

The Terrorist Mind

I. A Psychological and Political Analysis

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Part I of this two-part article describes the major forms of domestic and foreign terrorism, the motivations of the perpetrators, and the psychological, social, and political forces that contribute to this most particular expression of violence. The article addresses the question of whether all terrorists are sick or evil and considers the possibility that some forms of terrorism, however odious their result, can be a rational response to a situation of perceived intolerable injustice. The article examines what motivates people to join terrorist groups and what may later move them to leave the terrorist lifestyle. Special consideration is given to the psychological and religious dynamics of suicide terrorism and what might motivate some people to give their lives for their cause. Finally, the article offers recommendations for a multipronged approach to dealing with this modern yet ageless scourge.

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The Nature and Purposes of Terrorism

The word *terrorism* derives from the Latin *terrere*, which means to frighten, and the first recorded use of the term as it is currently understood derives from the 18th-century “Reign of Terror” associated with the French Revolution. Although we may think of it as a recent crisis in this country, terrorism is as old as civilization, as timeless as human conflict, and it has existed ever since people discovered that they could intimidate the many by targeting the few. However, terrorism has achieved special prominence in the modern technological era, beginning in the 1970s as international terrorism, continuing in the 1980s and 1990s as American domestic terrorism, and apparently coming full circle in the 21st century with mass terror attacks on United States soil by foreign nationals. Arguably, the two culmination points of domestic and international terrorism in the past decade have been Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center. Many experts believe that the worst is yet to come (Bolz, Dudonis, & Schultz, 1996; Keller, 2002; Savitch, 2003; Schmid, 2000).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives”

(Seger, 2003). According to the U.S. Department of Defense, “terrorism is the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to instill fear, intended to coerce or try to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological” (Seger, 2003). The operative terms in both of these definitions are coercion and intimidation and the ability to convert weakness of numbers into strength of impact.

Psychologically, terrorism can be viewed from several perspectives. On the one hand, almost all conventional warfare contains a terroristic element. Why threaten war at all unless the goal is to intimidate your enemy into complying with your demands? And if they resist, your strategy is to instill as much fear as possible to increase the likelihood of their surrender with minimal casualties on your part, the whole rationale behind “shock and awe”-type campaigns. Quantum technological improvements in weaponry in any war, in any era, have typically been referred to as “terror weapons”—iron blade, crossbow, mounted cavalry, long-range cannon, poison gas, machine gun, blitzkrieg armored assault, aerial incendiary bombardment, germ warfare, and so on. In most cases, the psychological intimidation effect of many of these weapons—at least at first—far exceeds their actual casualty rate.

On the other hand, where one side’s formal battlefield armies are deficient, terrorism puts disproportionate psychological power into the hands of small groups of ideologues or opportunists. Historically, a terrorist act is rarely an end in itself but is rather designed to instill fear in whole populations by targeting a small, representative group; Mao Zedong spoke of “killing one to move a thousand” (Bolz et al., 1994). However, this may be changing. A major characteristic of mass terrorism such as the World Trade Center attack and the much feared potential nuclear-biological-chemical terrorism of the future (Romano & King, 2002) is the terrorists’ apparent desire to wreak maximum destruction as an end in itself, going far beyond the symbolic value of the act and turning terrorism into a veritable war of annihilation.

Along these lines, Butler (2002) divides terrorism into two broad categories. *Instrumental terrorism* describes terrorist acts carried out to coerce a group into taking some action or complying with a demand. The perpetrators are usually political terrorists who want to effect a tangible result, such as the National Republican Army’s desire to end British control of Northern Ireland or the political faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization that wants to drive out the Israeli presence in disputed territories. Theoretically, at least, the terror will end if and when the demands are met or a compromise is forged.

By contrast, there is little that may be done to appease the perpetrators of *retributive terrorism*; perpetrators who are primarily interested in destroying, not influencing, their enemies. Here, the target is hated not because of what they do but for the very fact that they exist, so nothing less than their complete eradication will suffice. Radical Islamic terrorists, American White supremacists, and others fit this definition. Often, instrumental-type and retributive-type terrorist groups are admixed and ill defined even among themselves, which further complicates negotiations and compromises.

Several elements appear to be almost universal in modern terrorist activities (Bolz et al., 1996). The first is the use of violence itself as a primary methodology of influ-

ence, persuasion, or intimidation. In this sense, the true target of the terrorist act extends far beyond those directly affected. The Murrah building in Oklahoma City is bombed to make a point about the intrusive federal government. An Israeli pizza parlor is blown up to effect withdrawal of settlements in the West Bank. The USS *Cole* is torpedoed in Yemen to drive the infidel from the holy lands. The goal of these activities is to use threats, harassment, and violence to create an atmosphere of fear that will eventually lead to some desired behavior on the part of the larger target population or government. This is what Butler (2002) means by instrumental terrorism.

Second, victims are usually selected for their maximum propaganda value, usually ensuring a high degree of media coverage. A great deal of thought may go into the symbolic value of the attacks, or the victims may simply be targets of opportunity. This approach may backfire if the goal is to garner public sympathy and the result is that noninvolved innocents, especially children, are killed along with the symbolic targets (Silke, 2005). Alternatively, if the aim is to inflict as much pain and panic as possible, then indiscriminate slaughter may serve only too well: The target population had better comply because the terrorists are desperate enough to “do anything.” Traditionally, the aim of most terrorist acts has been to achieve maximum publicity at minimum risk, yet the recent spate of suicide bombings in the Middle East and elsewhere shows that fanaticism will often trump caution, and this lack of restraint even in the service of self-preservation is what makes suicide terrorism so frightening.

Third, unconventional military tactics are used, especially secrecy and surprise (“sneak attacks”) well as targeting civilians, including women and children. This is a commonly cited distinction between a terrorist and a soldier or guerrilla. Again, if the goal is to inflict maximum horror, then it makes sense to choose locations that contain the largest number of victims from all walks of life. Everyone is a target. No one is safe. These types of glaring acts are also the most likely to garner media attention.

In fact, Nacos (2003) points out that the September 11 terrorists precisely calculated their acts to achieve the maximum amount of publicity. She cites an Afghan Jihad terror manual advising holy warriors to target sentimental landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty in New York, the Big Ben in London, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris because of the intense publicity their destruction would generate. Moreover, according to Nacos, terrorists hope to stick a thumb in the eye of hypocritical Western civil libertarian values by forcing democratic governments to defensively crack down on terrorism by adopting all kinds of repressive antiterrorism measures. A case in point is the current debate and controversy that continues to surround the political and social ramifications of the U.S. Patriot Act.

Fourth, intense and absolutist loyalty to the cause of the organization characterizes most terrorist groups. Although there are exceptions, the bulk of hard-core terrorist members are not typically part-timers or mercenaries. In general, the ability to commit otherwise unspeakable acts—not to mention giving one’s own life—necessitates an unshakable belief that these acts are somehow in the cause of some absolute and worthy purpose.

The Changing Demographics of International Terrorism

Most of the international terrorist groups of the 1960s and 1970s consisted of well-educated, well-trained, well-traveled, multilingual, and reasonably sophisticated middle-class men and women—still the Hollywood stereotype of the urbane revolutionary. This individual tended to be intelligent, disciplined, and sufficiently resourceful to deal with unforeseen circumstances or last-minute changes in plans to successfully complete his or her mission. New members were typically recruited from among the ranks of university students or within urban cultural centers (Strentz, 1988).

In the 1980s, 1990s, and today, the prototypical foreign terrorist is likely to be a poorly educated, unemployed, and ill-trained male refugee of Middle Eastern origin. These are teenagers or young men who have grown up as members of street gangs, and what formal education they have received has been steeped in extreme religious and political doctrine. They have been taught to hate Western society, America in particular, and to especially resent those who have been able to escape their drab life and make successes of themselves, often in the very America they are supposed to loathe. Psychologically, this is a defensive reaction formation against the despair of never being able to partake of the bounties they may secretly covet—so these are now viewed as evil temptations, unholy excrescences of Western decadence, to be expunged and destroyed (Strentz, 1988). A smaller group of terrorists may retain the educational status and cosmopolitanism of their relatively more privileged background but find the clash of values threatening to their religious and cultural self-identity (Gibbs, 2005).

Another difference between 30 years ago and today is that the regional and international support structure of today's terrorist is not nearly as extensive as it was in the past. Despite the current politicized fears about massive conspiratorial funding and logistical support of worldwide networks of terrorist cells sponsored by powerful rogue nations, the more common trend today is for local terrorist groups to act in relative isolation or with only loose coordination, and their successes depend not so much on paramilitary precision as in their focus on relatively unprotected targets, taking full advantage of weaknesses in the system and the element of surprise.

Today's terrorists actually spend less time and money on training than in the past. Popular media and Hollywood accounts often portray battalions of terrorist recruits receiving the equivalent of a graduate university education in terror technology. Although a few facilities of this type may exist, today's terrorists typically do not receive the type of broad paramilitary training geared for a range of tactics, strategies, and contingencies. More common, they narrowly prepare for a specific mission, the approach being to train fast and hit hard (Strentz, 1988). One reason for this is the availability and expendability of young terrorist recruits. Especially for those missions that involve suicide—whether a lone backpacker blowing up a bus or a hijack team turning a plane into a bomb—there is obviously no need to train the perpetrators beyond the operation itself because nobody is coming back.

Varieties of Domestic Terrorism

Although today's headlines concentrate on terror from abroad, we may forget our somewhat less recent concern with a feared wave of domestic terrorism surrounding the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing in 1995. Just because we are currently preoccupied with threats from outside does not mean that the home-grown terrorist organizations have packed up and gone away (Scoville, 2003). One of the most comprehensive studies of domestic terrorism (Smith, 1994), conducted in the pre-Oklahoma City period spanning the 1960s to the early 1990s, identified two main groups of American terrorists based on political philosophy, described as left wing versus right wing and characterized along several dimensions.

Ideologically, left-wing terrorists tend to have an economic and political focus, typically socialist or Marxist, emphasizing equality and social justice. They are thus expansive and inclusive. Right-wing terrorists tend to have a religious, mystical, self-aggrandizing, and racial exclusionary focus. They are typically strongly anticommunist and espouse a strong Protestant work ethic, swift and severe justice, and emphasis on social order.

Demographically, left-wing terrorists tend to be somewhat younger than right-wing terrorists. Although the average age of arrest of both groups is about the same (35 for left wings, 39 for right wings), fewer left wings are above age 40, compared to right wings. Both forms of terrorism are overwhelmingly male preserves but more so for right wings than left wings, who include more women in both their leadership and rank and file. The major demographic difference is in race, with almost all of right wing terrorists identified as White, compared to less than a third of left wings. Another significant difference, but in the opposite direction, is in education: More than half of left-wing terrorists have college degrees, compared to a little more than a tenth of right wings. A similar breakdown affects occupation: The left-wing group is significantly composed of more professionals—physicians, attorneys, teachers, social workers—than right wings, who attract more blue collar, unemployed, or so-called “impoverished self-employed” workers. Left-wing terrorists tend to come from urban places of residence, whereas right wings are predominantly from rural backgrounds.

Strategically and tactically, left-wing terrorists favor an urban base of operations, employ a cellular organizational structure to guard against infiltration, and use safe houses. Right-wing terrorists emphasize rural bases of operation, often in the form of geographically isolated paramilitary camps and compounds, and favor national networking, relying on strict ethnic exclusionism to guard against infiltration by outsiders. In their terroristic activities, left wings tend to target seats of government or capitalist institutions, whereas right wings focus on federal law enforcement agencies or opposing racial or religious groups.

The fortunes of extreme right-wing domestic political organizations have waxed and waned during the past 3 decades (Pitcavage, 2003). Currently, the extreme right is composed of two major groups: (a) those which are primarily antigovernment, such as

the so-called militia movement, which advocates separation and autonomy from governmental control; and (b) those which are primarily hate oriented in nature, targeting certain racial or religious groups as befouling the larger society and impeding the development of a racially pure Valhalla. Overall, at the beginning of the 21st century, the militia movement appears to be on the decline, whereas White supremacist groups seem to be retaining their numbers, although shake-ups in leadership may be fragmenting their ranks.

Becoming a Terrorist

It would be glib to state that “nobody just wakes up one day and decides to be a terrorist”—a few actually do. Such awakenings, however, are typically the culmination of a succession of life events and periods of reflection. And although individual motivations for becoming a terrorist vary, certain common psychological factors appear to contribute to the decision to join this fraternity of violence (Crenshaw, 2001; Friedman, 2002; Gibbs, 2005; Gilligan, 2000; Horgan, 2003b; Horgan & Taylor, 2001; Silke, 2003a; Stern, 2003).

The first issue concerns viewing terrorism as something one does, as opposed to something one is, which relates to personal and group identity. What we believe and what we do comprise the individual threads of our self-definition that together weave the broad cloak of our identity. Different elements of that fabric will have different proportions of meaning for each of us. For some, our vocation may be the most important element (“I’m a doctor”; “I’m a teacher”); for others, our politics (“I’m a Republican”; “I’m an Independent”) or religion (“I’m a Protestant”; “I’m a Muslim”). For most of us in the Western free-market, democratic societies, the fabric of our identity is stitched together from a range of textures and colors (“I’m a Republican, Episcopalian, music-loving, family-oriented, tennis-playing, stamp-collecting, New England American”). We of the Western world are able to weave so richly a textured raiment of identity because our economy and culture give us so wide a range of choices.

But for most of the poorer and less-advantaged peoples of the world, menial work gives little satisfaction, political freedom is sparse or nonexistent, avenues of recreational escapism are few, and social mobility and hope for a better life is little more than a fantasy. From such existential remnants, these people are forced to stitch together a patchwork quilt of meaning that is stiff and irrefutable, to shield them from the harsh climate of their daily lives. For such people, ideologies become the guardians of identity (Crenshaw, 2001; Gibbs, 2005). If people have already got next to nothing, the one thing you cannot take away from them is their religious or political or philosophical belief, especially if that belief tells them that all their travails and deferred dreams are for a reason, a loftier purpose, God’s will, or the purity of the race. If doubts arise, or circumstances occur to challenge any of the meager securities in their lives, imagine how they will fight to preserve the few knotted cords of identity that keep their worldview from unraveling. Add to this the fact that adolescence and

young adulthood are the critical periods for identity formation, and the reason that many terrorists come from the ranks of the young and disaffected becomes clear.

But identity is always personal, not just social, and a common factor in the history of many terrorists-to-be is the combination of frustrated social aspirations and individual humiliations (Ezekiel, 1995; Staub, 2003a). A Black gang member just trying to “get over” in the Detroit ghetto, a jobless White Akron high school dropout floundering in a rust-belt economy, or a Palestinian youth leading a hardscrabble existence in a West Bank refugee camp could all commiserate on their shared lack of opportunities, almost daily put-downs at the hands of hostile authorities, and the limited chances for a better life through little or no fault of their own—all the while watching others, whom they believe are no more deserving than they, getting a far better opportunity to enjoy life.

In areas where this deprivation is combined with overt political persecution, a collective sense of injustice swells and simmers. Combine this with the typical period of adolescent angst and adrenaline and embed it in an eye-for-an-eye religious culture, and terrorism or some other extreme action may be seen as a perfectly legitimate means of striking back. What better way to defuse one’s desires for the comforts of the material life than to sublimate one’s yearnings into 180-degree antipathy, to brand that subconsciously coveted life as categorically evil and try to destroy it? And far better than eruptions of individual rebellion that may be condemned as mere street crime, politically or religiously guided terrorism has the added benefit of receiving the sacred imprimatur of a respected community, if not the society as a whole. The nascent terrorist thereby focuses the frustration, channels his or her aggression, and gains respect.

Although the causes and motivations for terrorism are complex and there is no set formula for creating a terrorist group, certain regularities in the psychological and sociopolitical dynamics of such groups have been identified. In one representative model, the evolution of the terrorist mind-set is divided into four stages (Borum, 2003). Stage 1 (“It’s not right”) begins with an individual or group identifying some set of conditions in their life that is unpleasant, undesirable, or unacceptable. This can be poverty, political repression, runaway immorality, or anything else that produces confusion, discomfort, or distress.

Stage 2 (“It’s not fair”) involves a basis of comparison. Not only do we—through no fault of our own—have it bad, others—through no credit of theirs—have it better. This breeds resentment and a desire to find a cause of this gross injustice.

This leads to Stage 3 (“It’s your fault”), in which the cause of the injustice is projected onto a vilifiable out-group, alien culture, or corrupt regime. All the sociopolitical complexities of the situation are homogenized and distilled into a single, all-purpose explanation for the in-group’s travail: The White supremacists’ problem is the Blacks; the Palestinians’ problem is the Zionists; the Chechens’ problems is the Russians; the Northern Irish’s problem is the British; the Muslim fundamentalists’ problem is the whole Western world. And if your group or society or way of life is persecuting us, tormenting us, keeping us down, and laughing in our faces, then:

“You’re evil” is the logical 4th stage of the process, in which the purported exploiters and tormenters are dehumanized and demonized. By this logic, any aggressive corrective action on the part of the in-group is justified and elevated to noble resistance and freedom fighting. If you’re evil and I’m good, then I’m entitled—indeed, obligated—to destroy you in the name of righteousness, to make the ends justify the means and to dismiss as collateral damage any innocent bystanders who happen to get in the way.

Of course, not everyone who has been victimized becomes a terrorist. Many people who have been neglected, abused, persecuted, even tortured, or seen their communities subjected to genocide, do not allow themselves to become poisoned by the lust for revenge. Instead—as organizations such as the Restorative Justice Movement or Truth and Reconciliation Commission attest—such individuals may transmute their pain into a devotion to helping others, what Staub (2003a, 2003b) calls “altruism born of suffering.” This, unfortunately, gets far less attention than the more violent responses. By far, the vast majority, however, probably become neither violent revolutionaries nor crusading altruists; they either anonymously eke out their livelihoods or, at best, covertly encourage and abet the more direct activities of social-change groups—becoming the silent partners of mainstream or extremist organizations.

Assuming one makes the decision to become a terrorist, how does one start? Much depends on the nature of the political or religious organization one wishes to join (Silke, 2003a). Some terrorist organizations are entities unto themselves, whereas others exist as splinter groups of larger, more mainstream political organizations. Some groups will be eager to attract new members, whereas others will screen prospective applicants carefully. In some communities, terrorist group members may be well known to the general populace; in others, the neighbors may be genuinely surprised when the double life is eventually revealed.

Typically, the would-be terrorist approaches some larger legitimate group associated with the terrorist cause, starts working with it, and may eventually express an interest in, or be selected for, more dangerous work. The recruit may be subjected to successive tests of loyalty and commitment by proving oneself through increasingly dangerous acts. Some individuals join mainstream organizations just to do conventional work but are eventually socialized into the more radical aspects of the group’s activities.

In other cases, indigenous or expatriate members of the population, often itinerant workers, come in contact with political group members and are befriended by them. The participant is typically not aware at first that their new friends have any association with an extremist organization. A soft-pedal approach to recruitment then ensues, by way of discussions and commiseration with their mutual plight. When the participant expresses a strong desire and willingness to do something, the new friends then decide that the time is right to make the appropriate introductions and suggest to the participant that there is indeed a way to put his beliefs into action.

Suicide Terrorists

What is worth giving up your life? That may depend on what you think your life is worth. For some individuals, death in the name of a noble cause may be the one act that gives life its ultimate meaning—a paradox that most of us have immense difficulty comprehending.

The first problem concerns the term “suicide.” In the Western mind, suicide is invariably associated with despair, capitulation, depression, and a disordered mind. Western religions generally discourage purposeless suicide and are not entirely comfortable with the idea of giving one’s life even as an affirmative act of faith. We tend to take religion as one component of a full life, not the end-all and be-all of life itself, and we recoil at the idea of willingly giving our lives for a religious principle, even if some of us might have less compunction about killing others, as the actions of both Medieval crusaders and modern self-appointed slayers of abortion doctors have demonstrated. But we look on suicide bombers in about the same way as we view self-immolating Buddhist monks—with a sense of bemused but itchy revulsion: We just don’t get it.

This kind of understanding requires an appreciation of the role death plays in many people’s conception of life. For most religions, or even secular mass political movements, death may be the entree into one or another form of eternal life. Becker (1973, 1975) pointed out how annealing oneself to something that transcends one’s own life can give a person what he called “immortality power.” Religion is the most obvious choice because most faiths promise an afterlife of some sort. Whether you accept this literally as playing a harp on a cloud or more metaphorically as a melding with some great universal consciousness, it boils down to the essential reassurance that when you die, you do not really die. Somehow, in some form, you defeat death by continuing on.

But immortality power is not denied to the secularist or atheist, either. Indeed, the messianic zeal that has characterized proponents of socialism, fascism, humanism, or any of the sweeping sociopolitical movements of the past century illustrates their power to grant their adherents at least historical and philosophical immortality. I may be the smallest cog in the grand engine of historical destiny, but I am thus part of the whole machine and thereby derive both limitless power and eternal existence through my connection with it. The reason that religion and politics are such loaded topics is because to challenge someone’s belief system is to threaten not just their life’s meaning but their very (eternal) life itself.

Add to this uncounted millennia of human evolution within close-knit, intradependent, insular tribal clans, each guided by its own totemic deities, and it is easy to see why we quite naturally gravitate to the beliefs of our in-group, and why, especially under conditions of stress, scarce resources, and conflict, my in-group will be elevated to absolute righteous goodness and your out-group will be loathed and demonized. This conceptualization explains the paradoxical acts of altruism that seem to fly in the face of self-preservation, acts that are familiar to every war movie buff who has gotten choked up at the brave soldier throwing himself on a grenade to save his buddies. He willingly dies so that his companions might live. Why?

In Becker's (1973, 1975) interpretation, what the soldier is really saving is his transcendent alliance with his warrior clan and, by extension, the survival and immortality of his nation and cultural heritage. He physically dies, but his people live on, and by extension, so does he. It certainly helps him to know that God is on his side, too, as this gives him the added bonus of real immortality and honor in heaven. But even this spiritual perk may not be necessary, as history has shown millions willing to sacrifice themselves, or at least put themselves in grave danger, for the sake of political beliefs or even the chance of personal wealth, honor, or power—a species of material and temporal immortality to supplement the spiritual and eternal kind (Yalom, 1980).

Accordingly, it makes sense that suicide attacks seem to spring most readily from cultures that condone and encourage self-sacrifice, especially in the context of long-running conflicts that have endured extensive and repeated casualties on both sides (Silke, 2003b). Suicide attacks, in this view, may emerge from a sense of desperation but not despair or depression. Suicide attackers are not killing themselves as a way of “going out and taking as many of you as I can” in the kind of final exit that marks the suicidal workplace violence perpetrator (Miller, 1999, 2002). This is not reckless self-destruction but a forthright noble act, the ultimate sacrifice—gift, even—that the suicide attacker can give for his cause and his people.

The few psychological analyses that have been carried out on this subject have found that Middle Eastern suicide terrorists are rarely the wild-eyed crazies caricatured in the Western media. Rather, these are typically young men in their late teens and early 20s who have been generally well-behaved youth in their communities, good students, and regarded as helpful and generous. They come from relatively stable, religious homes, often with large extended families. But like many terrorists, at least part of their decision to sacrifice themselves comes from the rage and resentment at what they perceive to be an endless onslaught of unjust persecutions and humiliations at the hands of the out-group (Silke, 2003b). Thus, it is not depression and despair that fuels their self-sacrificial impulse but the assertive, energetic desire to fuse themselves with something greater and stronger, to become one with an eternal and omnipotent vindicating force.

That this is not the purposeless throwing away of lives is further illustrated by the simple secular fact that, culture notwithstanding, the usefulness of suicide missions is often dictated by the numbers. Considering the sacrifice involved, terrorist organizations seek to maximize the deadly payoff, and suicide bombings that kill only one or two other persons represent a poor investment return. In the grim calculus of Mideast terror, for example, Palestinians typically glean a respectable margin on their bombings, favoring targets that concentrate their victims tightly, such as loaded buses or markets: The average ratio for Palestinian suicide terrorists is 7 dead and 30 injured per bombing. By contrast, the Kurdistan Workers' Party eventually abandoned suicide bombings, not for any qualms of conscience or slacking of devotion to the cause, but simply because they failed to get their kill ratio above a paltry 1 to 1 (Silke, 2003b).

In addition to return on investment, suicide bombing is efficient in another way: It is relatively easy. A certain level of training, preparation, and precision timing is required to pull off an attack if the aim is to complete the mission and then escape to

fight another day. Hijackings and hostage-takings require lots of planning and pinpoint coordination among many players to carry out successfully. In contrast, all the suicide bomber has to do is literally show up and pull a cord or press a cell phone button.

Not that these attacks take place without planning, but the preparatory work is typically done by others behind the scene, leaving the suicide attacker's mind clear to pray and reflect on the purpose of his holy mission. In fact, the preparation, planning, and execution of a suicide attack has by now become almost a standard sequence of operations (Seger, 2003). First, a target is selected, usually fairly easily if it is going to be a civilian soft target. Then, intelligence is gathered to determine the feasibility of the attack and to develop the best plan of approach. Next comes the recruitment, screening, and selection of appropriate mission candidates, followed by the practical training and spiritual indoctrination of the subject. Finally, the explosive packet is prepared and the attacker is transported to the scene of his martyrdom. As Ismail Abu Shanab, the assassinated Hamas leader, is quoted as saying, all one needs to qualify as a suicide bomber is "a moment of courage" (Van Natta, 2003). Indeed, this is as close as anyone ever gets to actually, literally, going out in a "blaze of glory."

Glory, however, may sometimes need a little outside help, and so many terrorist organizations build into the process a number of fail-safe measures to ensure that the suicide mission is completed. For one, emphasizing indoctrination of the subject and leaving the tactical details to others limits the number of psychological junctures at which doubts or wavering motivation might intrude. As part of the rigorous indoctrination process, there occur a number of "point-of-no-return rituals" to ensure compliance. These include having members write last letters to friends and relatives, videotaping a goodbye narrative, saying final prayers, and so on. Once a person has pledged himself or herself to a suicide mission, groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad cement that commitment by thenceforth referring to the member as "the living martyr." In essence, the person has already left the physical world and exists in a temporary corporeal state solely to carry out his last mission on earth.

Even so, although rare, there are a few isolated cases in which suicide attackers have changed their minds at the last minute. As a final safeguard against such last-moment derelictions, some groups take the decision out of the bomber's hands and arrange for remote control detonation (Silke, 2003b). In some cases, this is part of the indoctrination ritual: Like any successful operation, the fewer surprises, the better.

Leaving Terrorism

Like the Mafia, it is generally assumed that the only way out of a terrorist organization is feet first. The terrorist lifestyle is not an easy one, and although most members stay committed, some actually do leave (Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Horgan, 2003a). The motivations for quitting may vary, depending on the personality of the terrorist and the nature of the organization. Some terrorist organizations seem to rely on a kind of freelance subcontractor system involving operatives who perform a specific task and then drop out of sight until they are needed next time. The advantage for the orga-

nization is that this looseness makes the ties hard to trace. The drawback is lack of control, putting the organization at the mercy of even one blabbermouth or loose cannon.

At the other extreme are terrorist organizations that use only a select cadre of dedicated operatives, carefully selected, screened, and indoctrinated, who have earned the right to carry out missions through a hierarchical progression of skill and loyalty tests. Certainly, all gradations of commitment are seen in various extremist groups. In some cases, once you are in, there is only one terminal opt-out policy. In other cases, members who do not wish to carry out violent missions may be assigned intelligence, technical, and other support roles. In the latter case, the member's distaste for personally carrying out violence does not diminish his commitment to the broader goals of the group. In still other cases, the roles are fluid and members are cross-trained, alternating between direct attack and behind-the-scenes support operations from mission to mission.

Kernels of doubt about one's commitment to the cause per se may sprout from the realization that the noble ideals and personal aspirations that led to joining the group in the first place are strikingly removed from the day-to-day realities of the member's new role. Even if the idealism remains, it may become apparent that there is no quick-fix justice, no immediate gratification in the quest for glory, and that the group is in it for the long haul, which may involve a seemingly endless dialectic of successes and setbacks. The member may also come to regret giving up the things that, in the beginning, seemed small sacrifices to make for the cause of a better world—love, family, friends, children, and just the opportunity to walk the streets without looking over one's shoulder or sleeping through the night without keeping one eye open. Maybe the member thought these things would eventually occur in the "new paradise" but now sees it will be a long time coming, perhaps not in his or her lifetime—although for religious adherents, it may be enough that true paradise awaits in the next world. Like many a disenchanting radical, the disaffected member's original naive self-deception may be projected onto the group itself, as the member suspects that he or she was tricked and misled from the start. In some cases this may actually be true.

Yet it is difficult to just quit something to which you have devoted your life, heart, and soul for any length of time, for which you have made sacrifices and burned bridges. In psychology, the theory of *cognitive dissonance* states that, when confronted with information that disconfirms your beliefs or devalues your actions, the first impulse is to dig in your heels and cling ever more desperately to the crumbling belief structure. No one wants to leave their immortality project flapping in the wind. People want to be existentially consistent and will struggle and fight to retain this consistency in their beliefs. Only when overwhelmed by the sheer volume of contrary evidence does the belief system topple, and in the tailspin of what Horgan (2003a) calls the "spiraling of commitment," the individual may then attempt to squeeze out one desperate last act of violent activity to prove the rightness of the cause before then being snapped 180 degrees and coming to revile the very group for which the person was once willing to give his or her life. Alternatively, he or she may react to this shattering of his worldview by simply slinking away in a state of burned-out anomie.

That is, assuming that any form of elective retirement is even an option. Although giving one's notice may not automatically be fatal, the decision to leave a terrorist organization is rarely as simple as a goodbye and a handshake. The organization may have a lot invested in the terrorist member in terms of time and training. There is always the security issue, and sometimes vows to keep silent are not enough. Again, like some criminal groups, retirement may simply be out of the question. This is especially true where political and criminal groups overlap, such as in some of the drug cartels in Latin America or bank-robbing White supremacist groups in the United States (Scoville, 2003). In religious groups, there may be a great deal of social stigma and ostracism by the supporting community for betraying the ideals of one's faith. Once having left the group, any protection from rival groups, law enforcement, or government agencies is gone: "Once you're out, you're on your own." This, plus the reactive antipathy the former member may now feel for his erstwhile comrades, makes the individual a prime security risk. Of even more concern to extremist organizations is the ex-member using the colors and mantle of former membership to carry out personal crimes, thereby tarnishing the group's pure political or religious image. Such unapproved activities are almost guaranteed to land the expatriate on the group's hit list.

Similar to the situation with the rapid and unsystematic demobilization of soldiers and paramilitaries in times of crisis or political instability, some ex-members of terrorist organizations may parlay their lethal skills into frankly criminal activity, alone or as part of a newly joined organized crime group. In fact, if sufficient numbers of political or religious group members become disaffected in this way, the whole nature of the group may transmogrify internally from a social change organization to a criminal gang. Again, as noted above, there is sometimes no clear dividing line, and mixed "Robin Hood" groups of this type may develop and proliferate in crisis-affected regions. In other cases, as less violent members leave, the toxic ideological extremism of the remaining members becomes more concentrated, and the focus of the group's activities becomes increasingly violent (Staub, 2003a).

Even ex-members who achieve a relatively safe state of security, who just try to keep a low profile and stay off the grid, may come to loathe their unbearable isolation, leading to depression, substance abuse, and reckless actions. Much like informers sequestered in federal witness protection programs, such social isolation and demoralization may increase the risk of ex-members blowing their cover and being targeted for elimination.

The good news for the rest of us is that even a few exceptions to the "once-a-terrorist-always-a-terrorist" rule may provide insights and tools for deterring terrorism. If we can learn more about what makes terrorists give up the life, perhaps we can encourage more of them to seek alternatives to destruction for expressing their concerns, whatever we may think of the merits of their cause. But inasmuch as the best intervention is prevention, far better still would be to work the path backward to the causes of terrorism, to find a way to pull the fuse from the bomb before it is lit.

Stopping Terrorism

Currently, the conventional antiterrorism methodology consists of a surgical version of shock and awe. After a terrorist act occurs, find out who and where the perpetrators are, hit them soon, hit them hard, and thereby teach a lesson to other miscreants who may be thinking of hatching similar plots. This approach, which is the standard response of antiterrorism units throughout the world, may be fundamentally misguided (Silke, 2003c). In fact, systematic analysis shows that the standard retaliatory approach to terrorism not only fails to deter and discourage it but in fact actually increases the violence by encouraging retribution (Brophy-Baermann & Conybeare, 1994). This leads to more counterattacks and counter-counterattacks, resulting in the now clichéd “cycle of violence.”

This seeming paradox can actually be explained by a very elemental principle in psychology: *habituation*. Application of a novel or aversive stimulus elicits a marked response from the nervous system the first few times it occurs. Repeated application of the stimulus results in a lessening of the response; in essence, the nervous system adaptively tones down the impact of the stimulus so that the organism can go about its business. Think of getting used to a tight pair of shoes, an annoying sound in the room, or a splinter in your finger. Until you can actually do something about it, you just put it out of your mind and keep going. The exception occurs with especially painful or severe stimuli that threaten the life and safety of the organism; then, the nervous system may actually become more, not less, responsive to repeated application of the stimulus or similar ones, a phenomenon called *sensitization*. In humans, this can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder and other traumatic disability syndromes (Miller, 1998).

The problem with most military reactions to terrorist attacks is that they rarely are the total, all-cleansing, scorched-earth responses that the military forces imagine them to be. In fact, part of the standard doctrine of retaliation consists of a proportional or step-wise approach to retaliation, as if terrorist acts were equivalent to workplace rule infractions or schoolyard hijinks. A graded response defeats the whole purpose of deterrence completely: If you want to create habituation, what better way to do it than administer carefully titrated doses of punishment, progressively inoculating your enemy to further retaliation and thus emboldening him by your perceived impotence.

Indeed, factions at war with each other seem to engage in a strange kind of folie-à-deux mislogic (Silke, 2003c) that goes something like this: If they kill our people, this shows just how evil they are, and their aggression will only stiffen our resolve in our righteous cause and motivate us to fight to the bitter end. On the other hand, if we kill their people, that will show them we mean business, teach them a lesson, and they will melt into submission at our mighty force. The result? Escalating violence on both sides. Perhaps unwilling to be seen as utter barbarians, the stronger side fails to wage a war of total destruction, diluting the effect of whatever half-hearted retaliation it applies and thereby achieving not subjugation but further rebellion.

So why do these ineffectual actions continue? One reason is that they make good press for politicians and generals who generally prefer doing something to doing nothing.

ing. Even if total victory is elusive, who in power wants to be the one that backs down a step, who calls a truce, who searches for dialogue? What leader wants to be seen as “soft on terrorism”? Indeed, public opinion consistently shows that, in the face of attack, populations of even the most civilized Western democracies generally view negotiations and diplomacy as hapless dithering and prefer their leaders to act forthrightly and aggressively, especially when dealing with foreign enemies.

Indeed, Silke (2003c) cites the interesting statistic that American support for the use of capital punishment for ordinary criminals has normally fluctuated between 59% and 75%, far lower than poll percentages for the use of deadly force against terrorists. Silke (2003c) finds it interesting that there is less public support for the killing of offenders whose guilt has been established by rigorous courtroom protocol, compared to the swift call for blood when the perpetrators are outsiders with even a suspicion of evil intent against us. “Us,” however, is a fluid concept in multicultural societies, which may explain why many minority citizens feel unjustly profiled and targeted for especially rigorous surveillance, apprehension, and prosecution (Butler, 2002; Ruth & Reitz, 2003).

On a larger scale, to the extent that terrorism is at least partly motivated by legitimate social and political grievances of the host population, any comprehensive antiterrorism approach must inevitably deal with these factors (Staub, 2003a; Zakaria, 2003). Unfortunately, this is often misinterpreted as giving in or coddling terrorists. But engagement is not the same thing as surrender, and many an adversary has been defanged by being given the courtesy of just being heard. A key principle of all forms of *active listening*—whether in criminal interrogation, business negotiation, or psychological crisis intervention—is to engage your opposite number by taking the time to listen to his or her point of view, demonstrating that you have done your best to understand it, and then presenting your own point of view (McMains, 2002; Noesner & Webster, 1997). You do not have to agree on the issue. You may even go to war over it later. But once you have established a dialogue on a subject, it is hard to completely forget or discount it, and the possibility of further communication will hang over the smoke of battle, even as the conflict rages on.

An application of this approach to deterring some domestic extremists has been to simply meet with them (Silke, 2003c). Law enforcement officers visit the group members at their homes and encourage them to discuss their concerns and views. The officers try to be as nonjudgmental as possible, refraining from arguing or attempting to correct the views expressed. At the meeting’s conclusion, the officers provide the extremists with a business card and encourage them to call with any additional concerns. The aim is to provide a human face to the featureless governmental visage the extremists have confronted in the past. Supposedly, this removes some of the paranoia that law enforcement is simply out to get the extremists because of their views, but another motive may be to send the not-so-subtle message that “we’re on to you.” The problem is that, although this may be intended to insert both a dialogue factor and an intimidation factor, causing the group to think twice about their next action, it also carries the risk of driving the group further underground.

This kind of reaching out to as-yet peaceful extremists works best if it is coupled with an aggressive response to actual terrorist violence. Call it “velvet glove-iron fist,” “carrot and stick,” or “good cop, bad cop,” but the essential logic is this: Treat people with basic respect and decency, give them the benefit of the doubt when appropriate, avoid unnecessarily demeaning or humiliating the host population, conduct yourself professionally, and if the group crosses the line and commits unwarranted terror, do not vacillate—apply commensurately forceful and targeted punishment so that they understand the price to be paid for unconstructive violence. Indeed, this is precisely the philosophy behind the move toward community policing (Miller, 2006; Peak, 2003) in neighborhoods across the United States. Whether domestic or foreign, the goal for the authorities is to be seen not just as an intractable army of occupation but as dealing with the larger population fairly, yet responding forthrightly when necessary. As noted above, the challenge is to determine what is the appropriate and effective dose of both carrot and stick in each situation.

Talking will not stop all terrorists, of course. Where terrorism represents an act of desperation to achieve otherwise legitimate rights and freedoms by a marginalized, disenfranchised, or persecuted group, the ruling power’s willingness to put at least some issues on the table might well be effective in stemming further terrorist acts because the subgroup now feels it has something to gain, at least for now, from the dialogue. But with many domestic or international extremists, fueled by religious or racial fanaticism and programmed to destroy their enemy at all costs, no amount of either accommodation or forceful counterreaction is likely to deter them (Silke, 2003c; Staub, 2003a). They want to kill us because they hate us, period. Indeed, habituation can also occur to well-meaning measures, as when small concessions are mocked and reviled as being too little too late, mere window dressing or cosmetic changes, or worse, taken as signs of weakness to be exploited. Just as the doctrine of proportional, step-by-step aggressive retaliatory response to terrorism must be carefully rethought, so must the form and amount of agreement and concessions so that making peace is not mistaken for giving in or selling out.

Finally, for peace to truly work, justice must be provided for the innocent victims of terror (Staub, 2003b). It is not enough to declare that the war is finished, everybody go about your business. As recent Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and the so-called Restorative Justice Movement illustrate, evildoers—whatever their original motivation and rationalization—must undergo some societally sanctioned consequences for their actions: Mere expressions of repentance, however sincere, may not be enough. Also, formal social arrangements must be made that acknowledge and validate the unacceptable suffering that was imposed on victims, and that also makes future harm-doing less likely. Simply arresting and releasing violent terrorists as political bargaining chips sends a corrosive message to victims and to society that we do not really take this matter seriously, that it is all a political game. For in our fascination with the terrorist mind-set—no matter how clinical or lurid that interest may be—we cannot and must not overlook or abandon the victims of terror (Miller, 2003a, 2003b, 2005), because, if for no other reason, the next victims may be us.

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