned on outside of those already in the circles of power,⁹⁵ and will be resisted if perceived as posing a threat to those currently in charge. Being a leader of a terrorist movement allows one to express autonomy in ways that would not otherwise be tolerated.

It has been noted that leaders within terrorist organizations often come from middle-class or wealthy backgrounds.⁹⁶ This is consistent with the proposition that such economic status typically confers the belief that personal action can make a difference in bringing about a change in condition, whereas poverty is more likely to promote pessimism and passivity. Difficulty in finding opportunities for initiative within established social structures in hierarchical societies may cause those seeking such opportunities to create or join insurgent groups.⁹⁷ This may be especially true in cases where the person has been ostracized or expelled from a mainstream society (such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri⁹⁸). For those joining an established group, the absence of individual initiative on the part of most participants means a lack of competition for leadership roles and, consequently, a rapid rise through the ranks.

It appears, then, that the primary differences between terrorist leaders and other members of their organizations involve personality rather than identity. However, the willingness to engage in autonomous decision making suggests that terrorists at this level are more likely to have been reflective when making identity-related decisions, including the decision to create or join a terrorist organization. It is probably worth noting that a number of the leaders of terrorist groups had received training as engineers, including Osama bin Laden, Ramzi Yousef, and Mohammed Atta, while Ayman al-Zawahiri was once a licensed physician. This implies that each had options for the direction of their personal lives and chose the path that involved the leadership within terrorist organizations. The probability that a similar proportion of average participants within their organizations had similar backgrounds is relatively low.

Reducing the Threat of Terrorism

At present, most efforts to combat terrorism have focused on military solutions, specifically a war on terrorism. This approach can yield some successes when terrorists have state

sponsorship, as with initial NATO efforts in Afghanistan, or are geographically concentrated, as with Israeli attacks against Hezbollah in Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and southern Lebanon. However, subsequent events in both instances serve to indicate the limits of a military approach even when terrorists are geographically concentrated. In cases where it is difficult to distinguish active terrorists from the general population, many of whom may support the aims and tactics of the terrorists, military countermeasures have not proven particularly effective, as events in Palestine, Sri Lanka, and Iraq demonstrate.⁹⁹ The presence of large numbers of military forces may suppress insurgent activity in affected areas during their presence, but are also likely to result in a shift of terrorism to areas of lesser troop concentrations. The increase in Taliban activity in Afghanistan, aided by foreign fighters, following the “surge” of U.S. combat troops in Iraq, may serve as an example of such a shift. In addition, prolonged territorial occupations are also economically draining to the nations sponsoring such occupations.

As Post¹⁰⁰ outlines, the identities of most terrorists center almost exclusively on terrorism, so to give up terrorism “would be to lose their very reason for being.” External military threats to terrorist organizations are likely to increase group solidarity and provide added fuel to the perceived grievance, perhaps providing the motivating rationale for even more terrorist activities.¹⁰¹ The collateral deaths of noncombatants, particularly children, in strikes against terrorists not only intensify the grievance among the terrorists, but undermine the morale of soldiers fighting terrorism and, for many would-be supporters of counterterrorism measures, the moral justification for a military response.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss particular circumstances under which a military response is, and is not, likely to be productive. There are, however, alternatives to military actions that have the potential to prevent or to reduce the extent of terrorist activities. If identity is indeed central to the nature of terrorism, it follows that techniques for reducing the threat of terrorism should be identity-related, including efforts to reduce terrorism-promoting interactions among identity elements. Because terrorism involves aspects of identity at the cultural, social, and personal levels, the possibility exists for interventions to be delivered at all three levels as well. These interventions can be framed in terms of (a) preventing the identity configurations that give rise to terrorism and (b) reducing the attractiveness of terrorist ideologies.

Preventing Identity Configurations Giving Rise to Terrorism

Changing aspects of cultural identity is particularly difficult because they are promoted by a wide array of social entities within any culture, including family, schools, religious institutions, peer groups, civic organizations, and media, and because they are typically inculcated beginning early in a person’s life. Nonetheless, there are several means of entry into changing elements at this level. Most important is to address the underlying grievance that constitutes both the threat to the society and the cause for which the terrorist acts are perpetrated, *but only when the grievance can be defended as legitimate in the eyes of a reasonably neutral third party*. Some may argue that addressing any grievance with which terrorism has become associated amounts to negotiating with terrorists and thus reinforces the tactic. The present authors adopt the contrary view that failing to address a legitimate grievance because some involved in the cause have resorted to violence is to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to injustice and thus to perpetuate it.¹⁰² Any work carried out by international, governmental, or nongovernmental organizations directed toward resolving the grievance should be carried out with groups not directly involved in terrorist activities, although it

must be acknowledged that members of such groups may be sympathetic with terrorist tactics engaged in by others on behalf of “the cause.”

Cultural identity elements can also be changed through efforts to alter an “us versus them” worldview in which absolute lines can be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable beliefs and behaviors.¹⁰³ Given that dichotomous thinking is often introduced through educational and religious systems, efforts at reform must entail the creation of alternative systems within a society. “Us-versus-them” thinking, especially when “our” values are cast as opposed and superior to “their” values, leads people to identify strongly with their ingroup, to dehumanize the outgroup (i.e., to view the outgroup as a single entity rather than as a group of human beings), and to view the outgroup antagonistically.¹⁰⁴ As a result, solutions offered should involve increasing interactions among people from various groups in order to become acquainted with them as human beings—rather than simply as members of the “outgroup.”¹⁰⁵ Promoting increased cooperation during such interactions is also essential.

Social identity research suggests that face-to-face meetings as equals would help to “personalize” the outgroup and to bring out the humanity of the enemy.¹⁰⁶ It is considerably harder to demonize the “other” when one has had the opportunity to meet, play, and work together for a substantial length of time. Although this may be regarded as changing social identity on a retail, rather than wholesale, basis, upon returning to their home societies, the lessons learned may be shared within the community. The hope is that such person-to-person contacts contribute not only to changes in attitudes about the outgroup but also to a greater willingness to find an acceptable resolution to legitimate grievances.

It is at the level of personal identity that there is greatest likelihood of having success in creating changes that will reduce the probability that individuals will engage in terrorist activities, particularly those involving suicidal acts. With regard to aimless-diffused individuals (particularly Westerners) who adopt terrorist identities as a way of alleviating their identity confusion, an intervention directed toward helping them to choose positive life paths¹⁰⁷ or to identify goals consonant with their talents, skills, and interests¹⁰⁸ may prompt them to lead responsible lives rather than adopt destructive ideologies. In any case, it is important to identify individuals who are aimless or drifting and who appear to be developing a negative sense of identity. These individuals should become candidates for psychoeducational or therapeutic intervention.

A different set of suggestions may apply with regard to oppositional-foreclosed individuals who join terrorist organizations as a way of expressing their anger and frustration. As suggested earlier, terrorists are particularly likely to have built their personal identity around the grievance and efforts to address that grievance. Therefore, to reduce the likelihood that an individual will embrace such an identity, it is essential that countervailing identity elements be present or subsequently developed. One of the most frequently occurring types of counter-elements in societies supporting terrorism are those associated with responsibilities to one’s family and clan. By providing social and material support for kinship associations, it is possible to create competing allegiances that may be resolved in ways incompatible with terrorist involvement. Arguably, this has been one element in the success of the Sunni Awakening movement in Iraq contributing to their willingness to oppose the presence of Al Qaeda fighters in their communities.

Reducing the Attractiveness of Terrorist Ideologies

It is unlikely that either direct rational or emotional appeals criticizing terrorist ideologies will be effective in reducing the attractiveness of terrorism either for those directly involved

in terrorism or for sympathizers who associate themselves with the grievance. Rather, the central tenet in reducing the attractiveness of terrorist ideologies is to provide opportunities to envision competing and potentially more attractive ways of living than those associated with a terrorist lifestyle. The approaches to be outlined here coordinate and overlap with those already described. Whereas those techniques discussed in the previous section were designed to directly counter elements in terrorists' identity, the focus here will be on alternative ways of functioning.

Providing mainstream paths for young people, within the cultural constraints of their society, can help to alleviate the anger, frustration, and hopelessness leading many young people in the Middle East and South Asia to join terrorist groups. In primarily collectivist societies, the larger society may need to "buy into" and endorse life options proposed for young people.¹⁰⁹ People with comparatively less economic and social means may not have the resources to pursue certain careers,¹¹⁰ but there may be reasonable options for which they can be appropriately matched in light of their specific skills, talents, and interests.¹¹¹ Identifying options that resonate with each individual involves identifying that person's potentials and talents and helping her or him to formulate positive goals that draw on these potentials and talents.¹¹²

As stated earlier, poverty is not itself a cause of terrorism. However, the lack of a personally meaningful career path¹¹³ means that there is less holding a person back psychologically from becoming involved with a terrorist group. If conditions can be created under which people believe they have a stake in the future, the less likely they will be to want to take action that will jeopardize that future, even if that means that the grievance will go unresolved for a longer period of time. For people in the developing world, developing a stake in the future is most likely to occur with the emergence of a middle class. Efforts to develop a middle class should be focused on providing subsidized opportunities for talented individuals to gain training and education, either in the West or in their home countries. If training or education is carried out in Western venues, it should be with the understanding that the skills developed will be brought back to the nations of origin. The approach would include the training of teachers, nurses, engineers, and agriculturists, as well as professionals in such fields as medicine and law. Although the costs of a large-scale educational program such as the one envisioned here are substantial, they would be far less than fighting a war on terror by military means. More importantly, by providing opportunities for the development of identities incompatible with those of a terrorist, including increasing the financial capital of developing countries through trade and foreign investments,¹¹⁴ there is a better prospect of long-term success than is associated with policies designed to kill off all those whose identity-related goals are inimical to Western interests.

A related, important direction is to promote positive youth development in developing countries. It has been argued in the psychological literatures on development and intervention that one method of preventing problems is to promote positive outcomes.¹¹⁵ A similar principle may apply to preventing terrorism. For example, Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, and Lerner¹¹⁶ outline five components of positive youth development, at least four of which help to create a positive sense of identity¹¹⁷ and are relevant to preventing terrorism: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Someone who feels *competent* and *confident* is unlikely to hold the aimless-diffused or oppositional-foreclosed personal identities common among terrorist recruits; someone who feels *connected* to society is unlikely to feel the anger or hopelessness that draws young people to terrorist groups; and someone who *cares* for others—including others whom she or he does not know—may be less comparatively likely to engage in terrorist attacks. It may therefore be important to introduce "positive identity entrepreneurs"¹¹⁸ into areas where terrorism and terrorist grievances are prominent.

Although some conventional military tactics, and attempts to cut off terrorist financing, will undoubtedly be necessary to defeat terrorism,¹¹⁹ instilling positive characteristics in young people is essential to prevent the next wave of terrorist recruits. Teaching tolerance, caring, and humanity can help to preclude the development of the “authoritarian personality” that is susceptible to terrorist recruitment. Tolerance and caring are the inverse of the traits that Altemeyer¹²⁰ reported as being associated with authoritarianism. It should be recognized, however, that the group affiliations, and strengths of ingroup identifications, of the people doing the teaching will make a major difference in the effectiveness of efforts to promote tolerance. If the teachers are not credible in the eyes of the youth toward whom such programs are directed, such programs will almost certainly fail.

It is vital to note that societies also play an important role in positive youth development. Regimes that systematically deny their people the most basic of rights are unlikely to seek to foster competence, confidence, caring, and connection in young people. So societal-level change is necessary at the same time as efforts are undertaken to promote positive developmental outcomes in young people. In many instances, Western governments will need to apply pressure to the governments of developing countries to enact proposed identity-related techniques for combating terrorism. The types of changes proposed here will not occur overnight. However, considering what is stake for targets, supporters, and perpetrators of terrorism, it is vital that all avenues to change the current situation be given serious consideration.

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