

POLS 429: International Terrorism
Lecture 10 (02.03.2020): Explaining Terrorism - The
Psychological Approach

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Spring 2020

Overview

- 1 Quick review
- 2 Explaining Terrorism
- 3 Personality
- 4 Psych. Traits
- 5 Extra Material

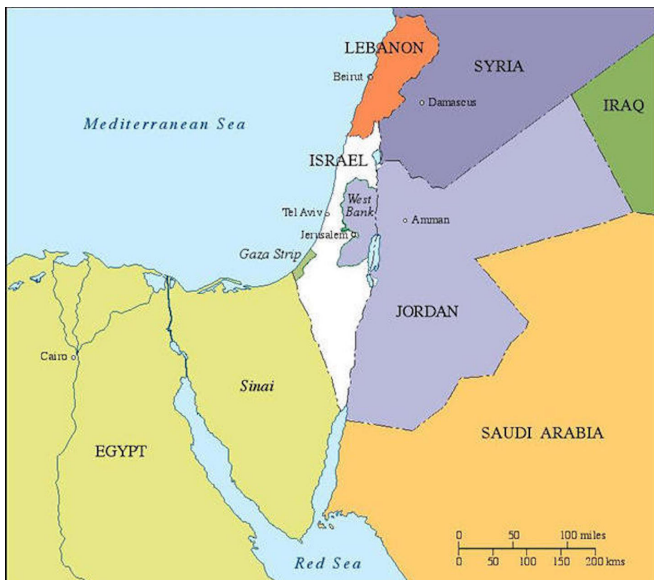
Review

WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- How dense organizational environments lead to more terrorism.
- Leadership crises, outbidding and the market share model.
- Credit claiming or the persistence of using ineffective methods.
- Policy implications.
- Critiques: empirical support, indeterminate theory.

Questions??







The Psychological Approach

INTRODUCTION

- Why individuals are willing to participate in terrorism?
- A bottom-up approach: focus on individuals who conduct atrocious acts for a goal that is difficult to accomplish.
- The process of radicalization: justify the use of violent activity.
- Explain a central puzzle of terrorism: in reality, many people having multiple grievances, yet only few actually join.

Individual level factors matter!!

The Psychological Approach

CENTRAL FEATURES

- The psychology of terrorists - not psychopaths.
- Support terrorism based on latent psychological motives/traits (some subconscious).
- Traits - distinguishing qualities, attributes and behavioral patterns that characterize an individual (Bravery, Laziness, Extroversion, etc.).
- Other individual factors: emotions (anger, revenge), risk preferences, charisma (leadership).
- Explanations → idiosyncratic and personalized.
- Approach is more explanatory than predictive.

Personality and Terrorism

A PERSONALITY DISORDER?

- Terrorism is a result of issues related to individuals' central nervous system (pathological disorders).
- **Narcissistic Rage Theory:** past events lead to adoption of violent behavior.
- Childhood events shape current behavior: unchecked "grandiose self" child.
- Post (1998) shows the link between aggression and narcissistic personality.
- Challenges: test empirically; separate specific mechanism.

Personality and Terrorism

- **Novelty seeking** - a key psychological motivator for high risk behavior.
- Participation in terrorism as a risk seeking behavior?
- Terrorism as "thrilling".
- Elements as high risk, excitement, drama, and behavior that is out of the ordinary.
- Example: 2015 study on volunteers fighting in Syria and Iraq.

Personality and Terrorism

- **Revenge and Humiliation** - driver of individual radicalization.
- The "Black Widows" of Chechnya - about 80% of suicide terrorists (2000-2005). [▶ Chechnya](#)
- A personal trauma or witnessing Russian security forces harm a close family member (PTSD). [▶ BlackWidows](#)
- RAF (Germany) - terrorism as acts of family revenge.
- Problems:
 - ① Selection bias.
 - ② Separate specific effect of psychological factors.
 - ③ Political Use: (Kerry Link).

Terrorism & Psychological Traits

- An alternative view → terrorism based on psychological traits: emotions, beliefs, and identities.
- Horgan (2008) identified few common elements for those that are open to recruitment and radicalization:
 - ① Feel angry, alienated, or disenfranchised.
 - ② Current political involvement does not give them the power to make a real change.
 - ③ Identify with perceived victims of social injustice.
 - ④ Feel a need to take action rather than just talking about problems.
 - ⑤ No moral issue with engaging in violence against the state.

Terrorism & Psychological Traits

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

- Our self-identity depends on belonging to certain groups.
- Group membership enhances self-esteem, self image and pride (Tajfe 1974).
- Join terror groups helps define identity as fighting against societal barriers for information and affecting policymaking.
- Enhance identity by committing acts opposing negative past experiences (colonialism). [▶ Fanon](#)
- Interaction of identities increase propensity for terrorism: ethnic, cultural (collectivism) and fundamentalist elements that views out-groups as a threat (2009).

Terrorism & Psychological Traits

QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE

- Join terrorism to satisfy the need to be part of a significant group that takes a stand on important issues.
- A close group setting strengthen defense of beliefs against any external threat.
- 2011 Survey in Muslim countries:
 - National and religious identity → collective goals.
 - More supportive of terrorism.
- Main problem - causal inference.

Terrorism & Psychological Traits

COGNITIVE THEORY

- Individuals' behavior is a function of the way they interpret the world → variation due to different perceptions of situations. [▶ CognitiveTheory](#)
- Terrorism is "replicated" because it is perceived as the right actions under certain circumstances.
- **Cognitive biases:** confirmation bias, attribution error.
- Example - Red Brigades (Italy) - rejection of all capitalism.
- Targeting all private businesses.

Group Psychology

GROUP BASED EXPLANATIONS

- Internal group dynamics as an incentive to join terrorism.
- Radical groups - strong bonds and tendency to isolate group from other elements of society.
- Seek external factors to serve as threats that strengthen the group.
- **Groupthink**: the need to secure conformity among peers, may lead to dysfunctional outcomes (Janis 1972).
- Example: Weather Underground (1969): ignore alternative methods to using force despite its ineffectiveness.

Moral Disengagement

Detachment from moral standards to explains acts of terrorism (Bandura 1999):

- Moral justification - frame immoral acts as honorable.
- Fighting for their community that suffers from harmful social practices (HamasKnifing-Link).
- Displacement of responsibility - higher authority as a legitimate responsible actor for an otherwise harmful behavior.
- Example: radical Shi'ite clerics justifications for suicide attacks.

Moral Disengagement (Cont.)

- Distortion of consequences - minimize the consequences of harmful actions by not being present in "scene of crime".
- Example: Terrorists using remote controlled devices.
- Dehumanize victims: perceive others as inhumane, it makes treating them in cruel and punitive ways easier (Rwanda Genocide 1994).
- Attribution of blame - assign blame for the outcomes on the victims and their behavior.
- View actions as a defensive response in contentious interaction.
- Examples - IRA bombings (1987, 1983) blaming British security forces.

Recommended readings

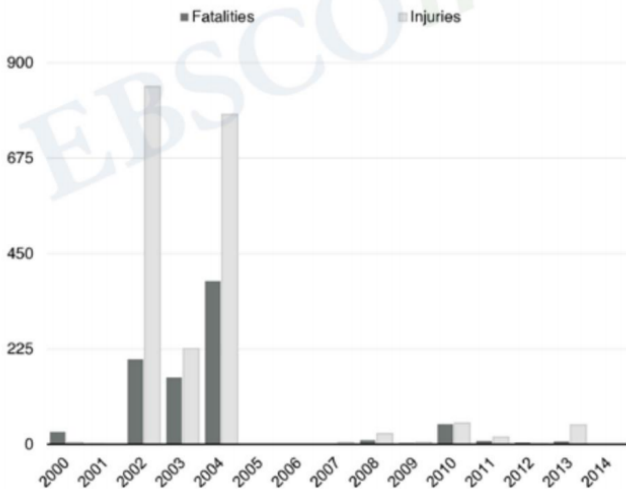
More studies on the topic of psychological approach to terrorism:

- 1 Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Belanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, and Rohan Gunaratna, "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, Issue 1 (2014), pp. 69-93.
- 2 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008), pp. 415-433.

Fanon (1965)

"Once their rage explodes, they recover their lost coherence, they experience self-knowledge through reconstruction of themselves; from afar we see their war as the triumph of barbarity; but it proceeds on its own to gradually emancipate the fighter and progressively eliminates the colonial darkness inside and out... When the peasants lay hands on a gun, the old myths fade, and one by one the taboos are overturned: a **fighters weapon is his humanity. For in the first phase of the revolt killing is a necessity: killing a European is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free"**



Figure 8: Injuries & Fatalities in Attacks Perpetrated by Chechen Women

Crenshaw (1988)

"...the actions of terrorists are based on a subjective interpretation of the world rather than objective reality. Perceptions of political and social environments are filtered through beliefs and attitudes that reflect experiences and memories"