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The psychology of extremism and terrorism: A Middle-Eastern perspective

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Abstract

The recent surge of terrorism and issues related to its causes are reviewed in this paper from a Middle-Eastern perspective. First, important related issues such as the definition, ideologies, environment, political, and social reasons that are linked to terrorism are briefly reviewed. Second, and the main focus in this paper, is a review of the psychological variables associated with terrorism. Finally suggestions for possible solutions and research projects are offered.
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Keywords: Extremism; Terrorism; Roots; Psychological explanations

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The consequences of terrorists' acts are disturbing and have world wide-impact regardless of where the acts were committed. The recent surge of these terrorist acts has not been adequately examined in spite of their horrifying effects. Many of these acts of terrorism have been linked to a violence-condoning interpretation of the Islamic faith, and the perpetrators are often referred to within the media as Islamic extremists. Although a majority of Muslims, particularly intellectuals and the educated do not condone acts of terrorism and violence, these acts have been nonetheless committed in the name of Islam. Extremism and advocating violence in the name of religion are historically common. They are not a new phenomenon or unique to the Islamic faith (Stern, 2003). The goal of this paper is to review the issues related to the recent rise of terrorist acts in Islamic and Western countries. The focus will be on the psychological variables linked to these acts. First, a brief review of information from other disciplines is necessary to provide important background information.

1. Definition of terrorism

There is no single definition that adequately describes the many expressions of terrorism that have spread throughout history (Drummond, 2002; Laqueur, 1987). The main elements of terrorist action are the calculated use of unexpected, shocking, and unlawful violence against non-combatants in order to intimidate or coerce a government or civilian population to accept demands on behalf of an underlying ideology or cause.

There are several reasons given for the use of terrorist activity. Among them are: to create high profile impact on the public with the goal of undermining public confidence in their own government; to make routine social activity difficult; to inflict as much damage as possible; to seek vengeance; and to create physical pain and paralyzing psychological emotions such as panic, chaos, unrest, fear, paranoia, anxiety, anger, grief, and a sense of tragedy (Ardila, 2002; Furnish, 2005; Hudson, 1999; Lawal, 2002; McCauley, 2002; Reid, 2002; Thackrah, 2004).

2. Foundation for terrorism

Middle-Eastern terrorism rests upon more than religion. It is based upon current and historical cultural experiences within the Islamic world. These experiences include political and racial conflicts both within and between these nations, and the historical relationships between the Islamic world and the West. It is maintained through several ideologies, environmental pressures, and its adherents are never lacking in justifications.

2.1. Religious influence and ideologies

Extreme religious ideologies play a central role in radicalizing young Muslims, recruiting and indoctrinating them into the terrorist ideology, and eventually asking them to commit terrorist acts (Ibrahim, 1980, 1988; Isam, 2006; Schwind, 2005). The common theme in these ideologies is that Islamic states were no longer purely Islamic and Muslim are living in "Jahiliaya" (the age of ignorance which prevailed in the Arabian peninsula before the revelation of Islam to the prophet Mohammed) (Ibrahim, 1980). The extremists' ideologies grew stronger around the second part of the 19th century, particularly in the Islamic world. Out of this systematic teaching came a planned and strategic effort to indoctrinate Muslims into thinking similarly. In order to unite Muslims around the world, to emphasize that they are distinct, and to develop the perception of "them" vs. "us," Islamic extremists promoted an Islamized dress code of the

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