

Terrorism – Sources and Options

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Introduction

Islamic extremist terrorism has had considerable share of global media and government attention since the attacks of 9-11. More importantly, it has become a significant influence on the foreign and security policy of major powers. The question of whether or not these powers and their allies among lower-tier states have responded appropriately remains open.

In this brief assessment we first consider the principal roots of terrorism - at a level of abstraction that does not limit the analysis to one variety of the phenomenon. From this we develop a general model of the system of causes, and from this model we extract indications about how the terrorist threat could be dealt with. We do not use these considerations as a benchmark by which to judge past or current responses, but hope that readers will benefit by having one more reference point by which to refine their own outlook.

What Causes Terrorism

Historic role models: If terrorism is defined in the abstract sense as the belief in the efficacy of inspiring chronic fear among a target population to influence outcomes of political rivalries, then it has likely been with us since humans first formed communities. But when an individual or group seeks options to influence an outcome in the face of a stronger enemy, they do not have to look that far back to obtain inspiration.

Decolonization in the 1960s often pitted weaker groups against well endowed opponents, and terrorism as we now know it was honed and refined in response to major imbalances in coercive means. National liberation groups made extensive use of propaganda by the deed. Palestinian and Red terrorism of the 1970s and early '80s followed similar patterns, and went a long way towards establishing terrorism as a doctrine and method which could be replicated and adapted.

By the late 1970s, there can be little doubt that terrorism presented itself as a serious option to any group considering how it could strike at those who held power in a state or international system. Algeria in the 1990s provides an instructive example: When faced with an entrenched security

apparatus that held all the cards, Islamist extremists revealed an overwhelming predilection for terrorism, often replicating the very means that had brought "the Power" to dominance decades earlier.

Lack of alternatives for self-realization: Young people in traditional societies face considerable pressure to attain a specific socio-economic status, often as a prerequisite to marriage. Modern education and communication technology have given young people around the world new reference points in what constitutes "success". Yet both traditional and emerging benchmarks of self-realization are as distant to the average youth as ever, in some cases increasingly so as prosperity fails to keep pace with population growth and expectations. A sense of irrelevance, dejection and frustration are often the result, with a further consequence: rage, and a sense of having nothing left to lose.

Even if relatively well educated, youth in this situation become prone to recruitment by established terrorist organizations. Being appreciated as a warrior and potentially a martyr, and identification with a sympathetic cause, provide relevance and rebuild self-esteem, and give angry youth a chance to hit back at those they perceive as responsible for the lack of meaning in their former lives.

Moral outrage: It is difficult to separate straightforward outrage towards perceived injustice from the need for self-realization, or indeed from romantic narcissism (see below), but in many cases moral outrage seems to predominate as a source of terrorist motivation.

The European Red groups were seldom comprised of the deprived, nor is there evidence to suggest they were all narcissists. In Italy in particular it was relatively easy for educated, well-to-do youth to argue and believe that the government was morally incorrigible, and that its relationship with the US was detrimental to the wellbeing of ordinary Italians (the arguments were complex but not without merit). In Palestine, the appeal of terrorism among youthful recruits was, and perhaps still is, heightened by perceived Israeli disregard for Palestinians' basic human dignity. Members of Hezbollah were compelled to outrage first by the Lebanese Shiites' low political status, which flew in the face of national demographics, and eventually by perceived misdeeds by the Israeli and South Lebanese Army forces in southern Lebanon.

Another example of outrage as a compulsion to terrorism is the rise of Al Qaeda: Bin Laden as an individual aside, the movement's founders were originally concerned about the aggression of an atheistic power, the USSR, towards a Muslim community, and later regarded US efforts to establish military bases in a Muslim holy land as cultural and religious imperialism.

Romantic narcissism: The 1980s and early '90s were rife with pseudo-academic explanations of terrorism as the product of "romantic narcissism". The "romantic" element supposedly meant rebellion in the name of a lofty ideal; the "narcissism" element apparently referred to self-glorification through public association with this ideal. Like the anti-heroes of Russian 1800s literature, terrorists were seen as having floundered hopelessly for self-respect and the respect of peers, finally latching onto propaganda of the deed in association with an avant-garde cause as a way to achieve personal glory.

There is little doubt that narcissism has played some role in inspiring some terrorists, but the degree to which it predominates among the total mix of motivators cannot be determined without detailed analysis of an individual terrorist. There seems to be little reason to take previous estimates of the importance of this factor at face value, especially when the danger of doing so is that the depth of motivation is underestimated.

No going back: Once in a terrorist organization, it can be very hard to leave it. The group itself would have serious concerns about its security if people were allowed to melt back into ordinary life, and in most cases the opposing power makes no distinction between past and present terrorists in its judgements and punishments. Having no way out might not be a root compulsion to terrorism, but it is often an important motivator for sticking with it once a person is already in a group.

Hard inner core: The eventual existence of a hard inner core at the heart of a terrorist group is fundamental to its growth and reach. The core members have experience and skills which are passed on to new members; they have the zeal and mystique required attract recruits; and their absolute commitment to the cause and the extreme penalties they would face if security is breached constitute the main source of operational discipline that ensures the group's longevity. The hard inner core not only attract recruits, but also seek them, often by careful manipulation of frustrations and weaknesses among the potential pool of recruits, and sometimes by making it very hard for families to not support the increasing involvement of youth in the terrorist movement.

State sponsorship: As with a hard inner core, state sponsorship is often a fundamental enabler of a group's growth and reach. Few terrorist groups that have achieved international notoriety lacked state support in one form or another. The few exceptions would include some of the European Red groups and the IRA; the Eastern Bloc provided or brokered some state support, but this was marginal compared to the means that these groups generated through their own activities, such as robbing banks or extortion. In any case, the funds, training, and logistical support of a state is often critical, and even if when is not, then it is still a major accelerator of a group's growth and geographic reach.

A Model of the System of Causes

The above causes can be fit together to reveal a system by which a given manifestation of terrorism arises and sustains itself. The lack of means of self-realization, moral outrage and a need for self-glorification, with varying degrees of relative influence, form the emotional base of terrorism. This is what causes people to look around for means to find relevance and hit back at the perceived source of one's grievances.

If there is a history of terrorism, then terrorism presents itself as one such means. If there is a pre-existing group which has already achieved publicity, then terrorism becomes the predominant alternative. At this point individuals form a group, and members' tight interaction and mutual emotional reliance reinforces the emotional base, further radicalizing the group.

As the group becomes more secretive and isolated from normal life, it assumes the role of the members' families, and members feel an even deeper compulsion to live up to the group's increasingly radicalized expectations. A spiral of emotional intensity and the mutual need for approval ensues, pushing the group to commit itself to a violent act. The group eventually carries out a terrorist act, and its members are irrevocably separated from their former lives.

After more experience, they become the hard inner core, with ambitions to grow and conduct even more destructive acts, but they lack the means to do so. The group could be aware that its aims are similar to those of a government in the region, or a government's intelligence service could have alerted its headquarters to the existence of a potential proxy. Contact is established, motives are assessed and the government eventually provides support, likely starting small while testing the commitment of the terrorist group.

The group undertakes more spectacular activities, gains notoriety, and is capable of attracting and funding new recruits. If others in the host society continue to develop the emotional bases of terrorism, then recruits will remain available. Recruits are inculcated in operational security which is rigidly enforced by the hard inner core.

The group continues to expand operations. It eventually comes into contact with other groups and sponsors sharing similar values, and these begin to share resources to increase mutual reach and impact. Attaining influence in such a network can be regarded as the final stage of a terrorist group's development (according to various strands of Marxist theory a terrorist group evolves into less covert and exclusive entities, but we are only concerned with the terrorist phase here).

Implications for Dealing with Terrorism

If the above model describes a story by which terrorist group is formed and develops, then dealing with it means slowing, stopping or reversing the plot.

1. Undermine the emotional basis

- Objectively assess the socio-economic and political limitations to self-realization, develop options to reduce them, and decide which of these options are feasible
- Publicly recognize the issues that a lack of opportunities for self-realization create, and announce a commitment to increasing opportunities
- Identify policies which could be sources of outrage at the domestic and international levels; weigh the potential impact the outrage caused by offensive policies against the potential risks in changing them; decide which ones could be changed, and to what extent, and develop plan to implement feasible changes
- Publicly announce a recognition that some government policies are offensive to important stakeholders, and announce the plan to change those which can be adjusted without sacrificing the wider national good
- Initiate an education campaign focusing on the human tragedy wrought by terrorism, the ways in which it abrogates important ethical and religious principles, and the way in which hardened terrorists cynically manipulate audiences to recruit sacrificial pawns

2. Give a way out

- Publicly state that the government recognizes that joining a terrorist organization can be an act of desperation and an expression of understandable frustration, and that many members of such organizations are not motivated by malevolence
- Offer reduced sentences for terrorists who turn themselves in, with separate prisons where hard core terrorists cannot reach those who surrender; offer rehabilitation schemes including basic education and job skills training; recognize the risk to ex-terrorists and demonstrate a commitment to provide them and their families with a basic level of protection against terrorist retribution

3. Weaken the solidarity of the hard inner core, then co-opt or neutralize

- Monitor the inner core's doctrinal solidarity and identify emerging schisms and rivalries
- Identify leaders of the weaker faction; either co-opt them directly in exchange for amnesty or reduced sentences, or use deception to get them to act against the main faction; in some cases their disloyalty can then be exploited by threatening to expose the weaker faction's plot to the group's top leadership and this could open up an opportunity to gain cooperation in undermining the group
- Identify those among the hard inner core who could not be co-opted and who are very unlikely to surrender, and those whose continued involvement in the group would have the greatest impact on its destructive potential; make these individuals the target of persistent efforts to neutralize them

4. Adjust the cost-benefit equation for sponsors

- Identify the most influential state sponsors
- Assess their motives in supporting terrorism - what do they see as the benefits?
- Assess their perception of the risks involved in supporting terrorism - what would they like to avoid?
- Devise options for reducing the perceived benefit of support

5. Maintain legitimate tactical efforts to contain terrorism

- Continue tactical security operations to contain terrorism, in the interests of reducing tragedy, but over the long-term to reduce the apparent effectiveness of the organization and thereby erode its mystique and appeal in the eyes of potential recruits and sponsors
- Ensure that tactical responses are clearly within the law and do not abrogate international standards of human rights, or the government's credibility will weaken, and strategic success in terms of reducing terrorist threat will be sacrificed for short-term tactical victories

Conclusions

It would appear from this thought experiment that dealing with terrorism requires a multi-faceted strategy that considers underlying causes as well as the perpetrators themselves. A purely tactical response has limitations: even if a group is eradicated, there is no reason to believe that the phenomenon itself is any less prone to manifesting. As well, relying on security operations without addressing the root causes will inevitably appear heavy-handed and self-serving, and could increase

the level of dissatisfaction with the government, thereby strengthening terrorists. The above ideas are only that, and are aimed at inspiring thought, not at suggesting answers. However, one recommendation that would emerge is that approaches to terrorism are based on rational, holistic assessments, with a minimum of polemic interference. Only a clear analysis of the problem can yield strategic results.

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