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From Profiles
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Perspectives
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By
JOHN HORGAN

Attempts to profile terrorists have failed resoundingly, leaving behind a poor (and unfair) impression of the potential for a sound psychological contribution to understanding the terrorist. However, recent work in the area has delivered promising and exciting starting points for a conceptual development in understanding the psychological process across all levels of terrorist involvement. Involvement in terrorism is a complex psychosocial process that comprises at least three seemingly distinct phases: becoming involved, being involved—synonymous with engaging in unambiguous terrorist activity—and disengaging (which may or may not result in subsequent de-radicalization). A critical implication of these distinctions is the recognition that each of them may contain unique, or phase-specific, implications for counterterrorism. An argument is made for greater consideration of the disengagement phase with a clearer role for psychological research to inform and enhance practical counterterrorism operations.

Keywords: psychology; terrorism; radicalization; process; disengagement

A legacy of the reductionist approaches to understanding terrorist behavior (cf. discussions in Victoroff 2006; Silke 1998) is not only confusion about what a psychology of terrorism

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implies, but also the realization that even some of the simplest analyses of terrorists produce inconsistent and confusing uses of psychological findings. Although psychology has relatively failed to assert explicit relevance for counterterrorism initiatives, knowledge of psychological processes can inform and improve our understanding of terrorism (and all that that implies) within an interdisciplinary framework. At the very least, we need to develop a more sophisticated way of understanding involvement in terrorism.

A number of authors have engaged in the conceptual development of psychological approaches to understanding the terrorist (e.g., Taylor 1988; Horgan 2005; Taylor and Horgan 2006); these studies have sought to redress some of the misunderstandings of what a psychology of terrorism implies by developing the issues of involvement and engagement in (and disengagement from) terrorism as a complex psychosocial process. My three-stage process model (Horgan 2005) and the conceptual framework developed by Taylor and Horgan (2006) captured a meaning for psychological approaches that do not depend upon narrow definitions derived from elsewhere or from definitions that have to be so general as to be meaningless and useless.

This article summarizes some of the issues from those discussions and extends some of the themes, making several critical distinctions to approach the reality of involvement in terrorism. Such distinctions offer the opportunity to identify points of intervention for counterterrorist and antiterrorist efforts. One of the advantages of viewing terrorism in this way is that we move psychological perspectives away from complex but essentially sterile discussions about definitions of terrorism as an abstract event to identifiable behaviors and their antecedents, expected consequences, and outcomes that are associated with terrorism. It is only at this point that psychologically informed counterterrorism operations can aspire to be practically useful.

One of the most potent traps stemming from the lack of conceptual clarity is the tendency, when examining why someone becomes a terrorist, to consider involvement as indicative of some state or condition. An alternative view of such involvement would be of something (e.g., being involved and doing things) that someone seeks out (initially for reasons that differ from the subsequent reality of what being involved actually delivers) and strives to sustain while moving from some unfocused peripheral state to something more focused, narrow, and unambiguously terrorism related. Paradoxically, thinking about individual involvement in terrorism in this way can not only point out how individual personality factors in themselves are neither useful nor predictive but also establish a clear need to identify the significance of the group and organizational context that maintains involvement and sustains behavior and eventually contributes to the commission of acts of terrorism. A critical conceptual point that may be important in informing response strategies is that answering questions about why people may wish to initially become involved in terrorism may have little bearing on what they do (or are permitted to do) as terrorists or how they actually become engaged in specific terrorist operations.

Unless we make these distinctions explicit, it is possible that when we ask questions such as “What causes terrorism?” or “What causes someone to join a jihadist movement?” we may be trying to force a simple answer to questions about routes to, through, and away from terrorism. Additionally, we may need to distinguish between how and why an individual becomes part of an *existing* terrorist movement from how that person becomes part of an effort aimed at creating a *new* terrorist cell or movement altogether, or to embrace terrorism as a tactic within a group’s broader strategy. The issue of posing the correct questions is not simply a pedantic exercise but carries extraordinary practical significance. The answer to the question, “How do we prevent terrorism?” may be as complex as trying to answer “What causes it?” Clearer conceptual thinking can also help us to prioritize the questions we need to answer and better focus policy decisions and resource allocation. It may ultimately be more useful for us to trace not roots (either in terms of personality factors or root causes) but *routes*. In this context, empirical analyses by Sageman (2004) and Post, Sprinzak, and Denny (2003) have demonstrated the usefulness of developing what might begin as individual case histories from which more generalizable patterns of individual involvement may emerge.

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One of the major challenges is answering the question, How and why does someone become a terrorist? Terrorism researchers have approached these questions through a wide range of individual psychological models (Taylor 1988; Taylor and Quayle 1994), organizational structures (Bloom 2005), and, more recently, indirect discussions of the root causes of terrorism. Such discussions tend to be rooted in notions about terrorist profiling and in the past through various degrees of subtle (and not so subtle) pathologizing of terrorists. While lacking in the necessary empirical support, such profiling remains plausible given the violence, brutality, and general callousness associated with terrorism and the fact that, despite the broad sociopolitical conditions that are thought to give rise to terrorism (Bjørge 2005), it is still the case that extremely few people engage in terrorism altogether. It may thus seem warranted to consider actual terrorists as different or special in some way.

For example, consider the case of al Qaeda members in the United Kingdom. A year after four coordinated suicide bombings ripped through London on July 7, 2005, a *House of Commons Report* (2006) into the events of that day asserted,

What we know of previous extremists in the UK shows that there is not a consistent profile to help identify who may be vulnerable to radicalisation. Of the 4 individuals here, 3 were second generation British citizens whose parents were of Pakistani origin and one whose parents were of Jamaican origin; Kamel Bourgass, convicted of the Ricin plot, was an Algerian failed asylum seeker; Richard Reid, the failed shoe bomber, had an English mother and Jamaican father. Others of interest have been white converts. Some have been well-educated, some less so. Some genuinely poor, some less so. Some apparently

well integrated in the UK, others not. Most single, but some family men with children. Some previously law-abiding, others with a history of petty crime. In a few cases there is evidence of abuse or other trauma in early life, but in others their upbringing has been stable and loving. (P. 31)

The significance of these comments should not be underestimated. They reveal that much of the thinking about the terrorist is still rooted in assumptions about profiling, while simultaneously hinting at the sense of frustration that no terrorist profile has yet been found—not only between members of different terrorist movements but also among members of the same particular movement. As argued elsewhere (Horgan 2007), in spite of the evidence that, logically, terrorist profiles are unlikely to appear at all—at least at a level meaningful or practical to those who call for their identification—the search for the terrorist profile continues on a number of fronts, for two reasons.

[M]uch of the thinking about the terrorist is still rooted in assumptions about profiling, while . . . no terrorist profile has yet been found—not only between members of different terrorist movements but also among members of the same particular movement.

First, the dramatic consequences of successful terrorist activity force us to confront the effects of behavior that would, to most normal people, suggest incomprehensible fanaticism, bordering on abnormality or even some sort of sickness—“How could anyone do this?” being a typical response to the shocking behavior associated with terrorist attacks. The second, more difficult question is, given that so many people are exposed to the presumed generating conditions for terrorism (or root causes), the triggering factors and catalysts both for religious and political mobilization, why is it that so relatively few people actually do this (even within conflict zones, let alone outside of them)? For example, more than 2 million Muslims live in Britain, many of whom are exposed to the same social conditions, backgrounds, and origins. Yet, so very few become radicalized to the point that they engage in terrorism. So how do we account for this?

A temptation has been to assume that some qualities of specialness exist within a specific group of terrorists, in terms of both what makes them alike as well as

what presumably makes them different from the rest of us (or at least from those who do not engage in terrorism).

Ariel Merari (personal correspondence 2006) has correctly argued that it is more precise to state that “no terrorist profile has been found” rather than “there is no terrorist profile.” However, several real dangers are associated with the continued effort to construct such profiles, particularly as far as understanding recruitment to terrorism is concerned. In assuming the existence of a profile, we tend to miss several critical features associated with the development of the terrorist. These would include, but are not limited to, the following:

- the gradual nature of the relevant socialization processes into terrorism;
- a sense of the supportive qualities associated with that recruitment (e.g., the “pull” factors, or lures, that attract people to either involvement in terrorism in a broad sense or that are used to groom potential recruits);
- the sense of migration between roles (e.g., moving from fringe activity such as public protest to illegal, focused behavior); and
- a sense of the importance of role qualities (e.g., what attractions does being a sniper hold as opposed to becoming a suicide bomber, and how do these qualities become apparent to the onlooker or potential recruit?).

When we assume static qualities of the terrorist (a feature of profiles), we become blind to the qualities of the dynamics that shape and support the development of the terrorist. We also obscure the basis from which a more practical counterterrorism strategy might develop to prevent or control the extent of those who initially become involved in terrorism.

Counterterrorism efforts still frequently rely on profiles. While delivering a presentation on terrorist profiling at a workshop for counterterrorism officials in 2006, a senior official protested to me, “Profiles *are* useful. Of course they are. The reason . . . is that your average suicide bomber is not going to be the middle-aged, white, father of three kids.” The context of this comment, made in the United Kingdom, is that such a suicide bomber had not been encountered there *yet*. But this example serves as a reminder that the assumptions that feed into how we think about the terrorist (who he or she is, and what population or demographic he or she is likely to come from) are often based on the actuarial projections from a small, and statistically insignificant, sample of individuals. The dangers of overgeneralization should be obvious.

But highlighting these limitations still does not answer the critical question: why does one person become involved in terrorism and the other does not? It is impossible to give an answer to this question that will allow us to predict with certainty who is likely to become a terrorist (and conversely, who is not). However, it might be useful to identify predisposing risk factors for involvement in terrorism (Horgan 2005) as a prelude to some form of risk assessment for prediction of involvement. These factors may include the following:

1. The presence of some emotional vulnerability, in terms of feelings of anger, alienation (often synonymous with feelings of being culturally uprooted or displaced and a longing for a sense of community), and disenfranchisement. For example, some alienated young British Muslims, looking for guidance and leadership that they do not get from mosque

- leaders because of a perception that the leaders are too old, too conservative, and out of touch with their world, may turn elsewhere for guidance and clarity.
2. Dissatisfaction with their current activity, whether it be political or social protest, and the perception that conventional political activity just does not work or produce results. A related issue here is that violent radicals view terrorism as absolutely *necessary*. For example, in a video message before blowing up himself and six others in London, Mohammad Sidique Khan employed the language of “war” in urging British Muslims to oppose the British government. The view is that terrorism is a necessary, defensive, and, above all, urgent activity against an offensive enemy perceived as bent on humiliating and subjugating its victims.
 3. Identification with victims—either real, in terms of personal victimization (e.g., by the military or police) or less tangible. For European Muslims who become involved in violent jihad, this identification is with Palestinian victims of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, victims in Iraq, or the conflict in Kashmir. In Khan’s video testimony, he blamed his behavior on the actions of the United States and United Kingdom: “bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of *my* people,” identifying with the suffering of Muslims around the world even though he came from Yorkshire, in northern England.
 4. Crucially, the person has to believe that engaging in violence against the state or its symbols is not inherently immoral. This belief, while it may be fine-tuned by a religious figure, is usually held by the time the person has decided to become involved to the point of engaging in terrorism.
 5. Also important is a sense of reward that the recruit has about what “being in this movement” represents. All suicide bombers, across the world, have *one* thing in common. They come to believe that they will achieve more in death than they ever could in life, a very powerful motivating factor not only in initial recruitment but also in terms of sustaining that person’s commitment to the movement once a member. In practical terms, involvement might result in heightened status, respect, or authority within the immediate peer group, the broader radical movement, and (at least as imagined by the recruit) the wider Muslim community. The clearest answer to why someone wants to become involved in a suicidal mission is that the person seeks the kind of martyrdom and accompanying rewards on display as when violent radical Web sites hailed the 7/7 bombers as heroic martyrs and exalted them as almost pop stars.
 6. Finally, kinship or other social ties to those experiencing similar issues, or already involved, are crucial (see Sageman 2004).

While more influences could probably be identified, these factors, when combined, provide a powerful framework for what could be termed “openness to socialization” into terrorism. They highlight why, given two people who are exposed to the same conditions (and even come from the same family), one may step toward involvement in terrorism and the other may not.

We should note that these factors are only potent at one very specific juncture: the phase of initially becoming involved. Once the potential recruit begins to move toward the potential of belonging to a group (before engaging in terrorist events), a different set of factors begin to exert unique influence. These include the power of the group, the content and process of ideology (or ideological control), the influence of a particular leader, and so on. Additionally, individuals will experience the steps toward increased involvement in different ways. Overall, for any given individual, becoming involved in terrorism will reflect a dynamic, though highly personalized, process of incremental assimilation and accommodation.

Terrorist Pathways

To move toward fruitful avenues for psychologically informed counterterrorism initiatives, it is useful to consider what involvement in terrorism implies. The reality of involvement in terrorism today is typified by its complexity: involvement in terrorism seems to imply—and result in—different things to different people, as well as different things to the same person over time and experience. Far from the simplistic distinctions between leaders and followers, even the smallest of terrorist movements comprise a variety of roles and functions into which recruits are assigned or encouraged to move. Additionally, adoption and retention of those roles is neither discrete nor static. As outlined earlier (Horgan 2007), there is very often migration both between and within roles, from illegal (e.g., engaging in violent activity) to gray areas (supporting the engagement in violent activity) to legal (e.g., peaceful protest, visiting relevant Web sites to learn). While many of the activities that members of terrorist movements engage in are not actually illegal per se (and cannot be meaningfully encompassed under the label *terrorism* but instead *subversion*), without these activities, actual terrorist operations could not develop, evolve, or be sustained over time and place. Engagement in violent activity is what we most commonly associate with terrorism. The reality of terrorist movements today, however, is that this most public of roles and functions tends to merely represent the tip of an iceberg of activity. Supporting the execution of a violent attack are those directly aiding and abetting the event, those who house the terrorist or provide other kinds of support, raise funds, generate publicity, provide intelligence, and so forth. The person we think of as “the terrorist” is therefore fulfilling only one of multiple functions in the movement, albeit the most dramatic in terms of direct consequences.

Qualities of Continued Involvement

Cordes (1987) and Taylor and Quayle (2004) identified common themes in terrorists’ self-perception that have relevance to understanding the development of involvement in terrorism, reflecting the importance of both the language terrorists use as well as how they use it. Taylor and Quayle reported that terrorists, whatever the exact nature of their groups, unanimously view their involvement in violence as a provoked reaction requiring defense against an enemy. It is difficult to ascertain the effect these types of verbal explanations would have in the absence of exposure to some of the effects and qualities of membership, and life as part of a terrorist movement more generally. In other words, the reason given for involvement may be a direct reflection of an ideological learning process that comes from being part of the group. We may essentially be discovering potent qualities of what Hundeide (2003) termed the “community of practice” associated with counterculture groups of committed insiders. The recruit may have

learned to interpret his initial movement into the group to heighten the positive image of the group as well as to confirm the ideological commitment that the group has now solidified over this recruit.

For this reason, we may need to be mindful of a particular distinction for asking questions of former terrorists. Asking someone, “Why did you become involved?” as opposed to “How did you become involved?” may reveal a very different kind of answer. Often when asking the *why* question, a terrorist’s stated motivation for involvement and justification for violence, Cordes (1987) suggested, may reveal more about the organization’s internal use of propaganda and ideological control than anything conclusive about the personal account. That is, self-accounts of involvement in terrorism may derive from the individual’s own sense of truth *or* some sort of commonly shared or acquired truth that is ritualistically enshrined through the community of practice. While it may be plausible to assume that “fraternalistic over egoistic” (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood forthcoming) goals are genuine features of individual accounts, it is more likely that they reflect a learning quality incurred from continued involvement and increasing commitment.

Accounts that convey a sense of the external forces that provide the push into terrorism tend to ignore the supportive qualities (or “pull” factors) that influence individuals. The terrorist may be either reluctant or unintentionally forgetful to mention such lures in an interview situation or autobiographical account. The significance of each particular kind of lure will vary for the individual. The degree of acquired ideological control and “self”-propaganda that might exist for a person could be measured as a function of how little that terrorist acknowledges the existence of real and imagined rewards for joining the terrorist group. The true significance of particular assumed or self-identified catalyst events must thus be considered with caution, particularly in the absence of any acknowledgement of the supposed positive qualities of involvement gained (or expected via continued commitment) by the individual. Their true significance is likely to be more potent to those already participating in a peripheral activity, such as a peaceful protest. In fact, the overall significance of pushing catalyst events as triggering factors (as former terrorists often do, especially in autobiographies) can only be appreciated in the context of other qualities of the descriptions given by activists. Particularly in those terrorists interviewed by Taylor and Quayle (1994), the notion that there was simply “no other choice” was a commonly offered explanation of initial involvement in a terrorist movement. Frequent references to violence being an inevitable response, a form of self-defense in fact, to broader conditions are common in all terrorist groups, and such explanations reflect heavily conspiratorial dimensions (legitimized usually with clear references to the victimized group or community) in jihadist groups in particular.

Closely related to the notion of positive qualities (or expected positive qualities) of continued involvement is an appreciation of the community context. Hassan (2001), who interviewed many militants in the region, described how, in Palestinian neighborhoods,

the suicide bombers' green birds appear on posters, and in graffiti—the language of the street. Calendars are illustrated with the “martyr of the month.” Paintings glorify the dead bombers in Paradise, triumphant beneath a flock of green birds. This symbol is based on a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that the soul of a martyr is carried to Allah in the bosom of the green birds of Paradise. (P. 3)

Post, Sprinzak, and Denny (2003) interviewed incarcerated members of Hamas and its armed wing Izz ad-Din al Qassam, Hezbollah, the Islamic Jihad, and others from secular movements and discovered similarities between the supportive qualities that shaped individual pathways into terrorism, despite the wide variety in participants' backgrounds and histories:

The boyhood heroes for the Islamist terrorists were religious figures, such as the Prophet, or the radical Wahabi Islamist, Abdullah Azzam; for the secular terrorists, revolutionary heroes such as Che Guevara or Fidel Castro were identified. Most had some high school, and some had education beyond high school. The majority of the subjects reported that their families were respected in the community. The families were experienced as being uniformly supportive of their commitment to the cause. (P. 172)

Role models serve as a source of authoritative legitimacy for the justification of violent reaction, sustaining the individual's commitment to the group to the point of actually engaging in violent acts. In Post, Sprinzak, and Denny's (2003) analysis, the social setting (implicit or explicit approval from peers and family) appeared to be the source of the greatest apparent positive quality for joining. However, the researchers' interviews with imprisoned activists revealed other supportive qualities of involvement:

Perpetrators of armed attacks were seen as heroes, their families got a great deal of material assistance including the construction of new homes to replace those destroyed by the Israeli authorities as punishment for terrorist acts . . .

The entire family did all it could for the Palestinian people, and won great respect for doing so. All my brothers are in jail. One is serving a life sentence for his activities in the Izz ad-Din Al Qassam battalions. (P. 177)

Similar themes emerge from interviewees in Northern Ireland:

The idols among our community shot up because they stood for something. . . . As soon as your parents, and the priest at the altar, and your teacher are saying, “These men are good men. They are fighting a just thing here,” it filters down quickly that these people are important and whatever they say must be right. So all of a sudden, you are bordering on supporting something that is against the government. (Burgess, Ferguson, and Hollywood forthcoming, n.p.)

An additional expected benefit associated with attaining and sustaining commitment is the status it carries within an immediate circle of activists as well as within a broader supportive community. Such status can be powerful not only for sustaining commitment but also as a lure for peripheral onlookers not engaged in any focused activity but with the future opportunity to do so. A sense of approval

from a significant other person can also catalyze socialization into more extreme behavior. Atran (2003) illustrated that Palestinians regularly “invoke religion to invest personal trauma with proactive social meaning,” with injury seen not as burden but as a badge of honor.

An inescapable social quality of increased involvement in a terrorist movement is a sense of gradual progression. From examining accounts closely, increased commitment to the movement appears to be characterized by a slow marginalization away from conventional society and toward a much narrower society where extremism becomes all-encompassing. It is also characterized by a sense of increasing disillusionment with alternative avenues developing in conjunction with increasing involvement in peripheral activities. What constitutes an alternative avenue likely reflects a “community of practice” dimension identified by Hundeide (2003) as a necessary quality that the movement must put in place to solidify commitment by the individual member. Increased commitment and ever-greater and ever-focused involvement will carry with it the realization that in difficult or challenging times, the need to “stick it out” is paramount (e.g., Sherman 2005).

Involvement in terrorism encompasses constant change and vastly differing levels of activity, commitment, and overall involvement—all of which might be present in one small terrorist grouping. As McCauley and Segal (1989, p. 55) memorably put it, at any one time, some members are “beginning to find out . . . others are becoming committed, others are firmly committed, others becoming less committed, and still others are in the process of leaving entirely.” We can see how the profiling of terrorists (based on conceptually dubious attempts to identify individual qualities of those filling certain specific roles) will be quite limited without a sense of the varied factors influencing how and why that role became attractive, open, and attainable for a specific individual moving through the terrorist group. What might determine the total extent of active terrorists at any one time might relate to a whole host of local internal and external group, organizational, leadership, and other management or response issues. What is necessary from a counterterrorism perspective is a way of assessing capacity and threat or risk without having to revert to limited notions of counting membership based on restrictive and unrelated criteria.

A final feature of increased involvement for the individual is the realization that the associated steps can carry different levels of currency. With the impressive variety in roles and functions found within even small terrorist groups comes also different psychological baggage. While active service roles (for example, directly planting bombs or engaging in a shooting within the Provisional IRA or the role of martyr in a four-man al Qaeda cell) may be limited to minimize the risk of security breaches, leaders can also attach a psychological value to the restriction of such opportunities. Hassan’s (2001) interviews revealed that by limiting those accepted for martyrdom operations, “others are disappointed. They must learn patience and wait until Allah calls them.” The limitation thus performs the important function of sustaining the perceived attractiveness of attaining and fulfilling such a role.

Implications for Counterterrorism

As Taylor and Horgan (2006) have argued, a clear implication of thinking about initial involvement as part of a *process* is that it provides a clear agenda for psychological research on terrorist behavior: an attempt to understand the decisions made by the individual at particular times within a particular social and organizational context. When we frame initial involvement in terrorism within a broader process of involvement and engagement, we can identify a shared characteristic: that a powerful incentive is the sense of reward, however distant to the believer or seemingly intangible to the onlooker.

Given this common denominator, what tangible operational strategies can be offered to counterterrorism initiatives? Despite the increased discussions of root causes of terrorism, we can do little in a practical sense to change the “push” factors (i.e., the broad sociopolitical conditions) that give rise to the increased likelihood of the emergence of terrorism. In contrast, counterterrorism programs may be more effective in concentrating on the “pull” factors (or “lures”), since they tend to be narrower, more easily identifiable, and specific to particular groups and contexts.

Two examples from Northern Ireland illustrate this point. The first dates from 1987, when British investigative journalist Roger Cook conducted an undercover expose of the racketeering activities of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the largest Loyalist terrorist organization in Northern Ireland. Cook's coinvestigators set up a meeting between one of their team (who posed as a businessman) and a local UDA brigadier, Eddie Sayers. Sayers represented one of the UDA's many “front” security companies. The meeting was covertly filmed, and Sayers was shown attempting to extort money from the supposed businessman. When the program aired, it became a sustained source of extreme embarrassment to the UDA leadership and to Sayers, in particular, who was shown having difficulty with simple arithmetic during his calculation of the extortion demand. As described in Cusack and Taylor's (1993) case study, the documentary proved to be a powerful catalyst (among other factors) that led to massive internal upheaval within the UDA, particularly between those within the UDA who had made concerted efforts to clean up the movement and those heavily engaged in criminality. The internecine feuding that followed led to bitter recriminations and even assassinations, but more damaging in the long term, the UDA's reputation never fully recovered.

The second example comes from a series of wide-ranging interviews this author conducted between 2006 and late 2007 with former members of more than a dozen terrorist groups around the world, ranging from nationalist or ideological to jihadist movements. The interviews focused on the relationship between reasons for becoming involved and the ways in which people disengage from, and ultimately end, their involvement. One interview, with a former high-ranking member of the Provisional IRA, revealed a particular moment when the reality of involvement was brought home.

The IRA member, who was responsible for the largest Republican area in Northern Ireland, was under competing pressures within the organization to step up attacks as the ceasefire unraveled and, on the other hand, to scale down attacks in an effort to keep the ceasefire in place. During this tumultuous time, he found himself having tea with Kevin McKenna, later the “chief of staff” of the Provisional IRA. When McKenna commented on the recent bombing death of a pregnant policewoman—“we might get two for the price of one”—the IRA member began to gain perspective, asking himself questions about the situation he found himself in. He realized he had been locked in “a very localized, kind of almost a defender situation.” Whereas his own goal had been to attack the British Army, his colleagues “wanted to shoot the local [Ulster Defence Regiment] down the road.” The interviewee explained how this was one of the defining moments that brought him not only to question his own involvement in the movement but also, subsequently, to inflict damage on the movement by becoming an informer.

What the Loyalist and Republican examples have in common is the significant difference between the perceptions and the day-to-day reality associated with terrorism. The significance of this divide is of enormous value and may come to play a potentially critical role for psychological research in counterterrorism operations. Even on a basic level, it can be difficult to overestimate the significance of the media in undermining the positive attractions (particularly the sense of nobility) that involvement in terrorism is deemed to hold for potential recruits. By making the realities of terrorism known, it may be possible to undermine terrorism in ways not considered viable or potentially effective in the past.

Unfortunately, little systematic attention has been paid to the potential role that counterpropaganda may have in redirecting or displacing cognitions and behaviors that may otherwise catalyze initial involvement in political violence. The mass media, both journalistic and popular, has an underdeveloped but potentially significant role to play in contributing to the environment in which terrorism thrives and simultaneously in which the attraction to involvement in terrorism may be undermined. Challenges to the myths and lures of terrorism probably can be an effective counterterrorist strategy for both the group and the individual, but they can only be realistic and meaningful if they are directed at specific populations.

The effectiveness of any form of counterpropaganda on individuals *already involved* in clear and unambiguous terrorist activity will necessarily be limited at the outset, primarily when alternate views are identified as belonging to the “enemy” and thus are frequently interpreted as part of a conspiracy. The effectiveness of any propaganda, regardless of context, will rely heavily on the credibility and relevant expertise of the communicator and in particular on perceptions of the communicator’s *intention*. (People generally tend to be more trusting of the communicator if they do not perceive that he or she has something to gain or explicitly intends to persuade.) The perception of expertise on the part of the communicator can be based on factors such as similarity in social background (e.g., similar views, values, and status), although differences in age or leadership may promote the communicator to “expert” status.

Thus, counterterrorism (or counterpropaganda) initiatives must identify sources that will be more credible for communicating countermessages. For example, it would be beneficial to encourage those who have disengaged from terrorist activity to become more vocal in dispelling the attractions and lures of involvement in movements. Although it might seem that such counterpropaganda would be ignored by the deeply committed (to paraphrase Hundeide's [2003] term), the messages may have a real impact on those at the initial stages of involvement. There are already some positive developments on this front. Taarnby's (2005) examination of activities in Yemen using moderate Muslim clerics and Boucek's (2007) examination of the "rehabilitation" program in Saudi Arabia suggest that counterpropaganda may effectively challenge the extremist beliefs of imprisoned jihadists and their sympathizers. Although researchers have yet to examine systematically the "de-radicalization" programs developing in a variety of countries, the groundwork for comparative work has already begun (e.g., Bjørge and Horgan forthcoming).

Conclusions

We may yet discover that even the beliefs of deeply committed extremists may be more subject to change than we previously expected. It is worth exploring the role of the individual as a consumer of propaganda, particularly in the context of a conflict. We need to understand the major function of terrorist leaders to encourage changes in political and religious beliefs—even minute changes for those already deemed to be more or less converted while at the peripheral stages of involvement—and a sense of accommodation in the involvement in terrorism as not only *legitimate* but also attractive and important. The objective should be to publicize the negative consequences of terrorism, challenge its legitimacy through the appropriate channels, and encourage a displacement of activity that would otherwise result in greater involvement in a terrorist movement. In addition, such a strategy could prove immensely valuable in reducing the perceived sense of effectiveness of terrorism for already involved members.

To succeed, we need to face some facts. The assumption of a moment of epiphany that explains some assumedly conscious decision to become a terrorist is naïve, misleading, and, crucially, unsupported by empirical evidence. Involvement in terrorism is a complex process of accommodation and assimilation across incrementally experienced stages. Potential and actual terrorists move between and within roles, although these migration and promotion processes remain poorly understood. Some individuals become involved more quickly than others, but a consistent quality across all terrorist movements is the gradual sense of progression.

Furthermore, this movement process is based on initially supportive qualities. The most obvious common denominator influencing individuals' embracement of their own radicalization—at any level—is a sense of positive expectation. As

long as commitment and dedication to one's socialization further and further into the movement remains positive for the follower, the process eventually results in the formation of a new—or at least effectively consolidated—identity.

Profiling the individual and his or her presumed associated qualities has no future in serious analyses of either the terrorist or the pathways to radicalization in which he or she engages. We ought to consider instead profiling (1) the process of violent radicalization and (2) the meaning of engagement with that process to the individual terrorist. In considering the nature of involvement in terrorism, we might begin to develop phase-specific counterterrorism initiatives, depending on what we can ascertain is the most effective intervention point: whether it be initial prevention of involvement, subsequent disruption of engagement, or eventual promotion of disengagement. Acknowledging these distinctions will allow for the development of unique kinds of interventions, depending on where we eventually decide they may be best focused. The disengagement phase remains the most poorly understood and least researched, but ironically, it is in this phase that practical counterterrorism initiatives—aimed not only at facilitation of disengagement but also at prevention of initial involvement—might actually become very effective.

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