

SEVEN PSYCHOSOCIAL PRINCIPLES FOR EXPLAINING TERRORISM

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Research approaches for an understanding of the terrorist phenomenon are suggested. Seven principles explaining terrorism are analyzed by applying a psychosocial approach, with a view to complementing explanations based on socio-structural and psychological variables, which are insufficient and often erroneous. Thus, terrorism is presented as a strategy of political influence, and the psychological attributes of terrorists are explained as the result of several influential social processes. We consider terrorist attacks and campaigns to be based on strategic reasons, but we also assume that the rationality of the terrorist's perspective is limited. As far as the organizational parameters are concerned, we propose an analogy with social movements of a more general nature, especially with regard to their ideological frameworks of legitimation and resource mobilization processes

Keywords: terrorism, social movements, conflict, political violence

Este artículo describe las bases para una aproximación psicosocial al análisis de los fenómenos terroristas. Más concretamente, se exponen siete principios explicativos del terrorismo que sean congruentes con los supuestos metateóricos y el cuerpo de conocimientos propios de la Psicología social. Desde esta óptica el terrorismo se concibe como una estrategia de influencia sociopolítica. Los atributos psicológicos de los terroristas son analizados por su relación con diversos procesos de influencia social. También se destaca la importancia de los factores ideológicos. Por último, se presta una atención muy especial a las semejanzas entre las organizaciones terroristas y los movimientos sociales ordinarios y a la estructura y dinámicas grupales propias de aquellas organizaciones.

Palabras clave: terrorismo, movimientos sociales, conflicto, violencia política

There is no disputing that modern terrorism is one of the most significant sources of risk and social alarm, adding to the long list of threats that characterize the beginning of this new century. However, the analysis of this phenomenon is particularly complex. On the one hand, prejudice often contaminates attempts at explanation; on the other, politicians and experts do not always coincide in their theoretical approaches. At least three perspectives are applied to the study of terrorist phenomena, and which could be called: socio-structural or macrosocial, psychological-individual and psychosocial. The first two perspectives have received more attention than the third, and it is for this reason that the present work sets out to consider the psychosocial approach. Even so, it is not easy to make sense of this approach without being aware of the properties and limitations of the first two, which we shall now briefly discuss.

Those analysts and researchers who adopt a socio-structural perspective in their exploration of terrorism conceive it as a reflection of certain dysfunctions or conflictive tendencies characteristic of the social system in which it occurs. Thus, terrorism has often been linked to the same types of "root causes" that tend to motivate other forms of political violence (street disturbances and protests, popular revolts, civil and international wars, etc.), such as poverty or severe economic inequality, authoritarian, repressive or discriminatory systems of government, or marked social divisions for ethnic, religious or other reasons. However, a general assessment of research on the possible relationships between diverse political, economic and social conditions and terrorist campaigns does not reveal particularly conclusive data, save those which indicate that this phenomenon can be found in a wide range of social contexts. The majority of experts acknowledge that there is no objective social condition that ensures the appearance of terrorism, so that at present it would not seem possible to formulate any general and robust sociological theory of the (macro)social causes of terrorism (Crenshaw, 1995; Laqueur, 2003; Reinares, 2003; De la Corte, 2006; Newman, 2006). It is worth

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considering some of the possible reasons for such limitations. First of all, it should be borne in mind that terrorism is an activity generally perpetrated by minority groups or organizations. Secondly, it is considered that the perspective from which terrorists justify their actions often reflects serious distortions of social reality. These and other types of evidence suggest that some of the characteristics which best define this particular object of study may remain concealed if analysts fail to take into account explanatory variables of a psychological nature, and persist with purely macrosocial approaches.

The most widespread and spontaneous psychological explanations of terrorism refer to possible clinical disorders or personality variables. However, practically all studies that have sought mental dysfunctions in this context have failed spectacularly (Crenshaw, 2004; Sageman, 2004; Horgan, 2005). Other researchers have attempted to reconcile the profile of terrorists with that of other persons characterized by their propensity for violence and by a certain deficit in their ability to control their aggressive impulses (violent common criminals, domestic abusers, war veterans). However, impulsive aggression is not a common trait among terrorists – indeed, it would actually be a serious hindrance to terrorist activity. Living in situations of semi-clandestinity, and obliged to make restricted and carefully planned use of violence, terrorists cannot permit themselves sudden outbreaks of aggression or anger that could give them away or endanger the effectiveness of their plan of action. In more general terms, there is no evidence of a personality with a special propensity for terrorism. Numerous biographical analyses of activists have shown how a wide range of motivational and personality factors can bring about the conditions for a person joining a terrorist organization (Reinares, 1998; Alonso, 2003; San Martín, 2005). Even so, there appears to be evidence of certain psychological characteristics common among terrorists, such as their lack of empathy with victims, their dogmatism or ideological rigidity, their simplistic view of the world, or their utopianism (see Beck, 2003; De la Corte, Sabucedo & Moreno, 2004; De la Corte, 2006). However, these descriptions should be qualified for various reasons. For example, one disadvantage of many theoretical analyses of psychological traits is that they are based on the organizations' most fanatical members (their leaders), or on those most directly involved in carrying out the acts of terrorist violence. But terrorist activity does not involve only spreading ideological messages, pulling triggers and activating bombs; it also requires strategic

planning, logistical support, fundraising, recruitment, and so on. Each of these activities can and are carried out by people of diverse characteristics. It is also a question for debate whether the psychological attributes of terrorists constitute genuine personality traits or whether they are dispositions and attitudes induced by the experiences and circumstances typically pertaining to membership of organizations of a sectarian and clandestine nature.

In sum, neither the individual psychology of political or religious activists involved in terrorism nor the attributes of the social contexts in which they operate throw sufficient light on the phenomenon. It is for this reason that more and more researchers in this field are adopting a psychosocial perspective in their work. Although the rest of the article includes different descriptions, comments and illustrations in relation to the characteristics that can and should define this psychosocial perspective, before going into detail it is necessary to set out its basic premises. The first of these premises, and the most decisive, concerns the importance of analyzing and explaining socio-political phenomena such as terrorism (and many others) through the simultaneous consideration of their social and psychological conditioning factors (see Álvaro & Garrido, 2003). Moreover, there is an evident need to reinforce the study of terrorism from a level of analysis that complements the macrosocial and psychological-individual levels, insofar as this activity is carried out not by societies or large communities, or by private individuals, but by groups or organizations. Thus, the psychosocial analysis of terrorist phenomena will pay particular attention to its group or organizational dimension. Finally, from these first two premises there derives a further assumption: the utility of applying to the study of terrorism the large body of knowledge provided by social psychology, which is nothing less than the academic speciality that has made the inter-relations between social and psychological facts and group and organizational behaviour its preferred objects of analysis. Therefore, in the present article we shall consider some explanatory principles that social psychology can contribute for increasing our knowledge of terrorist phenomena and for guiding new research in this field. Naturally, the conclusions and orientations deriving from a psychosocial approach to the study of terrorism are not without their limitations. On the one hand, we should like to stress that this approach does not aspire to supplant the socio-structural and psychological-

individual approaches, whose contributions we consider to be equally necessary and enriching. On the other hand, and although the psychosocial principles discussed here are intended to apply to the analysis of diverse terrorist campaigns, it should also be made clear that neither this nor any other generalist or nomothetic approach can substitute work of a specific or ideographic nature capable of clarifying the particular causes of each specific type or case of terrorism. Consequently, our point of view in no way denies the value of possible distinctions between different historical cases of terrorism, or between regional and international, lay and religious terrorism (for a current typology see Post, 2002). In brief, the present work deals not with such differentiating aspects, but rather with elements and features shared by different forms of terrorism.

First psychosocial principle: terrorism should be conceptualized not as a syndrome (social or psychological) but as a method of socio-political influence

The first contribution of a psychosocial approach to the understanding of terrorism would be its opposition to the widespread representation of this phenomenon as some kind of “syndrome” (Kruglanski, 2005). The world described by social psychology is a world in which people’s behaviour is clearly conditioned by the socio-structural frameworks in which they live, and by their psychobiological predispositions. But above all it is a world of *social influence*. Consequently, from this point of view, terrorist attacks should be interpreted not as the effect of simple social or psychological determinants, but as the result of multiple social interaction processes that take place at both the inter-group and intra-group levels. Moreover, some of these processes of influence are exercised in a deliberate and strategic way. Thus, professional publicists design and implement advertising or information campaigns with the explicit goal of influencing the attitudes and spending patterns of broad sectors of the public. In a way, terrorists do something similar. An old anarchist saying that defined terrorism as special type of propaganda, “propaganda through deeds”, was indeed not far wide of the mark.

Turning to a more precise theoretical formula, terrorism can also be interpreted as a strategy of *minority social influence* (Kruglanski, 2003). What do we mean by this? When a majority or a particularly powerful group wants to influence the behaviour of a

minority, it can do so in two different ways. First of all, it can try to change those attitudes that lead the minority to oppose the desires of the majority. Secondly, it can pressurize the minority to make it behave exactly as the majority wants, requires or demands. Finally, the majority or powerful group(s) may end up imposing their desires on the minority “by force”. Is that not actually what terrorists try to do? If a radical organization prepared to use violence does so using terrorist methods, that is, using sporadic surprise attacks on non-combatants, it usually means that the organization recognizes its incapacity to impose its desires on its adversary through the mere exercise of force. Where does such inferiority come from? Simply from the fact that the political or religious goals pursued by sub-state terrorist organizations do not usually receive the spontaneous support of social majorities (even though they may receive that of certain minorities which may still be numerous in absolute terms). This converts terrorists into what psychosocial jargon refers to as *active minorities* (Moscovici, Mugny & Pérez, 1991; Moscovici, 1996).

According to research on minority social influence, the only chance a minority has of achieving those goals which are contrary to those of the social majority is through *changing the attitudes* of that majority and convincing them to accede to their requests. Both genuine experience and the research referred to earlier indicate that it is not impossible for minorities to change the attitudes of majorities, and in turn, their behaviour. One of the keys to successful minority influence resides in the ability of the minority to express their disagreement with the beliefs, values or decisions of the majority, coherently and repeatedly over a certain period of time. Such coherence and persistence may lead many people to start questioning the majority beliefs, values or decisions, so much so that they end up renouncing them. Though it may not appear so, this conversion phenomenon has a good deal to do with terrorism since, apart from instilling fear or terror through threats and acts of physical destruction, this particular type of violence always has a communicative or propagandistic dimension, as we mentioned above. In the end, terrorists use violence as a means of directing our attention toward certain problems (real, exaggerated or fictitious) and publicizing their own political or religious goals and values (how many people in the West have taken an interest in the claims of radical Islam for the first time as a result of the attacks by al-Qaeda?).

Second principle: terrorists' attributes are shaped by processes of social interaction

As the world analyzed by social psychologists is a world of social influence, their tendency is to interpret people's psychological characteristics as resulting from diverse processes of socialization and social interaction. The same is likely to apply to the psychological attributes of terrorists. In this context, a range of studies have suggested that the probability of joining a terrorist movement tends to be strongly conditioned by the political subculture in which subsequent terrorists are socialized in the contexts of their family relations, group of friends, school, local community, and so on. Growing up in an environment marked by radical nationalist values or by the strong influence of certain extremist religious currents may be almost decisive (San Martín, 2005). Thus, a large proportion of the members of ETA, the Red Brigades and the IRA were born and grew up in families with links to, respectively, the Basque nationalist tradition (Reinares, 2001; Romero, 2006), Irish Catholicism (Lee, 1983) or the Italian political Left (Della Porta, 1990). Moreover, these primary socialization contexts provide the networks of social relations and friendships through which processes of recruitment into terrorist organizations tend to start up. Such processes can be more or less prolonged, though they frequently involve progressive implication in radicalized political groups, associations and activities, sometimes created or nurtured and encouraged by terrorist organizations themselves (see Waldmann, 1993; Della Porta, 1990; Reinares, 1998; De la Corte, 2006; De la Corte & Jordán, 2007). Of great interest in this regard is the recent research by Sageman (2004) on the routes that tend to lead young Muslims to become Mujahedin terrorists. According to this analysis, affiliation to Jihadist groups is always preceded by the patient, meticulous, but ostensibly non-deliberate formation of new friendships between potential recruits and their recruiters. Thus, in the sample of 168 individuals studied by Sageman, friendship was the principal cause of conversion to Jihadism in 68% of cases. The second key to recruitment was the existence of some kinship link between recruits and recruiters, which was found in 14% of the cases studied. As for the other two explanatory variables, these were also related to socialization experiences prior to participation in terrorist activity, namely, education in certain Koranic schools (decisive for 8% of those in the sample, all of South-East Asian origin) and regular participation in activities at certain mosques which served as centres for ideologization and recruitment of future terrorists.

Together with the effects of primary socialization contexts on the psychology of future terrorists, we should also take into account the "secondary" socialization experiences of recruits to radical networks or organizations. Although the majority of terrorist organizations are not sects in the strict sense of the word, some experts have identified substantial similarities between the process of indoctrination typical in sectarian groups and the socialization methods to which potential or recent recruits to different terrorist organizations are subjected (Rodríguez, 1992; Della Porta, 1998; Sageman, 2004). Whatever the case, there is no doubt that the activities and lifestyles characteristic of the radical and clandestine organizations responsible for terrorism shape the mentality of their members, intensifying their identification with and commitment to such organizations and their ideologies, and helping to clear away the psychological and moral obstacles that may stand between their consciences and the criminal acts they will have to commit.

Third principle: terrorist organizations can be analyzed by analogy with other social movements

Many terrorist movements display a "near-parasitic" relationship with cycles of anti-state political mobilization and mass protest that occur over time (Tarrow, 1989; González Calleja, 2003). Terrorist campaigns are commonly the final result of a process of radicalization of certain pre-existing political movements or groupings. On experiencing a considerable loss of social and political influence, such movements may end up splintering into various groups, some of which—the most extremist—opt for the use of violence (Reinares, 1998; De la Corte, 2006).

An important parallel between the way social movements in general and terrorist movements tend to evolve concerns the powerful influence brought to bear on them by processes of social categorization or identification. Without the activation of a more or less sustained sense of shared identity, no political or religious movement would be possible (Klandermans, 1997; Simons & Klandermans, 2004). This becomes much more evident in the case of movements whose aim is to defend the supposedly threatened values and interests of a given ethnic or religious community (see Javaloy, Rodríguez & Espelt, 2003; Castells, 2004), as represented by radical organizations underpinned by ethno-nationalistic or religious ideology. The individuals making them up define themselves as members of a much broader social group, which they consider wronged, and whose interests

and values are perceived to be threatened – injustices on which they base the arguments justifying their use of violence. The terrorists’ ideology usually provides the content for these representations about their social identity and maintains psychologically accessible their feelings of identification with the community of reference (e.g., the Basque people for ETA, the *Umma* or community of believers for the radical Salafists of al-Qaeda or the Tamil community for the bloodthirsty Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka). A terrorist organization’s disposition to identify itself with a certain community of reference makes more attractive the option of joining the organization in the eyes of that community’s members. Furthermore, the fact that members of a terrorist movement perceive themselves as members of the same group greatly helps them to meet the demands of terrorist activity (Taylor, 2003). Such phenomena can be attributed to the diverse psychosocial effects of social categorization processes, which have been studied within the framework of the Theory of Social Identity (Tajfel, 1984; Turner, 1991; Javaloy, Rodríguez & Espelt, 2003; see Table 1 for a summary). Nevertheless, the relevance of social identity is far from being the only attribute that terrorist organizations or groups share with other socio-political movements.

Fourth principle: terrorism is only possible when terrorists and their allies gain access to certain essential resources

As postulated as early as the 1970s in the influential theory of Resource Mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1973; McAdam, 1982), the capacity of any socio-political movement to subvert or protest depends not only on the

opportunities offered by the social situation in which such movements operate, but also by their capacity to “mobilize” or obtain certain crucial resources that cannot be improvised and that are not always easy to access. More specifically, and as highlighted by, among others, Waldman (1997), the resources essential to the development of a terrorist campaign are economic, technological and material, but also human and symbolic (the last of these, clearly linked to the ideologies that motivate terrorist acts, will be discussed below). It is important to stress that a large part of the activity with which terrorists are occupied involves, on the one hand, obtaining the necessary economic, technological and material resources, and on the other, recruiting and developing their own *human resources*. In the former case they tend to engage in *predatory activities* ranging from robbery to extortion, and including kidnapping and involvement in diverse types of legal and illegal business (see Bovenkerk & Chakra, 2004; Ward, 2004; Napoleoni, 2004). As regards human resources, terrorist groups need to develop their own strategies and programmes of recruitment and training, and this raises some questions for researchers in relation to two crucial issues: first, what incentives do terrorist organizations offer to their potential activists? And second, what procedures are applied for their indoctrination and technical training? The second of these questions was already addressed in a previous section. What should be stressed is the predominance of incentives and rewards of a psychological nature over those of a material kind – fame or social admiration, friendship, the acquisition of a positive social identity, and so on (Reinares, 1998; De la Corte, Sabucedo & Moreno, 2004; Alonso, 2003; De la Corte, 2006).

Table 1
Some psychosocial effects of the social identification between members of a terrorist organization

Effect	Explanation
<i>Depersonalization</i>	On identifying with their comrades, terrorists perceive themselves as simple interchangeable members of the same group. This will help them to put the interests and goals of the group before their own, and hence increase their commitment to the movement and their disposition to sacrifice themselves for it.
<i>Social cohesion</i>	Depersonalization makes members of one’s own group more attractive and pleasant than those who do not belong to it. The terrorist groups displaying the greatest sense of collective identity will be those that are most united and cohesive. In turn, high group cohesion favours equally high levels of readiness to cooperate with and help other group members.
<i>Acceptance and obedience</i>	The greater the identification with the terrorist group, the greater the identification with its goals and norms, and the lower the likelihood of disobedience to directives and orders from group leaders.
<i>Development of a Manichaeian view of the world</i>	Strong identification with the group has as its corollary a psychological distancing with respect to those who do not form part of it, either in the strict sense (one’s terrorist comrades) or the broad sense (members of the terrorists’ community of reference). This leads, in turn, to a series of processes and contents of perception and thinking which blame those outside the group for all the relevant problems and injustices, and exonerate the members of the group from all responsibility for them. The world becomes divided into ‘us and them’.

Fifth principle: the decisions that promote and support terrorist campaigns are based on ideologized collective motives

Despite the above, and as pointed out by Stern (2003), however relevant the selective incentives terrorist activity can offer to potential activists, there is no terrorism without the existence of an ideology which gives it meaning and justification in the eyes of those who plan and carry out the attacks. By ideology here we understand a system of political, cultural or religious beliefs and values that are at least shared by the members of the terrorist movement. This ideology will also often be shared with other persons or groups which, without participating in any way in the actual terrorist activity, sympathize with those responsible, or excuse their behaviour. In those cases in which the ideology of the terrorists is deeply rooted in the traditions and history of the community they claim to represent (the Palestinian community in the case of Hamas, for example, or the Basque people in the case of ETA), it may be that this ideology also merits the acceptance of many people, and of other groups which do not participate in the terrorist activity. As Kruglanski (2002) noted, this last point is important for two reasons. First, because the more widespread the ideology that guides a terrorist organization, the greater will be its capacity to survive, since there will be more people motivated to join the organization. And second, because the more people that share the ideological standpoint of the terrorists, the greater the potential for violence. Thus, according to various comparative studies, the terrorist

organizations that enjoy the most social support (generally with nationalist or religious ideologies) are also those which show higher rates of violence and commit the most serious attacks (Alonso, 2005).

In recent years there has been wide-ranging research on the characteristics, content and functions of the ideologies of different terrorist groups (see, for example, Reinares, 2001; Juergensmeyer, 2001; Alonso, 2003; Stern, 2003). To refer to a research line in which the present authors have participated, it would seem possible to identify certain ideological elements (beliefs and arguments) common to terrorist groups as diverse as ETA (Sabucedo, Rodríguez & Fernández, 2002; Sabucedo, Blanco & De la Corte, 2003), the Colombian FARC and AUCs (Sabucedo et al., 2005) or al-Qaeda (De la Corte, 2005; De la Corte & Jordán, 2007). These elements can be summarized in the five categories shown in Table 2, together with some of their psychosocial functions.

Sixth principle: terrorist acts and campaigns are based on strategic rationales, though the rationality with which terrorists operate is partial and limited

According to one of the most influential theoretical models in the contemporary social sciences, individuals, organizations and even socio-political movements tend to behave as rational actors (Coleman, 1990; Rosenberg, 1995). A rational actor is one who chooses those courses of action that he or she believes will be most effective for the satisfaction of his or her goals or preferences. In its original version, Rational Choice Theory assumes

Table 2
Arguments and beliefs for the legitimization of terrorism

Ideological resources	Psychosocial functions
Arguments and beliefs that identify and criticize certain social injustices, threats or offences affecting the terrorist group's community of reference.	Activation of feelings of moral frustration and indignation.
Arguments and beliefs that identify an institutional or social enemy that is held responsible for such injustices, threats and offences, and whose image is devalued to the point of dehumanization or demonization.	Displacement of responsibility for the terrorist violence. Inhibition of possible empathy reactions toward potential victims. Activation of feelings of hate and desire for revenge.
Arguments and beliefs that express a positive social identity common to the terrorist group and its community of reference.	Identification of the terrorist group with the interests and values of the community of reference. Depersonalization of the terrorist activity (blurring of individual responsibility for the violence). Development of reactions of solidarity and sympathy from members of the community of reference.
Arguments and beliefs that identify the collective goals to which the terrorist group's community of reference should aspire, and that specify the (violent) activities considered necessary for the achievement of such goals.	Psychological connection between certain just and desirable goals for the community of reference and the terrorist attacks and activity.
Arguments and beliefs that predict a future state in which the terrorist group will have achieved the collective goals proposed, and pursued through the use of violence.	Development of high expectations of success with respect to the socio-political effects of the terrorist activity.

that the rationality we are talking about is objective. That is, it is understood that the acts undertaken by the rational actors are truly the most effective given the objective characteristics of the situations in which they operate. But can it be affirmed that terrorists and their organizations behave in this way? They certainly appear to perceive themselves as rational actors. Some authors adduce as evidence of their rationality the fact that many terrorist organizations have been capable of varying their strategies to adapt to the way situations evolve and to the responses of their adversaries (Crenshaw, 2001; Sánchez, 2003). However, contrary to that which was suggested by early versions of Rational Choice Theory, numerous studies have shown the rationality that guides strategic human behaviours to be somewhat limited and imperfect (Tversky & Kahneman, 1982; Elster, 1984; Simons, 1995). What are the reasons underlying this claim? They are actually quite diverse, though here we shall mention just two (for a fuller discussion, see De la Corte, 2006; De la Corte, Sabucedo & de Miguel, 2006). First of all, no individual actor or group member is genuinely equipped to anticipate *a priori* and recognize *a posteriori* all the real consequences of his or her actions. Therefore, many of the terrorists' predictions and assessments about the effectiveness of their activities will be imprecise. Secondly, it is not surprising that passion (anger, desire for revenge, hate, etc.), ideology and other psychological elements that commonly condition the perspective of terrorists lead them to distort the predicted effects and the goals of their acts. Various studies have shown how terrorists tend to overestimate their possibilities of success, and sometimes have serious difficulty acknowledging the lack of effectiveness of their actions – as is also the case, indeed, for members of non-violent protest movements (San Martín, 2005). Furthermore, terrorists may tend to underestimate the rejection their most brutal attacks can produce among actual or potential sympathizers with their cause (Bandura, 2003).

Finally, if the rationality of individuals tends to be limited and imperfect, the rationality of groups (social movements, organizations, institutions, etc.) is even more problematic, and this brings us to the final point in our analysis.

Seventh principle: terrorists' activity partly reflects the internal characteristics of their organizations

The capacity of terrorists to act in a rational way is limited not only by their individual psychological attributes, but also by their condition as members of an

organization, and by its characteristics. Research in the field of the psychology and behaviour of human groups and organizations offers highly relevant knowledge in this regard (Blanco, Caballero & De la Corte, 2004). There are two categories of the properties of terrorist organizations, both of which are reflected in their actions. The first of these concerns the *structure* of the organization; the second, the *group dynamics* that develop inside it.

The structure of an organization is equivalent to the pattern of social relationships within it and to the roles and norms that regulate the corresponding interactions. There are at least two types of structure characteristic of terrorist organizations (Calvo, 2004; De la Corte, 2006; De la Corte, Sabucedo & de Miguel, 2006). The first would be of a pyramidal and hierarchical nature, as in the cases of the IRA or the Red Brigades. The other type of structure would be reticular, and based on operational and logistical cells or groups capable of acting fairly independently. The Jihadist cells active today in various parts of the world provide the most perfect example of this second type of organization. The structure of an organization strongly conditions its possibilities for action. Pyramidal structures permit greater exercise of leadership and control than network-based structures, and provide better guarantees of obedience in the operational sections to the directives emanating from the highest levels. However, structures based on networks increase the operational capacity of terrorist organizations and make them more difficult to break up, since the neutralization of a few cells does not necessarily imply irreparable damage to the organization as a whole. It is for such reasons, as Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2003) point out, that many modern terrorist organizations have made their structures more flexible, bringing them closer to the network model, which, moreover, is much more suited to the demands of transnational terrorist strategies.

By group dynamics we are referring to the psychological and social interaction processes that take place within terrorist organizations. There is now consensus among experts that the course of these dynamics constitutes a decisive causal element in explanations of political violence phenomena in general, and of terrorism in particular. Among the diverse dimensions in which these dynamics can be analyzed, one of the most important concerns group decision-making processes (Javaloy, 2003). As is well known, studies in this area suggest that when people take decisions in group contexts they are more likely to make

distorted strategic calculations. Specifically, the attitudes and points of view of human groups tend to be more polarized and extreme than those of individuals. In some cases this polarizing tendency results in the adoption of courses of action that are highly risky or have destructive consequences, such as those adopted by some terrorist groups (Myers, 1978). Indeed, such groups fulfil several of the conditions most favourable to the adoption of polarized decisions.

Characteristics typical of life in terrorist groups would include a relative social and psychological isolation of the organization's members with respect to people of other ideological standpoints, adherence to a leader, and strong pressure to fulfil the norms of the organization. All of these factors contribute to the emergence of a further bias characteristic of group decision-making processes: so-called "group thinking", formulated by Janis (1972) for explaining diverse and serious decision errors committed by political and military groups or committees (Ovejero, 1997; Sabucedo, 1996). Janis defined group thinking as reasoning biased by the desire to reach a quick and firm consensus. This takes us back to some of the comments made earlier. Given the seriousness of their activities and the risks they involve, we can assume that terrorists experience what one of the present authors has defined as a strong "need for cognitive closure" (Kruglanski, 2000) – an intense desire to feel that one is in the right and that one's own decisions are based on valid and reliable knowledge. In turn, a strong need for cognitive closure is commonly associated with a higher propensity to reject opinions that deviate from the majority opinions in the group (Kruglanski & Webster, 1991). Numerous analysts have applied the group thinking concept to their explanations of different cases of terrorism (e.g., Alonso, 2003). Such analyses have permitted the identification in terrorists' discourse of several "symptoms" of group thinking (Myers, 1978).

The psychological influences of group dynamics on terrorist activity should be considered on the basis of a final premise. Apart from the original ideological motives, life inside a terrorist organization brings into play a range of factors that provide the conditions for committing attacks and the other customary criminal activities. These factors are related to: a) the socializing process to which terrorists are subject; b) the norms and roles to which they must adjust their behaviour at all times; c) the negative social sanctions that can result from failure to adhere to such norms (ranging from recrimination to execution); d) the

influence exercised by leaders; and e) the individual benefits offered and obtained as a consequence of remaining in the organization. This last element is especially interesting insofar as it points to another significant feature that terrorist movements share with many other types of organization: their tendency for self-perpetuation, which can sometimes become the principal cause of the persistence of a terrorist campaign, over and above other elements. After all, organizations can be considerably similar to what the sociologist Etzioni (see Goffman, 1970) defined as *total institutions*, that is, social systems which, at the same time as drastically limiting the external social influences received by their members, satisfy all their needs in life and their personal aspirations. When an organization functions in this way it is not unlikely that its structure, ideology and strategic decisions, or the contacts made with other groups, will be adapted and remain subordinate to the conscious or unconscious purpose of its self-reproduction (De la Corte, 2001; De la Corte, 2006; Kruglanski & Golec, 2004). But what is most important to stress here is that both this reproductive tendency and the rest of the causal factors that lead terrorists to act as they do reveal that, as well as imperfect and limited, the rationality that corresponds to terrorist activities is a "retrospective" rationality.

Research on social influence, persuasion and attitudinal change suggests that the attributions of rationality we assign to many of our decisions and actions are attributions elaborated *a posteriori*, after the decisions and actions have taken place (see Briñol, De la Corte & Becerra, 2001). Aronson (1972) coined the expression "retrospective rationality" to refer to this tendency to seek reasons for our past decisions and actions. Aronson also argued that, as diverse experiments show, many of these *a posteriori* reasons constitute mere "rationalizations", which have little to do with the genuine causes of our acts and much more with our desire to appear – both to ourselves and to others – as rational and coherent beings. This helps us to understand why in a wide range of circumstances the members of a group or organization invent or seek all kinds of arguments to persevere on a course of action to which they feel especially committed (e.g., a terrorist strategy), and whose abandonment would incur some serious costs (Pfeffer, 1998). Likewise, we might suspect that the "reasons" resorted to by members of terrorist organizations for justifying their activity will not always correspond to the true causes or motives, but rather to their need to find a justification for their crimes

and to present it to others (such as their groups of reference). Moreover, insofar as such rationalizations distort the reality to which they refer, they may also bias terrorists' appraisals of the political effectiveness of their actions. In his study of terrorism in Northern Ireland, Alonso (2003) presents a good deal of evidence in support of the above hypothesis, as in the following remarks made by a former IRA member: "Yes, a lot of people need it, because if they considered that it hadn't been worthwhile, they would go mad because of deep feelings of guilt at having murdered human beings, at having murdered them in horrible ways, at having kidnapped, tortured and brutally murdered them, or at having blown their bodies and their limbs to smithereens; they would go mad. So they cling on to the moral argument that they were justified in doing so. I think there are a lot of people like that, very, very deluded... they have to believe it was worthwhile. Otherwise they would think: I'm a criminal, I've murdered all these people for nothing, and I deserve to die or I'll go mad through guilt. Of course there's a lot of that, a lot. Believe me, there are many people like that" (cit. in Alonso, 2003, p. 133).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH LINES

Explanations of terrorism based on variables of a socio-structural and psychological nature are insufficient, and often lead to erroneous suggestions and predictions. As we have attempted to show, an approach to the terrorist phenomenon based on the assumptions and knowledge characteristic of a psychosocial perspective can be of great help for improving our understanding of it. Likewise, this approach provides some useful suggestions for orienting future research and analysis, and which we shall consider here by way of conclusion: a) the study of the socio-political context, the social relations and the primary socialization processes that may set the conditions for the radicalization of individuals and their recruitment by terrorist organizations; b) the study of the process of emergence of terrorist organizations through their possible relationship to pre-existing political, cultural or religious associations or groups and through reference to the historical evolution of such groups; c) the analysis of recruitment processes employed by terrorist organizations; d) the study of socialization processes that take place within terrorist organizations; e) the study of the activities, networks and social relations that

permit terrorist organizations to gain access to crucial resources; f) the study of the structure of terrorist organizations and of the dynamics of social interaction that take place inside them; and g) the study of the discourse and ideological principles with which terrorists attempt to legitimate their criminal activities.

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