

Psychology of Extremism & Terrorism

For M.Phil Psychology By Dr. Najma Iqbal Malik

two common elements are usually found in contemporary definitions:

(1) that terrorism involves aggression against non-combatants

(2) that the terrorist action in itself is not expected by its perpetrator to accomplish a political goal but instead to influence a target audience and change that audience's behavior in a way that will serve the interests of the terrorist

*“One person’s terrorist is another person’s
freedom fighter.”*

- Terrorism can be distinguished from other types of terror in that it is:
 - goal oriented not gratuitous
 - always directed at a larger audience
 - designed to produce a “positive” societal change
 - facilitated by both active supporters and sympathizers
- Terrorism is usually viewed as a glorious endeavor by its perpetrators

TABLE I
Dimensions of Terrorism

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Classification</i>
Perpetrator number	Individual vs. group
Sponsorship	State vs. substate vs. individual
Relation to authority	Anti-state/anti-establishment/separatist vs. pro-state/pro-establishment
Locale	Intrastate vs. transnational
Military status	Civilian vs. paramilitary or military
Spiritual motivation	Secular vs. religious
Financial motivation	Idealistic vs. entrepreneurial
Political ideology	Leftist/socialist vs. rightist/fascist vs. anarchist
Hierarchical role	Sponsor vs. leader versus middle management vs. follower
Willingness to die	Suicidal vs. nonsuicidal
Target	Property (including data) vs. individuals vs. masses of people
Methodology	Bombing, assassination, kidnapping/hostage taking, mass poisoning, rape, other (e.g., bioterrorism, cyberterrorism)

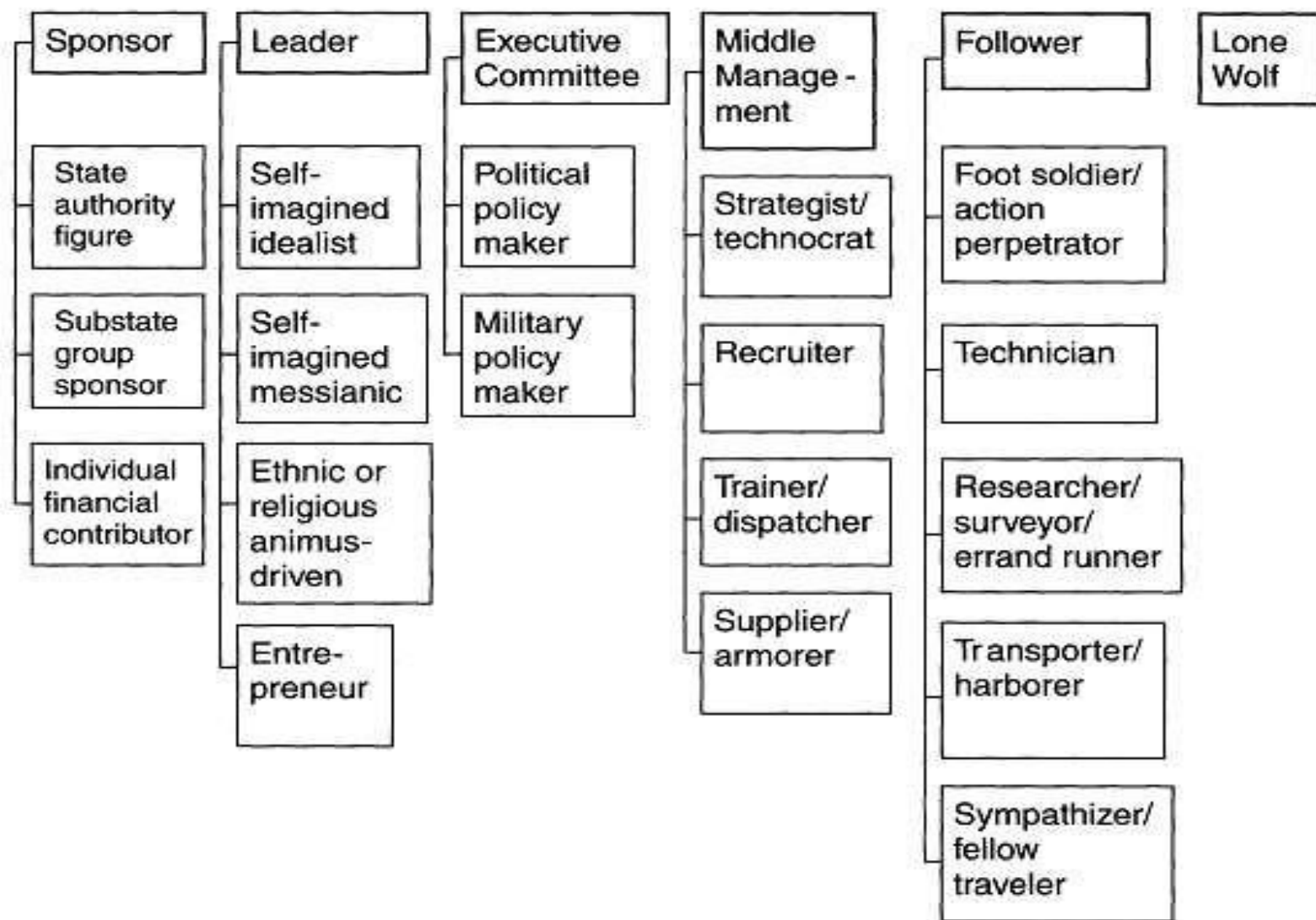


Figure 1: Roles and Types within Terrorist Hierarchies

PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL THEORY

Ferracuti's (1982) formulation regarding the relationship between insanity and terrorism might equally apply to the relationship between sociopathy and terrorism: sociopaths may sometimes be among the terrorists, but terrorists are not, by virtue of their political violence, necessarily sociopaths. Intuitively, one might expect different personality traits among antisocial and prosocial terrorists

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

that terrorist action derives from a conscious, rational, calculated decision to take this particular type of action as the optimum strategy to accomplish a sociopolitical goal.

other theories explain why people are inclined toward a type or style of behavior (e.g., to be a terrorist), while rational choice theory, derived from economics, assumes this behavioral proclivity as a given and attempts to explain how changes in policy—the rules of the "game" that is played between terrorists and governments

rational choice analysis is a powerful tool for discovering theoretically valid and surprisingly counterintuitive forces that probably influence terrorist and government behaviors. Game theory may also prove invaluable in predicting likely changes in the base rate (the rate predicted in rational actor simulations) of behaviors of an idealized terrorist in response to concessions or deterrents. However, rational choice theories cannot predict idiosyncratic responses.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Bandura's (1973, 1998) social learning theory of aggression suggests that violence follows observation and imitation of an aggressive model, and a variant of this theory has been invoked to explain terrorist behaviors not as the consequence of innate aggressivity but of cognitive "reconstrual" of moral imperative.

Madrasahs

However, the social learning/cognitive restructuring model fails to explain why only a small minority among the hundreds of thousands of students educated for jihad in madrasas, the millions exposed to extremist publications, and the tens of millions exposed to public glorification of terrorists have become terrorists.

As Taylor and Quayle (1994, 32) put it, "Not everyone from those communities, although subject to those same or similar influences, becomes a terrorist."

FRUSTRATION-AGGRESSION HYPOTHESIS

This raises the question of how politically motivated people reach the point of no return at which their potential energy is converted into violent action.

. Political psychologist John Chowing Davies (1973, 251) has even stated, "Violence is always a response to frustration.

Millions of people live in frustrating circumstances but never turn to terrorism, many terrorists do not belong to the desperate classes whose frustration they claim to be expressing.

RELATIVE DEPRIVATION THEORY

It has also been proposed that economic disparities cause terrorism.

This claim underlies Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation—that rebellions come to be when people cannot bear the misery of their lot.

One possibility is that either absolute deprivation or relative economic disparity ignites terrorist sentiments, especially among members of an oppressed underclass.

Although poverty may play a role in some political violence, relative deprivation is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain revolutionary terrorism.

OPPRESSION THEORY

Oppression provokes political violence. Particularly in the case of nationalist-separatist or ethnic-sectarian terrorism (e.g., ETA, PIRA, Hamas), actors often cite the injustice of their treatment by governments that rob them of identity, dignity, security, and freedom as the motive for their joining a terrorist group.

NATIONAL CULTURAL THEORY

Weinberg and Eubank (1994), who proposed that terrorism expresses itself differently in "collectivist" versus "individualist" cultures.

According to this theory, in collectivist cultures, a person's identity is primarily derived from the social system, dividing the world strictly according to in-groups and out-groups and linking their personal well-being to the well-being of their group, while in individualist cultures, identity is derived from personal goals.

PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

PSYCHOANALYTIC PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF TERRORISM

Psychoanalytic approaches to terrorist behavior may be roughly divided according to their emphasis on identity theory, narcissism theory, paranoia theory, and absolutist thinking.

1. Identity Theory

It has been proposed that candidates for terrorism are young people lacking self-esteem who have strong or even desperate needs to consolidate their identities.

Overcontrolling parents prevented these respondents from developing autonomy, leading to identity crises that made violent struggle irresistible. At the extreme, those with identity confusion are perhaps tormented by a sense of isolation, conceivably engaging in terrorist violence as an adaptive response to the pain of anomie.

2. Narcissism Theory

John Crayton (1983) invoked Kohut's self psychology to explain the sequence that drives young people to terrorism.

Self psychology emphasizes the needs that an infant has for caring responses to develop normally. Failure of maternal empathy leads to damage to the self-image-so called narcissistic injury-that arrests development in one of two ways: persistent infantile grandiose fantasies or failure to internalize the idealized image of the parent. Either problem prevents the development of adult identity and morality

3. Paranoia Theory: The salient feature of terrorist psychology is projection, an infantile defense that assigns intolerable internal feelings to an external object when an individual who has grown up with a damaged self-concept idealizes the good self and splits out the bad self.

While not overtly psychotic, the paranoid position nonetheless inflames the terrorist with suspicions that justify bloody acts of "self-defense" against his victims: "the zeal of the torturer, represents his eagerness to destroy the devalued and disowned part of the self"