



## **Factors Contributing to the Strength and Resilience of Terrorist Groups**

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### **1. Introduction**

Terrorism is a very complex phenomenon; rivers of ink have been used to explain what might spark the use of this kind of violence against society. Although the main body of work about terrorism focuses on root causes and addressing grievances, there are some other important factors worth analyzing since they furnish important information about the factors that provide strength and resilience to terrorist groups and we may find there a way to remove these groups' source of oxygen for their bloody enterprise.

### **2. A few variables**

When dealing with as many-sided a subject as terrorism, policymakers put special emphasis on finding out

what triggers such a phenomenon. Its emergence is often attributed to different causes. Although an array of prescriptions have been advanced and tried, terrorism is still among us, stronger and more lethal than ever. Whether the analyses focus on cost/benefit, psychological or structural factors, this new century will bear witness to our continued inability to stop the use of terrorism as a means to achieve political ends. The spotlight on the causal debate pointing to either interest-based or value-laden approaches has produced a rich literature exchange postulating different explanations. However, as a part of the ongoing analyses about terrorism, it is important to pay attention to peripheral factors such as those contributing to the strength and resilience of terrorist groups in order to disrupt their abilities to do harm.

Trying to analyze the terrorist phenomenon in a holistic way sometimes clouds the fact that terrorist participants are rational *individuals*. They constitute groups of people or “networks,” i.e., actors linked to each other through complex webs of direct or mediated exchanges.<sup>1</sup> The deadly business of terrorism is a lively social enterprise of individuals disembedded from their societies of origin.<sup>2</sup> For example, the increasing loss of bonds to society has transformed jihadism into a truly global movement, based on virtual bonds to abstractions.<sup>3</sup> In order to augment critical cohesion among members, they must be indoctrinated with a set of shared core beliefs. It’s here where ideology blends with social networking and together they become two of the factors playing a defining role in maintaining the strength and resilience of terrorist groups.

A vital component for the endurance of any successful terrorist group is popular support. Due to usual superiority of government forces, terrorist groups engage in irregular warfare as a way to advance their agenda. Winning the hearts and minds of the people becomes paramount for both contending sides; the larger following a group has among segments of the population, the more difficult it becomes for government forces to subdue and control terrorists.<sup>4</sup> Support in general, but popular support in particular, usually bolsters the resilience of terrorist groups.

Organization and crime are two more variables worth looking closer. Terrorists must find ways to compensate for the material superiority of opponents and this deeply depends on organizational skills.<sup>5</sup> Organization can make the difference between failure and success as a group; division and desertion become more likely when there is a lack of organizational skills.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the link between terrorism and transnational crime cannot be sufficiently emphasized. The overlapping and cooperation of the activities of organized crime groups and terrorist groups has increased in recent years due to the need of terrorist groups to find alternative sources of financial support.<sup>7</sup> When these groups find a vein to exploit in the criminal underworld, the money that flows into their operations provides them with the means to intensify and expand their terrorist activity.

Besides these variables just adumbrated, fear is the one of the main ingredients of terrorism that deserves a closer look since it is adroitly exploited to boost the capabilities of terrorists. All these factors affording potential advantages to advance terrorism will be reviewed one by one to better understand the mechanics and rationale behind the strength and resilience of terrorist groups.

### 3. Ideology

In the most modest of interpretations, the term “ideology” refers to the study of ideas whose main pur-

pose is to propound societal change through a normative thought process. Ideologies propound their own version about the world in which we live and groups of people adhere to these sets of beliefs and share their common view about man and society. Ideological disagreements and different assumptions can yield quite different prescriptions regarding human activity<sup>8</sup> since an ideology imputes a particular structure to political action.<sup>9</sup> Politics is the process of making and executing binding decisions for a society<sup>10</sup> and, as it is well known, not everyone agrees with all of the decisions. Thus, a wide variety of organizations dedicate their efforts to influence the ideology of a society to shape it as closely as possible to their ideal and terrorist organizations are no different in this respect; however, the instruments they use in the quest to accomplish their political objectives are not the ones with which society tries to conduct its business.

As Hans Morgenthau wrote in *Politics among Nations*, power is always the immediate aim and politics is a struggle for power. Ideologies are used to attain power. The twentieth century saw the clash between the ideology of capitalism and communism. The balance of power was divided between East and West while most of the world was busy choosing sides. The collapse of the Soviet Union altered that balance and the world became unipolar. At the end of the century, since communism was taking its last gasps, leftist groups saw their main sponsor van-

ish. Their position was swiftly filled by the rise of Islam as a powerful ideological tool for religious terrorist groups who manifested their increased interest for the establishment of an alternative polity to the nation-state that Muslims call the caliphate and recall as the "Golden Age."<sup>11</sup>

Absolute ruthlessness harnessed to an ideology yields terrorism. Its global version, jihadism, preaches its own purist interpretation of Islam and advocates a strategy of violent jihad, which will produce an explosion of terror to wipe out "local political heresy" and defeat the Western powers allegedly preventing the establishment of a truly Islamist state. For Islamists, religion becomes more than belief, it actually means a way of life and in Islam this is based on belief that advocates the abolition of all political systems which usurp Allah's divine attributes.<sup>12</sup> As a result, this blend of religious ideology and political goals has led to significant divisions within the Islamic world.

Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman concludes that terrorism is where politics and violence intersect in the hope of delivering power to effect fundamental political change.<sup>13</sup> The ideological factor plays a significant role in motivating society to engage in the political community; yet it plays a more intense and decisive role motivating people to join the terrorist cause. It is essential to hold a deep-seated ideological belief in order to legitimize the killing of innocent people with no qualms or the

sacrifice of ending one's own life for the cause. Without disregarding that the decision to engage in, or support violence, may have to do with concrete grievances, sacred ideology – theology – seems to be a more important means of recruitment than secular ideology<sup>14</sup> and a more compelling tool to rationalize violence.

#### 4. Social networking

As political conflict expert Ted Robert Gurr indicates, the immediate reason for a disgruntled individual to join an organization is to increase his options for attaining the things he values or desires.<sup>15</sup> While terrorists usually share certain concepts and worldviews, they generally lack a sense of purpose in life. By undergoing intense socialization, they try to find a sense of belonging and identity. Thus, they form cohesive groups or “networks,” a collection of nodes connected through links that, in turn, are attached to even more links; the most connected nodes, called hubs, are important components of a terrorist network.<sup>16</sup> So much so that a few highly connected hubs make the architecture of the global jihad, for example, Osama bin Laden or Khalid Sheik Mohammed, attracting and interconnecting networks while keeping in touch with their lieutenants in the field,<sup>17</sup> forming a resilient network of networks that is difficult to break up.

A network growing through the process of preferential attachment evolves into a “small-world” network structure.<sup>18</sup> Network science

expert Albert-Laszlo Barabasi explains that, unlike a hierarchical network that can be destroyed by eliminating its leadership, in a small-world network, a significant fraction of nodes can be randomly eliminated without affecting the integrity of structure as a whole.<sup>19</sup> This flexibility injects resilience to terrorist movements. However, hubs are vulnerable because most communications go through them; though resilient to random arrests, the jihad movement suffers greatly due to the fragility of the hubs since it may spell the end of a network if large hubs suffer simultaneous disruptive attacks.<sup>20</sup>

The social bonds that these kinds of movements create are very strong. The nodes feel more tightly linked to each other instead than to society, becoming members of an “imagined community” without earthly connections or social restraints, in other words, it is a virtual society; this structure is very appealing to alienated, bored, or disenfranchised youths, for example in the Arab world and among expatriates in the West.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, the jihad is not the imagined world of dreams these youths had hoped for and many of them end up becoming cannon fodder in the global struggle.<sup>22</sup> Attraction to this violent abstract global movement based on virtual ties is more likely among alienated youths since they lack embeddedness in their own societies making it easier to chase the abstract and apocalyptic notions of a global war between good and evil<sup>23</sup> – or “cosmic war” as American sociolo-

gist Mark Jürgensmeyer denominates it. The pool of candidates may increase or decrease according to sociopolitical events, but in order for these nodes or cliques to join the global jihad, they need human bridges,<sup>24</sup> peripheral social acquaintances that are crucial in the process of getting into the movement.<sup>25</sup> These weak ties also play a central role in bringing enthusiasts to the jihad and it is a self-generating process from below rather than a recruitment drive from above.<sup>26</sup>

Terrorist groups need motivated members, willing to fight and die. A constant flow of new recruits is necessary to continue operating. The determination of these recruits is capital for group formation and for the success of their venture. Terrorist candidates undergo a process in which they discard their old values and, cut off from society, humiliated, alienated, and hopeless, they become vulnerable to recruiters who offer a new sense of purpose in life and lead them to a brave new world.<sup>27</sup> Social forces might be difficult to resist; however, in the end, the individual must be held accountable for his rational choice.<sup>28</sup>

## 5. Popular support

Insurgent leaders, terrorists, and guerrilla fighters tend to emphasize how crucial popular support is for succeeding in offsetting the superior resources of governments.<sup>29</sup> The larger the groups that feel deprived, the greater the possibilities for mobilizing mass support.<sup>30</sup> Support,

either passive or active, can make or break a movement and acquiring this support demands considerable efforts, skills, and good organization.<sup>31</sup> If accomplished, it translates in strength and resilience for the group that in turn can receive moral, political, material support, and/or sanctuary.<sup>32</sup>

Selective terrorist tactics against hated people or groups may increase popular support. This particular tactic has heretofore yielded successful results to al-Qaeda in its fight against the West. The use of terrorism by groups who seek to address particular grievances has long been tried. However, the terrorism venture runs the risk of being counterproductive since it can turn life miserable for the general population and if it becomes indiscriminate, these groups can end up alienating potential domestic and international supporters.<sup>33</sup>

Though emotions are a poor guide to policy, they fan the flames of terrorism. The terrorist message must be appealing to the masses in order to garner support since its ultimate goal is to effect change. Political legitimacy is at stake when terrorist groups convince the population that violence is allegedly the only way to address grievances and this rationale of “fighting for a right cause” provides the moral justification for its use. In his book *Politics as a Vocation*, German sociologist Max Weber defined that the necessary condition of an entity to be considered a state is to retain the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence over its ter-

ritory. Using terrorism to erode the strength of a state shows citizens that the government cannot effectively control its territory and protect them.<sup>34</sup> The key is to find the right balance as to not alienate the population and this goes for terrorist groups as much as for government forces. Terrorists can organize attacks just to provoke government reprisals against the population, calculating that these actions will increase public support to their cause as a reaction, aided with some propaganda efforts, dramatizing the reaction and associating it with the ruling authorities.<sup>35</sup> However, if the population remains unresponsive, there is always the final technique of coercion to force them into compliance.<sup>36</sup> Coercion represents the weakest strategy since it usually spurs popular resentment and the terrorists' legitimacy claim is called into question.

Our new technological advances and the globalization phenomenon have helped to boost the reach of terrorist groups and their ability to send their message without filters across entire regions, thus enhancing their proselytizing capabilities. The new century will bring even more breakthroughs that terrorist groups and states will use. The most adroit side in the use of new technologies will have the upper hand. Governments need to appeal to public opinion in more compelling ways and use their superior resources in order to thwart terrorist efforts through the delegitimization of violence as a tool of political discourse.

## 6. Organization

Organizational skills are vital for every movement. Support for their cause will depend on these skills; groups know it and invest a great amount of time and effort in their organizational endeavors<sup>37</sup> since the lifespan of the organization will be determined by the effectiveness of using their assets cogently. The most important asset of a group is its human resources and the skills of the leader will be paramount in identifying, integrating, and coordinating their different tasks and roles essential for success in combat operations, training, logistics, transportation, communications, and other areas of the organization.<sup>38</sup> The most resilient terrorist groups enjoy longevity because of the strength of their organizations to carry out their strategies and accomplish their objectives - be it fundraising, propaganda efforts, or combat operations - and their adaptability to change according to the circumstances. For example, organizational development must accompany the escalation of violence; lack of discipline, poor training, deficient coordination, wrong or insufficient equipment can ruin the group's efforts and are a sign of trouble for the whole organization.<sup>39</sup>

One of the main goals of a properly-run organization is to promote and maintain the cohesion of the group. Unifying the effort is the basic principle behind effective strategy, planning, tactics and organization.<sup>40</sup> Competing for recruits and lack of unity often give governments op-

portunities to infiltrate the groups and create even greater dissension, exacerbating differences between factions – as the case of the PLO infiltrated by Israeli security agencies illustrates.<sup>41</sup> Disunity can be caused by teleological, theoretical, or strategic differences; though intertwined, the three are distinct.<sup>42</sup> The first cause can be deeply unsettling since it has to do with discord about the ultimate goal to pursue and these disagreements usually have their root causes in the theoretical realm. Consequently, it affects strategy definitions where ideas of how to develop the normative approach can clash leading to disputes.<sup>43</sup>

Discord over strategy can influence decisively over the success or failure of a group; for example, decisions about the use of terrorism have provoked great disunity within Irish IRA and Spanish ETA and stand out as prime examples of disagreement and defections due to disputes over the use of violence.<sup>44</sup> A picture of disunity and weakness can be fatal for an organization. Conflict between groups can dissuade people from joining and sap the movement's overall strength.<sup>45</sup> Although nothing can guarantee success, the higher the level of group cohesion, the more chances it will have to carry out its strategies victoriously and accomplish the objectives of the organization.

## 7. Crime

Although both use violence to meet their goals, crime is different from terrorism. There are two general

distinctions. First, crime is driven by the profit and risk reduction motives while terrorism is driven by ideology and it may lead terrorists to ignore risk in pursuit of the political end; second, criminal groups rely entirely on defined, structured organization while terrorism can be practiced by individuals or very small groups and terrorist organizations are prone to mutate.<sup>46</sup> Yet the distinction between crime and terrorism does not mean that they cannot make common cause to reach their own objectives.

Money is always a great motivator and the terrorist venture can be costly. For example, a CIA estimate indicates that it cost Al Qaeda some thirty million dollars a year to sustain itself during the period preceding 9/11.<sup>47</sup> Just as ordinary criminals do, petty theft, money laundering, smuggling, forgery, credit card theft and fraud, counterfeiting, drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnapping – now as a money-raising scheme – have become staple features of the terrorist fund-raising repertoire.<sup>48</sup> This “do-it-yourself organized crime” by terrorist networks has become an almost ubiquitous tool for terrorists, illustrated by the example of Tamils in Canada, who have been involved in such diverse crimes as drug trafficking and credit card fraud, in order to send a significant part of the profits back to Sri Lanka for the Tamil Tigers.<sup>49</sup>

With the end of the Cold War came also a decrease in formal state sponsorship of terrorism, which in turn

forced terrorist organizations to find new sources of alternative sources of funding and many of them found in criminal organizations their solution.<sup>50</sup> In order to support their ideological goals, terrorist organizations have learned to be pragmatic and often engaged directly in money laundering as well as selling arms, narcotics, and people; in the way, some have gone so far as to replace ideology by rich profits.<sup>51</sup> Unstable political conditions are perfect breeding grounds for crime and terrorism; criminology expert Tamara Makarenko suggests that the environment of instability that protects a group's criminal activities is sustained for the sole purpose of profit-seeking as it is the case with Colombian FARC, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>52</sup>

The difficulty of finding and tracking the movement of terrorist money is still another major limitation regarding counterterrorism efforts. Terrorists use the normal banking system where their transactions are very hard to distinguish from legitimate business activities and financial transfers.<sup>53</sup> Thus, steps have been taken in a number of countries to designate individuals, charities, and entities believed implicated in terrorism financing.<sup>54</sup> Although significant progress has been made since 9/11, partly through stricter banking operational procedures, the use of personal couriers by terrorists and the extended Middle Eastern informal remittance system known as *hawala* constitute a

network that is literally impossible to stop.<sup>55</sup>

Due to globalization, geography no longer matters as it did before. As in the world of legitimate commerce, criminals and terrorists are taking advantage of the globalization of financial, commercial, transportation and communications networks to improve their reach.<sup>56</sup> Criminal and terrorist networks are joining forces regardless of borders and using every advantage technologies can offer to increase their profits and lower their risks. These unholy alliances strengthen the financial status of terrorist groups, but also expose them to lose their *raison d'être*.

It is an honest assessment to admit that state bureaucracies cannot compete with the flexibility and adaptability of these networks. On the other hand, although fighting crime and terrorism may seem an impossible undertaking, it is not. It is very difficult, indeed, but not impossible. The variables playing in favor or against government action are many and can change the outcome. In addition, disrupting the criminal and terrorist infrastructures and funding is the inescapable duty of the State due to the social contract with its citizens.

## 8. Fear

Terrorism runs on terror. The fear factor is an ineluctable part of the power of terrorism. The psychological aspect is crucial for the terrorist and that sense of vulnerability and



insecurity can be unsettling for any society. And nothing seems to incite that fear more strongly than the specter of a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) attack. This angst fuels public fears and drives the strong psychological reaction that these weapons evoke.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, it exerts pressure on policymakers; as terrorism analyst Jessica Stern has indicated, "We want to eradicate the risk entirely, with little regard to cost."<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, that is only wishful thinking.

This kind of weapons used to be considered morally reprehensible and they were taboo due to a mixture of social, religious, and moral constraints.<sup>59</sup> Starting in the 1990s, but particularly in this new century, the level of indiscriminate violence has reached levels not seen before. Consequently, society has gone from thinking about the possibility of a CBRN attack to the certainty that the day of a CBRN attack will ultimately come – but it will not be as soon as many claim.<sup>60</sup>

The Damoclean psychological effect of CBRN weapons is one of terrorism's major advantages and strengthens its hand. Fortunately, CBRN terrorism still has a way to go because of delivery constraints. Powerfully attractive to those seeking apocalyptic destruction, these weapons have not rendered the fruits terrorists were looking for – yet.

Counterterrorism expert Richard Falkenrath describes the reasonable

assumption that at some stage there will be terrorist incidents involving weapons of mass destruction as "low-probability, high-consequence threat."<sup>61</sup> CBRN weapons are a real threat to society; however, fear should not get the best out of us. Western societies seem to be slipping into a state of mass psychosis fearing that a CBRN attack might be around the corner. We are enhancing the terrorists' psychological coercive power by having allowed fear to cloud our analyses and assessments. In order to be effective in our counterterrorism measures, such programs need to be based on realistic estimates of the potential threat and strike a balance between likelihood and cost – yet no state can provide one-hundred percent effective safeguards against attacks.<sup>62</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

In order to confront the terrorist threat with higher chances of success, it is necessary to understand that it is a long-term struggle and that we must develop appropriate policy measures to upset the terrorist cart. One way could be leaving aside the idea that we are just dealing with the symptoms, but not with the illness if we do not get to the root causes of terrorism. The human condition has much to do with terrorism and man is not about to change yet. Addressing instead the factors that fuel the strength and resilience of those groups engaging in terrorism can have crucial bearing on the progress and outcome of our anti-terrorism endeavor.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Marc Sageman. *Understanding Terror Networks*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 137.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 147.
- <sup>4</sup> Bard E. O'Neill. *From Revolution to Apocalypse: Insurgency and Terrorism*. (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 94.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup> Glenn E. Curtis and Tara Karacan. "The Nexus among Terrorists, Narcotics Traffickers, Weapons Proliferators, and Organized Crime Networks in Western Europe." *Federal Research Division, Library of Congress* (2002), p. 22.
- <sup>8</sup> O'Neill, p. 130.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Sageman p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.
- <sup>13</sup> Bruce Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), p. 254.
- <sup>14</sup> O'Neill, p. 101.
- <sup>15</sup> As quoted in O'Neill, p. 121.
- <sup>16</sup> Sageman, p. 137.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid* p. 137-38.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140.
- <sup>19</sup> As quoted in Sageman, p. 140.
- <sup>20</sup> Sageman, p. 141.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 149.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 150.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 151.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 172.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 169.
- <sup>27</sup> O'Neill, p. 88.
- <sup>28</sup> Sageman, p. 184.
- <sup>29</sup> O'Neill, p. 93.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 103.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104-105.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119-20.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 127.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 130.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104-05.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 116.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119-20.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 127.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 130.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 130-31.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 131.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107.
- <sup>46</sup> Curtis and Karacan., p. 4.
- <sup>47</sup> Victor Comras. "Al Qaeda Finances and Funding to Affiliated Groups." *Strategic Insights* (2005), p7.
- <sup>48</sup> Zachary Abuza. "Funding Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Financial Network of Al Qaeda and Jemayah Islamiya." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* N° 25 Vol. 2 (2003), p. 188.
- See also: Phil Williams. "Warning Indicators: Terrorist Finances and Terrorist Adaptation." *Strategic Insights* (2005), p. 6.
- See also Comras, p. 7.
- <sup>49</sup> Williams, p. 9.
- <sup>50</sup> Curtis and Karacan, p. 22.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.
- <sup>52</sup> As quoted in Curtis and Karacan, p. 24.
- <sup>53</sup> Williams, p. 11.
- <sup>54</sup> Comras, p.10.
- <sup>55</sup> Abuza, p. 172; Williams, p. 11.
- <sup>56</sup> Curtis and Karacan, p. 3.
- <sup>57</sup> Nadine Gurr and Benjamin Cole. *The New Face of Terrorism: Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 12.
- <sup>58</sup> As quoted in Gurr and Cole, p. 13.
- <sup>59</sup> Gurr and Cole, p. 164.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.
- <sup>61</sup> As quoted in Gurr and Cole, p. 260.
- <sup>62</sup> Gurr and Cole, p. 267.