Understanding the Terrorist Mind-Set

By Randy Borum, Ph.D.

> *While nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him.*
> —*Dostoevsky*

The terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001, shocked millions who perhaps before did not realize there were people in the world that would take such violent actions, even those resulting in their own deaths, against innocent civilians. It dismayed and puzzled them that such individuals could hate Americans with such fervor that they would commit these large-scale acts of lethal aggression.

After the attacks, many Americans saw terrorism as a real hazard for the first time. However, extremist ideology and its use to justify violence are not at all new. Although the use of the term *terrorism* did not emerge until the late 18th century (identified with the French government's "Reign of Terror"[1]), the idea of terrorizing civilians to further a particular political, social, or religious cause has existed for centuries.[2]

As professionals in the law enforcement and intelligence communities increasingly direct their energies and resources to countering and preventing this type of extreme violence, they are working to acquire new knowledge and skills. In learning about terrorism, they not only should consider the specific ideology of those who commit or advocate acts of terrorism but also gain an understanding of the process of how these ideas or doctrines develop, as well as the various factors that influence the behavior of extremist groups and individuals.[3]

An investigator might reasonably wonder why such an understanding is important. The answer lies in the old military adage "know your enemy." In one of the many translations of *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu, a well-known Chinese general, is quoted as saying, "Know your enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."

Considering Ideological Origins

There likely is no universal method in developing extremist ideas that justifies terroristic acts of violence. However, four observable stages appear to frame a process of ideological development common to many individuals and groups of diverse ideological backgrounds. This four-stage process—a model designed as a heuristic (trial and error) to aid investigators and intelligence analysts in assessing the behaviors, experiences, and activities of a group or individual associated with extremist ideas—begins by framing some unsatisfying event or condition as being unjust, blaming the injustice on a target policy, person, or nation, and then vilifying, often demonizing, the responsible party to facilitate justification for aggression.

To begin with, an extremist individual or group identifies some type of undesirable event or condition ("it's not right"). This could be, for example, economic (e.g., poverty, unemployment, poor living conditions) or social (e.g., government-imposed restrictions on individual freedoms, lack of order or morality). While the nature of the condition may vary,

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those involved perceive the experience as "things are not as they should be." That is, "it's not right."

Next, they frame the undesirable condition as an "injustice"; that is, it does not apply to everyone ("it's not fair"). For example, members of a police bargaining unit may feel that their low pay scale is "not right"; however, when they learn that other, perhaps less-skilled, city workers are making more money, they also consider the circumstance "unfair." In this regard, some use the United States as a comparison point to create a sense of injustice about economic deprivation; this holds true for some people in Middle Eastern countries who see the United States as a caricature of affluence and wasteful excess. For those who are deprived, this facilitates feelings of resentment and injustice.

Then, because injustice generally results from transgressive (wrongful) behavior, extremists hold a person or group responsible ("it's your fault"), identifying a potential target. For example, racially biased groups in the United States often use this tactic in directing anger toward minority groups. Members of these groups seek out young white men whose families are poor. They then point to examples of minorities receiving economic assistance or preferences in employment as the reason the white family is suffering.

Last, they deem the person or group responsible for the injustice as "bad" ("you're evil"); after all, good people would not intentionally inflict adverse conditions on others. This ascription has three effects that help facilitate violence.[4] First, aggression becomes more justifiable when aimed against "bad" people, particularly those who intentionally cause harm to others. Second, extremists describe the responsible party as "evil"; dehumanizing a target in this regard further facilitates aggression. Third, those suffering adverse conditions at the hands of others do not see themselves as "bad" or "evil"; this further identifies the responsible person or group as different from those affected and, thus, makes justifying aggression even easier.

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When looking at the behaviors of emerging extremists in this way, investigators may better identify persons who represent desirable candidates for recruitment ("it's not fair"), possible sites of indoctrination ("it's not right," and "it's your fault"), and extremists or groups that may use violent tactics ("you're evil"). The operational objective for this analysis and increased understanding is not to sympathize with or excuse terrorism but to comprehend and, thereby, prevent acts of terrorism. Thus, "the challenge for the analyst is to learn why the terrorists are doing what they're doing and how deep it runs, then to look at the moral side and explain why we can't approve of the politics of terrorism even when the motives of some involved are comprehensible."[5]
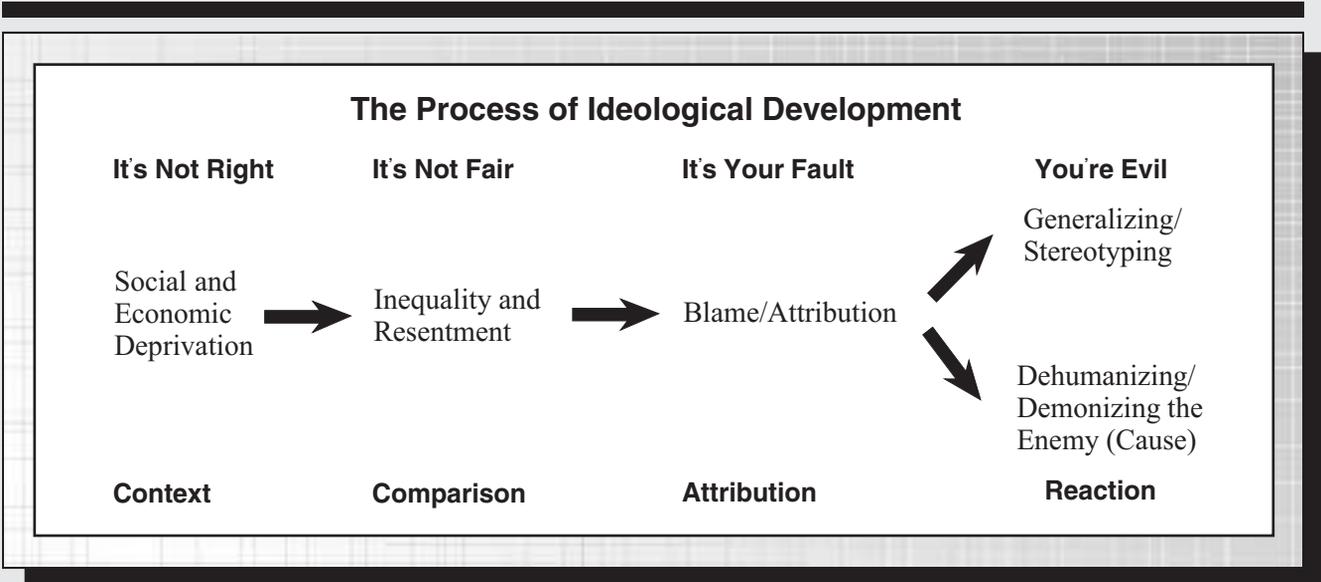
Understanding Motive

Fully "knowing one's enemy," specifically, understanding, anticipating, and forecasting another's behavior, demands not only an ideological understanding but a behavioral one as well. Gaining insight as to how someone may resolve a particular dilemma or handle a given situation requires a consideration of the person's entire perspective as influenced not only by their values and beliefs but by other factors, such as the information they have been exposed to, their assumptions, and their life experiences—in short, how they view the world. All people operate on their own internal "map" of reality, not reality itself. This is a mental-behavioral phenomenon that psychologists refer to as "social cognition."[6] If people understand their opponents' "maps," it becomes easier to understand and to anticipate their actions.

A good example of how this principle might apply involves considering the common misunderstanding of the tactic of "suicide bombings" used by Islamic extremists. The use of the term *suicide* to characterize these attacks reflects an outsider's view. Those who commit or encourage these attacks do not associate these acts with suicide. Instead, they consider them heroic acts of martyrdom. What is the

The Process of Ideological Development

It's Not Right	It's Not Fair	It's Your Fault	You're Evil
Social and Economic Deprivation	→ Inequality and Resentment	→ Blame/Attribution	→ Generalizing/Stereotyping
			→ Dehumanizing/Demonizing the Enemy (Cause)
Context	**Comparison**	**Attribution**	**Reaction**

difference? The motive, thoughts, feelings, responses of others, and preincident behaviors likely will differ for an act of suicide and an act of martyrdom.

People usually associate suicide with hopelessness and depression. The desire to end intense and unbearable psychological pain typically motivates the actor to commit such an act. Others who care for the actor typically view suicide as an undesirable outcome. Family and loved ones attempt to discourage the behavior and often struggle with feelings of shame if suicide does occur.

By contrast, people typically associate martyrdom with hopefulness about afterlife rewards in paradise and feelings of heroic sacrifice. The desire to further the cause of Islam and to answer the highest calling in that religion motivates the actor. Others who care for the actor see the pending act as heroic. Family and loved ones typically support the behavior, and, if the event occurs, the family is honored. Not only does the family of a martyr gain forgiveness of their sins in the afterlife but the supporting community often cares for them socially and financially. If investigators consider these attacks acts of suicide, the result could involve erroneous assumptions about how to anticipate the behavior and misguided ideas about how best to prevent it.

Attributing Ideology as the Sole Motive

Another investigative issue related to motive is the often-presumed role of ideology as the sole cause for a particular violent act of extremism. Generally, when someone or some group that supports a radical idea commits such an act, the ideology is assumed to be *the* motive. In some cases, this attribution may be overly simplistic. In others, it simply may be wrong.

Some violent people, predisposed to criminality or aggressive behavior, simply use a particular cause or ideology to justify their acts. In the scheme of classifying terrorists as "criminals, crazies, and crusaders," these are the criminals.[7] Threat assessment experts have referred to these individuals as "murderers in search of a cause."[8]

Others truly do believe in extreme ideas, but the motive for a given act or series of acts may be broader. For example, in some Islamic fundamentalist movements, there is significant struggle for power that mixes with the religious ideas; specifically, conflicts exist over establishing the Caliphate that will unite dar al Islam.[9] In this regard, an Islamic fundamentalist leader may wish to support Islam and to defeat those who oppose the kingdom of Allah on earth, but his actions also may insert him in the Caliphate power struggle. From the perspective of strategic intelligence, it would prove inaccurate to see only the "holy warrior" and to miss the influence that the dynamics of this religious power struggle might have on, for example, decisions to act, target selection, and relationships between key figures or groups. Stated simply, the ideology may be *a* factor, but not necessarily *the* factor in determining motive.

Conclusion

Professionals in the law enforcement and intelligence communities would do well to gain an understanding of how extremist ideas develop. By using a framework to organize behavioral information, counterterrorist analytic and threat assessments can become more accurate and more sophisticated.

Also, it is important to understand that analyzing counterterrorist intelligence requires an understanding of behavior, not just ideology. Investigators and analysts who must attempt to understand and anticipate how a person will act in a given situation should seek to understand that individual's "map," or perception, of the situation. Ideology may be a part of that, but other important dynamics and behavioral factors may contribute as well.

Extremist ideology is not at all new, although many Americans did not give the subject of terrorism proper attention until September 11, 2001. Those facing the task of safeguarding this nation and its interests, particularly important in this day and age, will do so most effectively when armed with a thorough understanding of terrorist ideology and behavior. ✦

Endnotes

[1] The Reign of Terror, a period of the French Revolution between 1793 and 1794, was characterized by a wave of executions of presumed enemies of the state.

[2] Jonathan White, *Terrorism: An Introduction,* 3rd ed*.* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002).

[3] The author serves on the Forensic Psychology Advisory Board for the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy and also is an instructor with the State and Local Antiterrorism Training Program (SLATT), a joint effort of the Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR) and the FBI.

[4] Albert Bandura and others, eds., "Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71(2), (1996): 364-374.

[5] Stephen Goode, interview by Christopher Harmon, February 5, 2001, "Harmon Details Terrorism Today," *Insight on the News*.

[6] S. Fiske and S. Taylor, *Social Cognition,* 2nd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

[7] Frederick Hacker, *Crusaders, Criminals and Crazies: Terror and Terrorism In Our Time* (New York, NY: Norton, 1976).

[8] Robert Fein and Bryan Vossekuil, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials* (Washington, DC, 1998).

[9] Supra note 2. In this context, the Muslim Khalifa is the successor (in a line of successors) to Prophet Muhammad's position as the political, military, and administrative leader of the Muslims. This definition excludes Muhammad's prophetic role as the Qu'ran clearly states that he was the last of the prophets.

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