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Expanding the Horizons of Terrorism and Political Violence Research

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Special Issue: Terrorism and Political Violence

It is more than a decade since the September 11, 2001 attacks made combating terrorism one of the top priorities of governments and law enforcement organizations worldwide. The flurry of research that emerged over this decade has done much to enrich our understanding of how and why people use violence to achieve their ideological or political goal. A field that was previously criticized for lacking empirical data (Silke, 1998) can now boast findings that are of interest to a wide range of scholars, including those interested in negotiation and conflict management. This is not surprising. While it is tempting to view acts of terrorism and political violence as unique and unlike other forms of conflict, such pathologizing is unhelpful and inconsistent with evidence showing that the processes at play are similar to those found elsewhere (e.g., Donohue & Taylor, 2003). The same kind of pathologizing of terrorists as ‘mad and bad’ is also now dismissed in the literature (cf. Jacques & Taylor, in press; Horgan, 2005). Rather, it seems more productive to view terrorism as an extreme instance of conflict behavior (i.e., one’s outward reaction to an experienced frustration caused by others; cf. Van de Vliert, 1997) that provides an opportunity to observe the personal and social dynamics of conflict in a magnified form.

Despite the developments in research, studying terrorism and political violence remains tricky. Designing an experimental paradigm that sufficiently captures the personal and social dynamics experienced by those who have been involved in terrorism is challenging (or not compatible with research ethics). Similarly, access to those who perpetrate acts of terrorism is also fraught with methodological concerns, since those consenting to an interview may intentionally provide a misleading account or may

provide an account that is shaped by perpetrators' post-hoc rationalizations (Gill, this issue). As a consequence, researchers of terrorism and political violence have been inventive in the data that they have used and the methodologies that they have applied. This Special Issue includes five such innovations. These papers not only provide new insights into the psychology of terrorism and political violence, but they also stretch our understanding of the kinds of data and the research questions that can be productively asked when examining real-world conflicts. In essence, they mark out new research avenues that may in time provide the evidence-base for interventions that allow us to combat terrorism and political violence in a more effective manner.

Our special issue opens with a piece by Gill, who focuses on understanding how people become motivated and mobilized to a point where they are willing to sacrifice their own lives. Based on a dataset of Palestinian suicide terrorists, he illustrates the role of push and pull factors in (self) selection processes as well as the importance of catalyzing experiences and socialization processes. As such, Gill's contribution is conducive in understanding the gradual pathway involved in becoming a suicide terrorist and the importance of how any deviant act may be seen as part of one's life story (cf. Young & Canter, in press).

The second contribution by Doosje and colleagues recognizes that an underdeveloped area of research involves right-wing terrorism. Recent examples, such as Anders Breivik's "lone wolf" act in Norway and the dismantled Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (a German Nazi inspired group held responsible for a dozen killings of Turkish immigrants), point at the importance of understanding how such terrorist acts develop. In a study with over 1,000 Dutch youth, Doosje and colleagues focus on social

psychological factors that promote the adoption of radical right-wing attitudes and behaviors. Their study shows that feelings of in-group superiority play a crucial role in both promoting people's own intention to display violence and their positive attitude towards violence used by others. Their findings provide an important foundation for understanding engagement with this form of violence, since even the lone wolf terrorist, who may act on his or her own without outside direction, may still be inspired by others (Bakker & de Graaf, 2010).

The third article by Dechesne directs our attention towards a question that has almost universally been overlooked in terrorism studies and conflict research: what can be learned by the name of the terrorist group? Drawing on representation theory, Dechesne shows that answering this deceptively simple question reveals far more about the underlying characteristics of different groups, as well as their intent toward terrorist activities. Through innovative usage of information in several large-scale databases, Dechesne shows how usage of name among groups differs systematically across both culture and perpetrated violence. He then goes further by giving a glimpse of how these relationships play out at an individual level by exploring its manifestations in a group of participants. Importantly, as Dechesne argues, the links among names, individual motivations, and group agendas goes beyond the curiosity of name choice, because it provides a heuristic mechanism through which authorities could assess the threat posed by emerging groups.

In the fourth contribution, Prentice and her colleagues direct our attention towards persuasive pro- and counter terrorism messages that may inspire others to engage in violent extremism. They expose an 'assumption of opposites' that underlies much

research into persuasion and counter-persuasion, and argue instead for a author-centered model that differentiates acts from ideology. Using novel corpus linguistic analysis, they demonstrate how Muslim authors denouncing terrorism construct messages that focus on disagreement with the act, while UK officials' counter-messages construct messages that disagree with both acts and ideology. Importantly, their findings suggest that counter-extremist messages should not be viewed as a homogenous group, and that understanding positions in such global-political conflicts is not as simple as adopting a pro- or anti-position. Their data supports one clear distinction that may help conflict negotiators in the future, which is to separate the act from the ideology.

The fifth article by Nieboer, Dolnik, and Giebels focuses on effective intervention during a terrorist crime 'in action' (i.e., hostage taking). The growing presence of western expats and travelers in fragile states has led to a rise in international kidnapping incidents, to which many Western and East-Asian countries deploy police negotiators. However, as Nieboer et al. argue, police negotiators in many countries are not specifically selected nor trained to operate overseas, and there is an absence of research for them to draw on. As a first contribution that rectifies this situation, Nieboer et al. present the results of semi-structured interviews with negotiators who have experienced such incidents. They reveal three areas of attention: (1) the type of incidents overseas negotiators are involved in and the consequences for the negotiation process, (2) the negotiator role and (team) context, and (3) the multitude of parties involved, such as diplomats and TPIs. Importantly, and to bridge the gap with practice, the authors conclude by identifying ways through which overseas operational deployment and negotiator training can be improved.

The five contributions of this Special Issue cover a broad range of terrorist acts, ranging from suicide bombings to hostage taking. They also demonstrate a broad range of methodologies, ranging from large-scale questionnaires, to text and social media analyses, to qualitative and in-depth interviews. Indeed, our intention in putting together this Special Issue was to demonstrate what is possible in research when we ‘think outside the box.’ This should not only help researchers think about the horizons ripe for development in the area of terrorism and political violence research, but it may also provide insights into methods that can be fruitfully brought to bear on questions in other areas of negotiation and conflict management research.

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