

# Terrorism

I COMPILED this article back in July, several weeks before the horrific events of 11 September. So it was somewhat surprising that even in the wake of the most destructive terrorist attacks in history I found that the fundamentals remained unchanged and the message and advice psychology offered, in my eyes at least, remained the same. What did emerge after the 11th was a powerful and urgent need for answers and understanding. In the days that followed, two questions were put to me time and time again: Why do people commit acts of terrorism? How can it be stopped?

Terrorism was a topical subject even before the September attacks. It is often in the news and obviously significant in terms of the threat it poses and the suffering and damage it inflicts. So an easy assumption to make is that it is an extensively studied subject matter – one that is well understood and one that we can combat with strategies and policies grounded in the findings and insights gleaned from a substantial body of high-quality research studies. Sadly, however, such an easy assumption is also very much a mistaken one.

While terrorism has rarely left the media headlines for any length of time in the past three decades, the research effort channelled into understanding its causes and cures has been limited, patchy and often of dubious quality (Crenshaw, 2000). The end result has been that we know an awful lot less about terrorism than we should do. Even more disturbing is that much of what we do know from research has been very poorly communicated outside



**ANDREW SILKE**  
with his practical  
recommendations  
for preventing  
further atrocities.

academic circles. This has left the door open for myth, rumour, prejudice and propaganda to dominate public and political discourse on terrorism. The result has been that, more often than not, terrorism is dismissed as the work of crazy fanatics and few see the need to progress beyond such casual interpretations. Thus the action plan begins with a realisation about the nature of terrorists:

1. *Recognising that terrorists are normal people is the first step to resolving terrorist conflicts.*

It is very rare to find a terrorist who suffers from a clinically defined 'personality disorder' or who could in any other way be regarded as mentally ill or psychologically deviant (Silke, 1998). Ultimately, the overwhelming majority of terrorists (and this significantly even includes suicide bombers) are average, normal individuals who in other circumstances would be quite unremarkable. Their involvement in terrorism is not the result of psychoses, inner traits or aberrant personalities. Rather, in most cases it is an understandable response to a series of life events.

2. *The causes of terrorism need to be focused on – not just the actors.*

If terrorists are otherwise ordinary, unremarkable people, then one needs to examine why have these 'normal' people decided to engage in such an extreme activity as political violence. Once you are forced to throw away the 'terrorists are different' model, then attention must be given to other areas. An important realisation here is that becoming involved in terrorism is a process. Nobody is born a terrorist. There is no bad gene at work here.

Neither does anyone wake up one morning and decide abruptly that on that day they are going to start planting bombs in public streets.

Becoming a terrorist is in the first instance an issue of socialisation. Any given society will possess some minorities or disaffected groups who rightly or wrongly perceive that the world is treating them harshly. In some cases there are genuine and very substantial causes for grievance. Individuals who belong to or identify with such disaffected groups share in a sense of injustice and persecution. It is from such pools that individual terrorists emerge.

The move from the disaffected to the violent extremist is usually facilitated by a catalyst event. Normally this is an act of extreme physical violence committed by the police or security forces or other rival group against the individual, family, friends, or simply anyone they can identify with. The fatal shooting of a 12-year-old boy by Israeli soldiers in September 2000 at Netzarim acted as such a catalyst event for Palestinians. Captured on television, the shooting of the boy as he cowered with his father behind a water barrel contributed to a dramatic resurgence in terrorist violence in the region.

The combination of a sense of belonging to a beleaguered group combined with the experience of an act of extreme violence against either oneself or significant others, is the impetus for some to engage in terrorism. Recognising the key importance of this process identifies two obvious ways to prevent terrorism:

3. *Address the genuine grievances of minorities and other disaffected groups.*
4. *Ensure that the security forces are restrained and disciplined in their use of aggression and force with regard to these groups.*

Governments failing to attend to these two issues leave themselves exposed to serious and long-running terrorist conflicts. A wider persistence in ignorance and delusion regarding terrorists and terrorism has allowed the continued manifestation of a number of questionable polices and

## WEBLINKS

1st SPOT Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism:

[1st-spot.net/topic\\_terrorism.html](http://1st-spot.net/topic_terrorism.html)

Terrorism Research Centre:

[www.terrorism.com/index.html](http://www.terrorism.com/index.html)

International Policy Institute for Counter-terrorism: [www.ict.org.ill](http://www.ict.org.ill)

Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies: [www.cteh.ac.ill/terror/index.html](http://www.cteh.ac.ill/terror/index.html)

Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism: [www.mipt.org/](http://www.mipt.org/)

practices. Military reactions to terrorist attacks are a classic example of an ill-judged policy: it has long been demonstrated that these have no deterrent impact at all, and indeed usually lead to an escalation in terrorist violence (Hoffman, 1998).

The use of these often counterproductive policies is in large measure the result of two factors. First, a poor understanding among the public and policy makers of the psychology and motivation of terrorists, and second, the media-friendly temptation to advocate only hardline and uncompromising strategies when tackling terrorists.

5. *Effective policies are based on good understanding and good awareness. This needs to be cultivated both in government circles and among the public.*

To achieve this understanding requires a proper exposure to the psychological insights already gained in comprehending terrorism. But this often requires a fundamental shift for authorities who tend to be more comfortable in simply demonising terrorist foes rather than seeing them as human beings. For example, two days after the World Trade Center attack Jack Straw commented that the terrorists 'were not people who accept any of the rules or values that we in the rest of the world would recognise' and that they 'have no respect, however minimal, for human life – not even for their own lives'. This is an understandable reaction perhaps, but not an accurate one.

Those in authority are often fearful that encouraging a more informed understanding of terrorists may undermine the wider commitment to defeating terrorism. For example, RUC Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan noted (*The Daily Telegraph*, 4 February 1999) that for him 'understanding [paramilitary activity] comes dangerously close to authorising, sanctioning and approving'. Yet allowing either oneself or others to continue to believe the illusion that terrorists are madmen or fanatics (in the interest of bolstering commitment for an aggressive and costly struggle) can simultaneously close down other avenues to peace. If terrorists are evil lunatics how could one ever reach a negotiated settlement with them? Why should one make any form of concession or gesture of compromise? It is only by changing the wider mind-set that alternatives to ruthless struggle become feasible options for both sides. This is



something which successive UK governments largely succeeded in doing in the 1990s, and something which Israeli governments largely failed to achieve in the same span.

In order to cultivate such understanding, informed and accessible insight on the subject needs to be disseminated in a systematic manner. Within government and security bodies proper briefings need to be readily available to those who are tasked with the serious responsibility of tackling terrorist threats. Such briefings need to be based on psychological insight rather than on the vagaries of political agendas. Within the public sphere a reputable body is needed to ensure that consistent and objective insight into terrorism is available both for media outlets and for more localised concerns.

6. *A national or European centre for the understanding of terrorism should be created.*

The USA recently created a national centre to co-ordinate, fund and disseminate research into terrorism: The Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, based in Oklahoma City. Recent events excluded, there have generally been far more serious concerns with terrorism on this side of the Atlantic, yet we have

developed nothing similar to tackle the problem. The creation of such a centre in the UK (or perhaps developed under the auspices of the EU) would provide a focus for item 5 of this action plan, and importantly could also improve the quality and quantity of research on terrorism. For example, more research is badly needed that can identify the risk factors leading to terrorism. Effective prevention is only possible when there is good understanding of the causes. Terrorism is a paradox – a topical, high-profile subject with clear real-world relevance, yet with limited funding for studies and a desperate shortage of researchers in the area. More needs to be done to encourage younger researchers to take an interest and to facilitate more established researchers in maintaining research activity in the area. A centre along the lines of the American model could do much in this regard.

## Conclusions

Psychology offers real insight in the understanding of terrorism and in the search for an end to terrorist conflicts. This article has focused on its crucial lessons in terms of educating with a mind to opening doors for improved prevention and more flexible resolution. The levels of ignorance, misconception and prejudice concerning terrorism that need to be overturned are immense, but in doing so there are genuine opportunities to achieve and safeguard peace and security for all.

## References

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■ *Dr Andrew Silke is at the Scarman Centre, University of Leicester. E-mail: aps7@le.ac.uk.*

## THE PLAN IN BRIEF

- Recognising that terrorists are normal people is the first step to resolving conflicts.
- The causes of terrorism need to be focused on – not just the actors.
- Address the genuine grievances of minorities and other disaffected groups.
- Ensure that the security forces are restrained and disciplined in their responses.
- Effective policies are based on good understanding and good awareness. This needs to be cultivated both in government circles and among the public.
- A national or European centre for the understanding of terrorism should be created.