This chapter investigates the causes of terrorism. Many explanations have been given for terrorism, and scholars and other experts have devoted a great deal of effort to explaining terrorist behavior. This has not been a simple task. Explanatory models consider many factors, including political history, government policy, contemporary politics, cultural tensions, ideological trends, economic trends, individual idiosyncrasies, and other variables.

In the following discussion, readers will identify factors that explain why individuals and groups choose to engage in terrorist violence. Readers will also explore and critically assess the sources of ideological belief systems and activism and the reasons why such activism sometimes results in terrorist violence. For example, is the terrorist option somehow forced on people who have no other alternative? Is terrorism simply one choice from a menu of options? Is politically motivated violence perhaps a pathological manifestation of personal or group dysfunction?

It is useful in the beginning of our discussion to identify broad causes of terrorism at the individual and group levels.

At the individual level, some experts have distinguished rational, psychological, and cultural origins:

Rational terrorists think through their goals and options, making a cost-benefit analysis. . . . Psychological motivation for resorting to terrorism derives from the terrorist’s personal dissatisfaction with his/her life and accomplishments. . . . A major cultural determinant of terrorism is the perception of “outsiders” and anticipation of their threat to ethnic group survival.1

At the group level, terrorism can grow out of an environment of political activism, when a group’s goal is to redirect a government’s or society’s attention
toward the grievances of an activist social movement. It can also grow out of dra-
matic events in the experience of a people or a nation. Although these two
sources—social movements and dramatic events—are generalized concepts, it is
instructive to briefly review their importance.

*Social Movements.* Social movements are campaigns that try either to promote
change or to preserve something that is perceived as threatened. Movements
involve mass action on behalf of a cause, not simply the actions of individuals
promoting their personal political beliefs. Examples include the Irish Catholic
civil rights movement of the 1960s in Northern Ireland and the African
American civil rights movement in the American South during the same
decade. Proponents of this type of movement seek the moral high ground as a
way to rally sympathy and support for their cause and to bring pressure on
those at odds with the cause. In both cases, radicalized sentiment grew out of
frustration with the slow pace of change and the violent reaction of some
opponents.

*Dramatic Events.* Also called traumatic events, these occur when an individual, a
nation, or an ethno-national group suffers from an event that has a traumatiz-
ing and lasting effect. At the personal level, children of victims of political vio-
lence may grow up to oppose perceived oppressors with violence. This is likely to
occur in regions of extended conflict, such as the war between Tamils and
Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, The Troubles in Northern Ireland, or the Palestinian
intifada.

Regardless of the specific precipitating cause of a particular terrorist’s behavior,
the fact that so many individuals, groups, and nations resort to terrorist violence
suggests that common motives and explanations can be found. The discussion in
this chapter will review the following:

- Political violence as the fruit of injustice
- Political violence as strategic choice
- The morality of political violence

**Political Violence as the Fruit of Injustice**

*Intergroup Conflict and Collective Violence:*
*Sociological Explanations of Terrorism*

The sociological approach argues that terrorism is a group-based phenomenon,
selected by weaker groups as the only available strategy. From the perspective of an
opponent group, “terrorism and other forms of collective violence are often
described as ‘senseless,’ and their participants are often depicted as irrational.”
However, this is not an entirely complete analysis, because
if “rational” means goal directed . . . then most collective violence is indeed rational . . . Their violence is indeed directed at achieving certain, social change-oriented goals, regardless of whether we agree with those goals or with the violent means used to attain them. If “rational” further means sound, wise, and logical, then available evidence indicates that collective violence is rational . . . because it sometimes can help achieve their social goals.³

In essence, the disadvantaged group asserts its rights by selecting a methodology—in this case, terrorism—that from the group’s perspective is its only viable option. The selection process is based on the insurgent group’s perceptions and its analysis of those perceptions.

Theoretical Foundations for Sociological Explanations

Two sociological concepts, structural theory and relative deprivation theory, provide useful explanatory analysis for this process.⁴ 

Structural theory has been used in many policy and academic disciplines to identify social conditions (structures) that affect group access to services, equal rights, civil protections, freedom, or other quality-of-life measures. Examples of

![Photo 3.1](image)

**PHOTO 3.1** An Irish Catholic boy holds plastic bullets fired at demonstrators during violent riots in the streets of Londonderry, Northern Ireland.
social structures include government policies, administrative bureaucracies, spatial (geographic) location of the group, the role of security forces, and access to social institutions. Applying this theory to the context of terrorism,

structural theories of revolution emphasize that weaknesses in state structures encourage the potential for revolution. . . . According to this view, a government beset by problems such as economic and military crises is vulnerable to challenges by insurgent forces. . . . Other governments run into trouble when their . . . policies alienate and even anger elites within the society.5

The state is the key actor in structural theories of revolution. Its status is the precipitating factor for popular revolutions. Popular discontent, the alienation of elites, and a pervasive crisis are the central ingredients for bringing a society to the brink of revolution.6

Relative deprivation theory essentially holds that “feelings of deprivation and frustration underlie individual decisions to engage in collective action.”7 When a group’s rising expectations are met by sustained repression or second-class status, the group’s reaction may include political violence. Their motive for engaging in political violence is their observation that they are relatively deprived, in relation to other groups, in an unfair social order. This should be contrasted with absolute deprivation, when a group has been deprived of the necessities for survival by a government or social order. This condition can also lead to political violence.

One observation must be made about relative deprivation theory: Although it was, and is, a popular theory among many experts, three shortcomings have been argued:

• Psychological research suggests that aggression happens infrequently when the conditions for relative deprivation are met.
• The theory is more likely to explain individual behavior than group behavior.
• Empirical studies have not found an association between relative deprivation and political violence.8

Cases in Point: Sociological Explanations in an International Context

Examples of movements that are motivated against a government or social order include ethno-nationalist movements among Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland and Palestinians in Israel. Sociological explanations for these movements are summarized below.

Irish Catholic nationalism in Northern Ireland dates to the 16th century, when English King James I granted Scottish Protestant settlers land in Ireland, thus beginning a long process of relegating Irish Catholics to second-class status in their own country. Protestant (Scotch-Irish) and English domination was secured in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne. Catholic independence was finally won in 1919 and 1920, but the island was formally divided between the independent Irish Republic in the south and the British-administered six-county region of Northern Ireland. Since that time, some Irish republicans in the north, especially the Provisional Irish
Republican Army, have engaged in armed resistance against Protestant and British political domination. They seek union with the southern republic.

Palestinian nationalism dates to the formal creation of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948. The next day, the Arab League—Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria—declared war on Israel. Israel was victorious, and in the subsequent consolidation of power, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians either left Israel or were expelled. Since that time, Palestinian nationalists, especially the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas, have fought a guerrilla and terrorist war against Israel to establish a Palestinian state.

Table 3.1 summarizes the constituencies and enemies of groups promoting these causes.

**Rationality and Terrorist Violence:**
*Psychological Explanations of Terrorism*

Psychological approaches to explaining terrorism broadly examine the effects of internal psychological dynamics on individual and group behavior. This kind of analysis incorporates many of the concepts discussed earlier in this chapter, such as moral convictions and simplified definitions of good and evil.

---

### Table 3.1 Sociological Explanations of Terrorism: Nationalism, Constituencies, and Adversaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Activity Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constituency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Republican Army factions</td>
<td>Northern Irish Catholics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETA factions</td>
<td>Spanish Basques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular and religious</td>
<td>Palestinians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLQ</td>
<td>French-speaking residents of Quebec (Québécois)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the outset, it is useful to examine the presumption held by a number of people—experts, policy makers, and laypersons—that terrorism is a manifestation of insanity or mental illness or that terrorism is the signature of a lunatic fringe. This presumption suggests that terrorism is a priori (fundamentally) irrational behavior and that only deranged individuals or deranged collections of people would select terrorist violence as a strategy. Most experts agree that this blanket presumption is incorrect. Although individuals and groups do act out of certain idiosyncratic psychological processes, their behavior is neither insane nor necessarily irrational.

**Individual-Level Psychological Explanations**

Some experts argue that the decision to engage in political violence is frequently an outcome of significant events in individual lives that give rise to antisocial feelings. Such individuals actively seek improvement in their environment or desire revenge and redress from the perceived cause of their condition.

Research has not found a pattern of psychopathology among terrorists. In comparing nonviolent and violent activists, studies reported “preliminary impressions . . . that the family backgrounds of terrorists do not differ strikingly from the backgrounds of their politically active counterparts.” There is evidence of some psychosocial commonalities among violent activists. For example, research on 250 West German terrorists reported “a high incidence of fragmented families,” “severe conflict, especially with the parents,” conviction in juvenile court, and “a pattern of failure both educationally and vocationally.”

**Group-Level Psychological Explanations**

In a number of social and political contexts, political violence is a familiar social phenomenon for some people. When it is combined with “the pronounced need to belong to a group,” individuals can in the end “define their social status by group acceptance.” Thus, at the group level,

another result of psychological motivation is the intensity of group dynamics among terrorists. They tend to demand unanimity and be intolerant of dissent . . . [and] pressure to escalate the frequency and intensity of operations is ever present. . . . Compromise is rejected, and terrorist groups lean towards maximalist positions.

An important outcome of these dynamics is the development of a self-perpetuating cycle of rationalizations of political violence. This occurs because

the psychodynamics also make the announced group goal nearly impossible to achieve. A group that achieves its stated purpose is no longer needed; thus, success threatens the psychological well-being of its members.
Generalized Psychological Explanations

Psychological explanations are fairly broad approaches. Both individual and group theories attempt to generalize reasons for the decision to initiate political violence and the processes that perpetuate such violence. These explanations may be summarized as follows:

- Terrorism is simply a choice among violent and less violent alternatives. It is a rational selection of one methodology.
- Terrorism is a technique for maintaining group cohesion and focus. Group solidarity overcomes individualism.
- Terrorism is a necessary process to build the esteem of an oppressed people. Through terrorism, power is established over others, and the weak become strong. Attention itself becomes self-gratifying.
- Terrorists consider themselves an elite vanguard. They are not content to debate the issues because they have found a truth that needs no explanation. Action is superior to debate.
- Terrorism provides a means to justify political violence. The targets are depersonalized, and symbolic labels are attached to them. Thus, symbolic buildings become legitimate targets even when occupied by people, and individual victims become symbols of an oppressive system.

In essence, then, psychological explanations of terrorist behavior use theories of individual motivations and group dynamics to explain why people decide to adopt strategies of political violence and why groups continue campaigns of violence. Pressures to conform to the group, combined with those to commit acts of violence, form a powerful psychological drive to carry on in the name of the cause even when victory is logically impossible. These pressures become so prevalent that victory becomes secondary to the unity of the group. Having said this, it is inadvisable to generalize about psychological causes of terrorism because “most terrorists do not demonstrate serious psychopathology” and “there is no single personality type.”

Case: The Stockholm Syndrome. In August 1973, three women and one man were taken hostage by two bank robbers in Stockholm, Sweden. The botched robbery led to a hostage crisis that lasted for 6 days. During the crisis, the robbers threatened to kill the four hostages if the authorities tried to rescue them. At the same time, the hostages received treatment from the robbers that they began to think of as kindness and consideration. For example, one hostage was told that he would not be killed but rather shot in the leg if the police intervened and that he should play dead. Another hostage, who suffered from claustrophobia, was let out of the bank vault on a rope leash.

During the 6-day episode, all of the hostages began to sympathize with the robbers and gradually came to identify with them. They eventually denounced the
authorities’ attempts to free them. After the situation was resolved, the hostages remained loyal to their former captors for months. They refused to testify against them and raised money for their legal defense. One of the female former hostages actually became engaged to one of the robbers. This was, to say the least, surprising behavior. The question is whether this was an isolated phenomenon or whether it is possible for it to occur in other hostage crises.

Experts are divided about whether the Stockholm syndrome is a prevalent condition. Those who contend that it can occur and has occurred in other situations argue that the syndrome sets in when a prisoner suffers a psychological shift from captive to sympathizer. In theory, the prisoner will try to keep his or her captor happy in order to stay alive whenever he or she is unable to escape, isolated, or threatened with death. This becomes an obsessive identification with what the captor likes and dislikes, and the prisoner eventually begins to sympathize with the captor. The psychological shift theoretically requires 3 or 4 days to set in.

Chapter Perspective 3.1 investigates the subject of gender and terrorism by discussing women as terrorists.

**Women as Terrorists: A Psycho-Social Context**

Between October 23 and 26, 2003, Chechen terrorists seized 700 hostages in a Moscow theater. The episode ended with the deaths of scores of hostages and all of the terrorists. Russian authorities reported that many of the hostage takers were women who had suicide explosive vests strapped to their bodies. The presence of female suicide bombers is not uncommon within the Chechen resistance movement. As a result, the Russian media have dubbed the women among Chechen terrorists Black Widows because they are allegedly relatives of Chechen men who have died in the ongoing war in Chechnya (see Chapter 5).

How common is terrorism by women? What motivates women to become terrorists? In which environments are female terrorists typically found?

Women have been active in a variety of roles in many violent political movements. Historically, some women held positions of leadership during terrorist campaigns and were well integrated into the command systems and policy decision-making processes in extremist groups. In the modern era, women were central figures in Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers, Germany’s Red Army Faction, Italy’s Red Brigades, Spain’s Basque ETA, and the Japanese Red Army. During the Palestinian intifada (shaking off, or uprising) against Israel, a number of Palestinian suicide bombers were young women. More commonly, women serve as combatants rather than leaders, or they are recruited to participate as support functionaries, such as by finding safe houses and engaging in surveillance.

Regardless of the quality of participation, it is clear that such involvement belies the common presumption that terrorism is an exclusively male preserve. In fact, some of the most committed revolutionaries around the world are women.
The following examples are instructive:

- Before the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, Russian women were leading members of violent extremist groups such as People’s Will and the Social Revolutionary Party.
- Female anarchists such as Emma Goldman in the United States demonstrated that women could be leading revolutionary theorists.
- Leila Khaled became a well-respected and prominent member of the Palestinian nationalist movement after her participation in two airline hijacking incidents.
- During the unrest leading up to the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s, women participated in numerous antigovernment attacks.
- Gudrun Ensslin, Ulrike Meinhof, and other women were leaders and comrades-in-arms within Germany’s Red Army Faction during the 1970s.
- During the 1970s and 1980s, other West European terrorist groups such as France’s Direct Action (Action Directe), Italy’s Red Brigades, and Belgium’s Communist Combat Cells integrated women into their ranks.
- Women were leaders in the nihilistic Japanese Red Army, which was founded by a woman (Fusako Shigenobu), during the 1970s and 1980s.
- During the final quarter of the 20th century, Provisional Irish Republican Army soldiers were mostly men, despite the fact that the IRA was a nationalist and mildly socialist movement.
- Women became renowned leaders among Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers group during and after the 1990s when many male leaders were killed or captured, and female terrorists known as Freedom Birds engaged in many attacks, including suicide bombings.
- Among Chechen rebels during the early years of the new millennium, young women were recruited, manipulated, or coerced into becoming suicide fighters known among Russians as Black Widows.
- Around the turn of the new millennium, the Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades unit of the Palestine Liberation Organization actively recruited and deployed a few women as suicide bombers.
- Female combatants have been found in the ranks of many insurgent groups, such as Colombia’s Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armados Revolucionarios de Colombia, or FARC) and National Liberation Army (Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional, or ELN), India’s Naxalites, the Communist Party of Nepal, Peru’s Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso), and Mexico’s Zapatistas.

Active participation of women is arguably more common among left-wing and nationalist terrorist movements than in right-wing and religious movements. Rightist and religious movements yield few cases of women as terrorists, and examples of female leaders are equally few. One reason is that, on one hand, many leftists adopt ideologies of gender equality and many nationalists readily enlist female fighters for the greater good of the group. On the other hand, right-wing and religious movements often adopt ideologies that relegate women to secondary roles within the group. Among religious movements, ideologies of male dominance and female subordination have been

(Continued)
common, so that women rarely participate in attacks, let alone in command systems and policy decision-making processes.

In a particularly disturbing trend, young girls have been recruited as fighters by paramilitary groups, such as the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda and the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone. Some of these “Small Girls” units were made to participate in the brutalization of local populations.\(^1\)

\(\text{a. For a good discussion of these and other issues, see Rhiannon Talbot, “Myths in the Representation of Women Terrorists,” Eire-Ireland, Fall 2001.} \)

\(\text{b. For a discussion of the roles of women in terrorist movements, see Rhiannon Talbot, “The Unexpected Face of Terrorism,” This Is the Northeast, January 31, 2002.} \)

\(\text{c. For a good discussion of Italian women in violent organizations, see Alison Jamieson, “Mafiosi and Terrorists: Italian Women in Violent Organizations,” SAIS Review, Summer/Fall 2000, 51–64.} \)

\(\text{d. For interviews with female Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades volunteers, see Michael Tierney, “Young, Gifted and Ready to Kill,” The Herald (Glasgow, UK), August 3, 2002.} \)


**Political Violence as Strategic Choice**

**Making Revolution: Acts of Political Will**

An act of political will is an effort to force change. It is a choice, a rational decision from the revolutionary’s perspective, to adopt specific tactics and methodologies to defeat an adversary. These methodologies are instruments of rational strategic choice, in which terrorism is adopted as an optimal strategy. All that is required for final victory is the political and strategic will to achieve the final goal. Selecting terrorism is a process based on the experiences of each insurgent group and thus the outcome of an evolutionary political progression.

As a result, terrorism is simply a tool, an option, selected by members of the political fringe to achieve a goal. Terrorism is a deliberate strategy, and success is ensured as long as the group’s political and strategic will remains strong.

The evolution of Marxist revolutionary strategy illustrates the essence of political will. Karl Marx argued that history and human social evolution are inexorable forces that will inevitably end in the triumph of the revolutionary working class. He believed that the prediction of the eventual collapse of capitalism was based on scientific law. **Vladimir Ilich Lenin**, however, understood that capitalism’s demise would not come about without a push from an organized and disciplined vanguard organization such as the Communist Party. This organization would lead the working class to victory. In other words, the political will of the people can make history if they are properly indoctrinated and led. An important conceptual example will help readers better understand the theory of revolutionary change.
through acts of political will. It is a strategy known as people’s war. The context in which it was first developed and applied was the Chinese Revolution.

Mao Zedong led the Communist Red Army to victory during the Chinese Revolution by waging a protracted war—first against Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists (Kuomintang), then in alliance with the Nationalists against the invading Japanese, and finally driving Chiang’s forces from mainland China in 1949. The Red Army prevailed largely because of Mao’s military-political doctrine, which emphasized waging an insurgent people’s war. His strategy was simple: Indoctrinate the army; win over the people; and hit, run, and fight forever.

People’s war was a strategy born of necessity, originating when the Red Army was nearly annihilated by the Nationalists before and during the famous Long March campaign of 1934 and 1935. During the Long March, the Red Army fought a series of rearguard actions against pursuing Nationalist forces, eventually finding refuge in the northern Shensi province after a reputed 6,000-mile march. After the march, while the Red Army rested and was refitted in Shensi, Mao developed his military doctrine. People’s war required protracted warfare (war drawn out over time), fought by an army imbued with an iron ideological will to wear down the enemy.16

According to Mao, the Red Army should fight a guerrilla war with roving bands that would occasionally unite. The strategy was to fight by consolidating the countryside and then gradually moving into the towns and cities. Red Army units would avoid conventional battle with the Nationalists, giving ground before superior numbers. Space would be traded for time, and battle would be engaged only when the Red Army was tactically superior at a given moment. Thus, an emphasis was placed on avoidance and retreat. In people’s war, assassination was perfectly acceptable, and targets included soldiers, government administrators, and civilian collaborators. Government-sponsored programs and events—no matter how beneficial they might be to the people—were to be violently disrupted to show the government’s weakness. A successful people’s war required the cooperation and participation of the civilian population, so Mao ordered his soldiers to win their loyalty by treating the people appropriately.

Mao’s contribution to modern warfare—and to the concept of political will—was that he deliberately linked his military strategy to his political strategy; they were one and the same. Terrorism was a perfectly acceptable option. The combination of ideology, political indoctrination, guerrilla tactics, protracted warfare, and popular support made people’s war a very potent strategy and an effective synthesis of political will.

**Perception and Cultural Disconnect: Adversaries in the War on Terrorism**

One other consideration is necessary to fully appreciate the modern causes of terrorism. This theory is rooted in the political environment that gave rise to the new era of terrorism.

The concept of “one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter” is pertinent to how the behavior of the West, and particularly the behavior of the United States, is perceived around the world. When the September 11 attacks occurred,
many Americans and other Westerners saw them as an attack on Western-style civilization. Reasons given for the subsequent U.S.-led war on terrorism included the argument that war is necessary to defend civilization from a new barbarism. From the official American and allied point of view, the war is a simply counteraction against the enemies of democracy and freedom. However, many Muslims have a wholly different perspective.

Interestingly, many young Muslims are keen to adopt some degree of Western culture, yet remain loyal to the Muslim community. One student commented,

Most of us here like it both ways, we like American fashion, American music, American movies, but in the end, we are Muslims. . . . The Holy Prophet said that all Muslims are like one body, and if one part of the body gets injured, then all parts feel that pain. If one Muslim is injured by non-Muslims in Afghanistan, it is the duty of all Muslims of the world to help him.17

The argument, then, is that the cause of anti-American and -Western sentiment is the behavior of those nations—that is, their actions rather than their values or their culture. In the opening paragraph of his controversial book *Imperial Hubris*, former ranking CIA official Michael Scheuer presented the central precept of this argument:

In America’s confrontation with Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, their allies, and the Islamic world, there lies a startlingly clear example of how loving something intensely can stimulate an equally intense and purposeful hatred of things by which it is threatened. This hatred shapes and informs Muslim reactions to U.S. policies and their execution, and it is impossible to understand the threat America faces until the intensity and pervasiveness of this hatred is recognized.18

Can Muslim perceptions and Western behaviors be reconciled? What are the prospects for mitigating this source of terrorism in the modern era? Several events portend a continued disconnect, at least for the immediate future:

• The American-led occupation of Iraq and the protracted insurgency that arose
• An open-ended presence of Western troops in or near Muslim countries
• Broadcast images of civilian casualties and other collateral damage during military operations
• Broadcast images and rumors of the mistreatment of prisoners in American-run detention facilities
• Cycles of chronic violence between Israelis and Palestinians and the perception that the United States and the West unfairly favor Israel

In this regard, a July 2007 report by the CIA’s National Intelligence Council concluded that the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland remained high and that Al Qaeda remained a potent adversary in the war on terrorism.19 The 2007 National Intelligence
Council’s estimate essentially reiterated the 2004 estimate, which had warned that the war in Iraq created a new training ground for professional terrorists, much as the 1979–1989 Soviet war in Afghanistan created an environment that led to the rise of Al Qaeda and other international mujahideen (Islamic holy warriors).20 It also projected that veterans of the Iraq war would disperse after the end of the conflict, thus constituting a new generation of international mujahideen who would supplant the first Afghanistan-trained generation. This is a plausible scenario because many foreigners volunteered to fight in Iraq out of a sense of pan-Islamic solidarity.21

Moral Justifications for Political Violence

Although not all extremists become terrorists, some do cross the line. For them, terrorism is a morally acceptable strategy, a specifically selected method to further a just cause.

To facilitate critical understanding of the morality of terrorists, the following four motives are reviewed:

1. Moral convictions of terrorists
2. Simplified definitions of good and evil
3. Seeking utopia
4. Codes of self-sacrifice

Moral Convictions of Terrorists

Moral conviction refers to terrorists’ unambiguous certainty of the righteousness of their cause. The goals and objectives of their movement are considered principled beyond reproach and their methods absolutely justifiable. This conviction can arise in several environments, including the following two settings:

In the first, a group of people can conclude that they have been morally wronged and that a powerful, immoral, and evil enemy is arrayed against them. This enemy is considered adept at betrayal, exploitation, violence, and repression. These conclusions can have some legitimacy, especially when a history of exploitation has been documented. This historical evidence is identified and interpreted as being the source of the group’s modern problems. For example, many leftist insurgents in Latin America characterized the United States as an imperialist enemy because of its long history of military intervention, economic penetration, and support for repressive regimes in the region.22

In later generations, native populations who shared this kind of history and who interpreted it as being part of an ongoing pattern in contemporary times developed strong resentment against their perceived oppressor—in this case, the United States and the governments it supported. To them, there was no need to question the morality of their cause; it was quite clear.

A second setting in which moral conviction may arise is when a group or a people concludes that it is inherently and morally superior. This can be derived
from ideological convictions, ethno-national values, or religious beliefs. From this perspective, the cause is virtually holy; in the case of religious beliefs, it is holy. A sense of moral purity becomes the foundation for the simplification of good and evil. In this setting, extremists decide that no compromise is possible and that terrorism is a legitimate option.

For example, a major crisis began in the Yugoslavian territory of Kosovo in 1998 when heavy fighting broke out between Serb security forces, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and the Serb and Albanian communities. The conflict ended when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russian troops occupied Kosovo and the Serb security units were withdrawn. The strong Serb bond with Kosovo had originated in 1389 when the Serb hero, Prince Lazar, was defeated by the Ottoman Turks in Kosovo. Kosovo had been the center of the medieval Serb empire, and this defeat ended the Serb nation. Over the next 500 years, as the Turks ruled the province, Albanian Muslims migrated into Kosovo and gradually displaced

![Photo 3.2](image-url) **Photo 3.2** Bloody Sunday (January 30, 1972): A British soldier runs down an Irish Catholic demonstrator during protests and rioting in the city of Londonderry in Northern Ireland. The confrontations resulted in elite paratroopers firing on Catholic civilians. The incident was a seminal event that rallied many Catholics to support the Provisional Irish Republican Army.
Serb Christians. Nevertheless, Serbs have always had strong ethno-national ties to Kosovo, considering it a kind of spiritual homeland. It is at the center of their national identity. Thus, despite the fact that 90% of Kosovo’s population was Albanian in 1998, Serbs considered their claim to the territory paramount to anyone else’s. From their perspective, the morality of their position was clear.

Chapter Perspective 3.2 illustrates the application of selective and moral terrorism. It is a quotation from a document captured during the war in Vietnam from the Viet Cong by American soldiers of the First Cavalry Division. It is a directive explaining procedures for suppressing counterrevolutionary elements, remarkable for its instructions on how to correctly conduct the campaign.

**Chapter Perspective 3.2**

**Moral Terror? A Viet Cong Directive Ordering Selective Terrorism**

The Viet Cong were southern Vietnamese Communists who fought alongside the North Vietnamese Army against American forces and the Republic of South Vietnam. The Communist forces considered this war one phase in an ongoing effort to unify the North and South into a single nation.

During the American phase of their long war, Vietnamese Communists in South Vietnam routinely used terrorism to eliminate enemies. Assassinations and kidnappings were common, and targets regularly included civilians. Thousands fell victim to this policy.

The following quotation is from a passage concerning the suppression of counterrevolutionaries in areas under American or South Vietnamese control. It is interesting because it orders Viet Cong operatives to be very selective in choosing their targets.

**Directive**

Concerning a number of problems that require thorough understanding in Z’s task of repressing counterrevolutionary elements.

In areas temporarily under enemy control:

1. We are to exterminate dangerous and cruel elements such as security agents, policemen, and other cruel elements in espionage organizations, professional secret agents in organizations to counter the Revolution, henchmen with many blood debts in village administrative machines, in the puppet system, in enemy military and paramilitary organizations, and in [South Vietnamese political parties].

2. We are to establish files immediately and prepare the ground for later suppression of dangerous henchmen whom we need not eliminate yet or whose elimination is not yet politically advantageous.

While applying the above-mentioned regulations, we must observe the following:

- Distinguish . . . the elimination of tyrants and local administrative personnel while fighting from the continuous task of repressing counterrevolutionaries in the liberated areas.

*(Continued)*
Delineating Morality: Simplified Definitions of Good and Evil

Revolutionaries universally conclude that their cause is honorable, their methods are justifiable, and their opponents are representations of implacable evil. They arrive at this conclusion in innumerable ways, often—as in the case of Marxists—after devoting considerable intellectual energy to political analysis. Nevertheless, their final analysis is uncomplicated: Our cause is just, and the enemy’s is unjust. Once this line has been clearly drawn between good and evil, the methods used in the course of the struggle are justified by the ennobled goals and objectives of the cause.

A good example of the application in practice of simplified delineations of good and evil is found in the influential *Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerrilla*, written by Brazilian revolutionary Carlos Marighella.24 In this document, Marighella clearly argues that terrorism is necessary against a ruthless enemy. The *Mini-Manual* was read, and its strategy implemented, by leftist revolutionaries throughout Latin America and Europe. Marighella advocated terrorism as a correct response to the oppression of the Brazilian dictatorship. He wrote,

> The accusation of assault or terrorism no longer has the pejorative meaning it used to have. . . . Today to be an assailant or a terrorist is a quality that ennobles any honorable man because it is an act worthy of a revolutionary engaged in armed struggle against the shameful military dictatorship and its monstrosities.25

One fact is clear: There is a moment of decision among those who choose to rise in rebellion against a perceived oppressor. This moment of decision is a turning point in the lives of individuals, people, and nations.

---

(Continued)

- Distinguish the ringleaders, the commissioned officers, from the henchmen.
- Distinguish exploiting elements from the basic elements and distinguish persons determined to oppose the Revolution from those who are forced to do so or those who are brought over and have no political understanding.
- Distinguish between persons with much political and religious influence and those who have no influence or very little influence.
- Distinguish between historical problems and present-day problems.
- Distinguish major crimes with many bad effects from minor crimes or innocence.
- Distinguish determined and stubborn antirevolutionary attitudes from attitudes of submission to the Revolution and true repentance, and willingness to redeem by contribution to the Revolution.
- Distinguish counterrevolutionary elements from backward and dissatisfied persons among the masses.

Seeking Utopia: Moral Ends Through Violent Means

The book *Utopia*, written by the English writer Sir Thomas More in the 16th century, was a fictional work that described an imaginary island with a society having an ideal political and social system. Countless philosophers, including political and religious writers, have since created their own visions of the perfect society.26 Terrorists likewise envision some form of utopia, although for many this can simply mean the destruction of the existing order. For such nihilist dissidents, any system is preferable to the existing one, and its destruction alone is a justifiable goal. The question is what kind of utopia terrorists seek. This depends on their belief system. For example, religious terrorists seek to create a God-inspired society on earth that reflects the commandments, morality, and values of their religious faith. Political terrorists define their ideal society according to their ideological perspective. Regardless of which belief system terrorists adopt, they uniformly accept the proposition that the promised good (a utopia) outweighs their present actions, no matter how violent those actions are. The revolution will bring utopia after a period of trial and tribulation, so that the end justifies the means. This type of reasoning is particularly common among religious, ethno-nationalist, and ideological terrorists.

*PHOTO 3.3* Members of the Waffen SS on parade in Nazi Germany. German members of the Waffen SS were specially selected as pure members of the Aryan race. They lived according to a code that allowed for the ruthless treatment of enemies and “subhumans.”
Moral Purity: Codes of Self-Sacrifice

Terrorists invariably have faith in the justness of their cause and live their lives accordingly. Many consequently adopt codes of self-sacrifice that are at the root of their everyday lives. They believe that these codes are superior codes of living and that those who follow the code are superior to those who do not. The code accepts a basic truth and applies it to everyday life. This truth usually has a religious, ethno-national, or ideological foundation. Any actions taken within the accepted parameters of these codes—even terrorist actions—are justified because the code cleanses the true believer.

A good example of ideological codes of self-sacrifice is found on the fringe left among the first anarchists. Many anarchists did not simply believe in revolution; they lived the revolution. They crafted a lifestyle that was consumed by the cause. Among some, an affinity for death became part of the revolutionary lifestyle. The Russian anarchist Sergei Nechayev wrote in *Revolutionary Catechism*,

> The revolutionary is a man committed. He has neither personal interests nor sentiments, attachments, property, nor even a name. Everything in him is subordinated to a single exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion: the revolution.\(^{27}\)

Codes of self-sacrifice explain much terrorist behavior. Those who participate in movements and organizations adopt belief systems that justify their behavior and absolve them of responsibility for normally unacceptable behavior. Such systems cleanse participants and offer them a sense of participating in a higher or superior morality.

Chapter Perspective 3.3 compares and contrasts the motives and behavior of two Palestinian nationalists, Leila Khaled and Abu Nidal.

---

**Chapter Perspective 3.3**

**Profiling: Leila Khaled and Abu Nidal**

How people become political extremists and terrorists is, of course, idiosyncratic. A comparison of two revolutionaries championing the Palestinian cause is useful in illustrating the origins of the motives and ideologies of politically violent individuals.
Leila Khaled: Freedom Fighter or Terrorist?

During the early 1970s, Leila Khaled was famous both because of her exploits as a Palestinian revolutionary and because she was for a time the best-known airline hijacker in the world.

Khaled was born in Haifa in Palestine. After the Israeli war of independence, she and her family became refugees in a camp in the city of Tyre, Lebanon, when she was a child. Khaled has said that she was politicized from a very young age and became a committed revolutionary by the time she was 15. Politically, she was influenced by leftist theory. One of her revolutionary heroes was Ernesto “Che” Guevara, whom she considered a true revolutionary, unlike other Western radicals.

In August 1969, at the age of 23, Leila Khaled hijacked a TWA flight on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The goal was to direct the world’s attention to the plight of the Palestinians. It was a successful operation, and she reportedly forced the pilots to fly over her ancestral home of Haifa before turning toward Damascus. In Damascus, the passengers were released into the custody of the Syrians and the plane was blown up. Afterward, a then-famous photograph was taken of her.

In preparation for her next operation, and because the photograph had become a political icon, Khaled underwent plastic surgery in Germany to alter her appearance. She participated in a much larger operation on September 6 and 9, 1970, when the PFLP attempted to hijack five airliners. One of the hijackings failed, one airliner was flown to a runway in Cairo and destroyed, and the remaining three were flown to Dawson’s Field in Jordan and blown up by the PFLP on September 12. Khaled had been overpowered and captured during one of the failed attempts on September 6—an El Al (the Israeli airline) flight from Amsterdam. She was released on September 28 as part of a brokered deal exchanging Palestinian prisoners for the hostages.

Leila Khaled published her autobiography in 1973, titled *My People Shall Live: The Autobiography of a Revolutionary.* She eventually settled in Amman, Jordan, and became a member of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian parliament. She has never moderated her political beliefs, has always considered herself a freedom fighter, and takes pride in being one of the first to use extreme tactics to bring the Palestinian cause to the world’s attention. Khaled considers the progression of Palestinian revolutionary violence—such as the intifada—a legitimate means to regain Palestine.

Abu Nidal: Ruthless Revolutionary

Sabri al-Banna, a Palestinian, adopted the nom de guerre of Abu Nidal, which has since become synonymous with his Abu Nidal Organization (ANO). He was a radical member of the umbrella Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from an early point in its history. Within the PLO, Yasir Arafat’s nationalist Al Fatah organization was the dominant group. Unlike the Fatah mainstream, Abu Nidal strongly advocated a dissident ideology that was pan-Arabist, meaning that national borders in the Arab world are not believed sacrosanct. Abu Nidal long argued that Al Fatah membership should be open to all Arabs, not just Palestinians. In support of the Palestinian cause, he argued that Palestine must be established as an Arab state and that its borders must stretch from the Jordan River in the east to the Mediterranean sea. According to pan-Arabism, however, this is only one cause among many in the Arab world.

After the 1973 Yom Kippur war, when Israel soundly defeated invading Arab armies, many in the mainstream Al Fatah group argued that a political solution with Israel should be an option. In 1974,
Abu Nidal split from Al Fatah and began his rejectionist movement to carry on a pan-Arabist armed struggle. He and his followers immediately began engaging in high-profile international terrorist attacks, believing that the war should not be limited to the Middle East. At different periods in his struggle, he successfully solicited sanctuary from Iraq, Libya, and Syria—all of which have practiced pan-Arabist ideologies.

The ANO became one of the most prolific and bloody terrorist organizations in modern history. It carried out attacks in approximately 20 countries and was responsible for killing or injuring about 900 people. The ANO's targets included fellow Arabs, such as the PLO, Arab governments, and moderate Palestinians. Its non-Arab targets included the interests of France, Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Many of these attacks were spectacular, such as an attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to Great Britain in June 1982, simultaneous attacks on the Vienna and Rome airports in December 1985, the hijacking of a Pan Am airliner in September 1986, and several assassinations of top PLO officials in several countries. It has been alleged that Abu Nidal collaborated in the 1972 massacre of 11 Israeli athletes by the Black September group at the Munich Olympics. Abu Nidal remained a dedicated pan-Arabist revolutionary and never renounced his worldwide acts of political violence. His group has several hundred members, a militia in Lebanon, and international resources. The ANO operated under numerous names, including the Al Fatah Revolutionary Council, Arab Revolutionary Council, Arab Revolutionary Brigades, Black September, Black June, and Revolutionary Organization of Socialist Muslims. The group seemingly ended its attacks against Western interests in the late 1980s. The only major attacks attributed to the ANO in the 1990s were the 1991 assassinations of PLO deputy chief Abu Iyad and PLO security chief Abu Hul in Tunis, as well as the 1994 assassination of the senior Jordanian diplomat Naeb Maaytah in Beirut. The whereabouts of Abu Nidal were usually speculative, but he relocated to Iraq in December 1998. In August 2002, he was found dead in Iraq of multiple gunshot wounds. The official Iraqi account was that he committed suicide. Other unofficial accounts suggested that he was shot when Iraqi security agents came to arrest him, dying either of self-inflicted wounds or during a shootout.

---


---

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced readers to the theoretical causes of terrorism and presented examples that represent some of the models developed by scholars and other researchers. Individual profiles, group dynamics, political environments, and social processes are at the center of the puzzle of explaining why people and groups adopt fringe beliefs and engage in terrorist behavior. Social movements and dramatic (or traumatic) events have been identified as two sources of terrorism, with the caveat that they are generalized explanations.

Not all extremists become terrorists, but certainly all terrorists are motivated by extremist beliefs. Motives behind terrorist behavior include a range of factors. One is morality, an unambiguous conviction of the righteousness of one’s cause.
Terrorists believe that the principles of their movement are unquestionably sound. A second is simplified notions of good and evil, with no shades of gray, when terrorists presume that their cause and methods are completely justifiable because their opponents represent inveterate evil. A third is utopian ideals, whereby an idealized end justifies violence. Such ends are often vague concepts, such as Karl Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat. The fourth factor is critical to understanding terrorist behavior. It is codes of self-sacrifice, when an ingrained belief system forms the basis for a terrorist’s lifestyle and conduct. Collectively, these factors form a useful theoretical foundation for explaining terrorist motives.

Explanations of terrorism also include a range of factors. The theory of acts of political will is a rational model in which extremists choose to engage in terrorism as an optimal strategy to force change. Sociological explanations of terrorism look at intergroup dynamics, particularly conflict that results in collective violence. Perception is an important factor in the decision. Psychological explanations...
broadly explain individual motivations and group dynamics. Psychological theories also help explain the cohesion of terrorist organizations and why they perpetuate violent behavior even when victory is logically impossible.

One final point should be considered when evaluating the causes of terrorism. When experts build models and develop explanatory theories for politically motivated violence, their conclusions sometimes “reflect the political and social currents of the times in which the scholars writing the theories live.” It is plausible that
to a large degree, the development of theories reflects changing political and intellectual climates. When intellectuals have opposed the collective behavior of their times... they have tended to depict the behavior negatively. ... When scholars have instead supported the collective behavior of their eras... they have painted a more positive portrait of both the behavior and the individuals participating in it.

This is not to say that analysts are not trying to be objective or that they are purposefully disingenuous in their analyses. But it is only logical to presume that new explanatory theories will be affected by factors such as new terrorist environments and new ideologies that encourage political violence. The progression of explanations by the social and behavioral sciences in the future will naturally reflect the sociopolitical environments of the times in which they are developed.

**DISCUSSION BOX**

This chapter’s Discussion Box is intended to stimulate critical debate about seminal incidents in the history of national groups.

**Bloody Sunday and Black September: The Effect of Traumatic Events in a People’s History**

**Bloody Sunday**

In the late 1960s, Irish Catholic activists calling themselves the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association attempted to emulate the African American civil rights movement as a strategy to agitate for equality in Northern Ireland. They thought that the same force of moral conviction would sway British policy to improve the plight of the Catholics. Their demands were similar to those of the American civil rights movement: equal opportunity, better employment, access to housing, and access to education. This ended when mostly peaceful demonstrations gradually became more violent, leading to rioting in the summer of 1969, an environment of generalized unrest, and the deployment of British troops. After 1969, the demonstrations continued, but rioting, fire bombings, and gun battles gradually became a regular feature of strife in Northern Ireland.
On January 30, 1972, elite British paratroopers fired on demonstrators in Londonderry. Thirteen demonstrators were killed. After this incident, many Catholics became radicalized and actively worked to drive out the British. The Irish Republican Army received recruits and widespread support from the Catholic community. In July 1972, the **Provos** launched a massive bombing spree in central Belfast.

**Black September**

When Leila Khaled and her comrades attempted to hijack five airliners on September 6 and 9, 1970, their plan was to fly all of the planes to an abandoned British Royal Air Force (RAF) airfield in Jordan, hold hostages, broker the release of Palestinian prisoners, release the hostages, blow up the planes, and thereby force the world to focus on the plight of the Palestinian people. On September 12, 255 hostages were released from the three planes that landed at Dawson’s Field (the RAF base), and 56 were kept to bargain for the release of seven Palestinian prisoners, including Leila Khaled. The group then blew up the airliners.

Unfortunately for the hijackers, their actions greatly alarmed King Hussein of Jordan. Martial law was declared on September 16, and the incident led to civil war between Palestinian forces and the Jordanian army. Although the Jordanian operation was precipitated by the destruction of the airliners on Jordanian soil, tensions had been building between the army and Palestinian forces for some time. King Hussein and the Jordanian leadership interpreted this operation as confirmation that radical Palestinian groups had become too powerful and were a threat to Jordanian sovereignty.

On September 19, King Hussein asked for diplomatic intervention from Great Britain and the United States when a Syrian column entered Jordan in support of the Palestinians. On September 27, a truce ended the fighting. The outcome of the fighting was a relocation of much of the Palestinian leadership and fighters to its Lebanese bases. The entire incident became known among Palestinians as Black September and was not forgotten by radicals in the Palestinian nationalist movement. One of the most notorious terrorist groups took the name Black September, and the name was also used by Abu Nidal.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What role do you think these incidents had in precipitating the IRA’s and PLO’s cycles of violence?
2. Were the IRA’s and PLO’s tactics and targets justifiable responses to these incidents?
3. What, in your opinion, would have been the outcome in Northern Ireland if the British government had responded to the Irish Catholics’ emulation of the American civil rights movement?
4. What, in your opinion, would have been the outcome if the Jordanian government had not responded militarily to the Palestinian presence in Jordan?
5. How should the world community have responded to Bloody Sunday and Black September?
PART I
UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM

Key Terms and Concepts

The following topics were discussed in this chapter and can be found in the glossary:

- Absolute deprivation
- Abu Nidal Organization (ANO)
- Act of political will
- Black September
- Black Widows
- Bloody Sunday
- Codes of self-sacrifice
- Direct Action (Action Directe)
- The end justifies the means
- intifada
- Khaled, Leila
- Kosovo
- Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilich
- Marighella, Carlos
- Meinhof, Ulrike
- Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerrilla
- Nidal, Abu
- Nihilist dissidents
- People’s war
- Proletariat
- Provos
- Relative deprivation theory
- Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armados Revolucionarios de Colombia, or FARC)
- Revolutionary Catechism
- Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso)
- Stockholm syndrome
- Structural theory
- Utopia
- Viet Cong
- Waffen SS

Terrorism on the Web

Log on to the Web-based student study site at www.sagepub.com/martiness2e for additional Web sources and study resources.

Web Exercise

Using this chapter’s recommended Web sites, conduct an online investigation of the causes of extremist agitation and terrorist violence.

1. What issues do these groups consider to have unquestioned merit? What reasons do they give for this quality?
2. What scenarios do you think might cause these groups to engage in direct confrontation or violence?
3. Act as “devil’s advocate” and defend one of these causes that you disagree with.
For an online search of factors that are commonly cited as causes for terrorist violence, readers should activate the search engine on their Web browser and enter the following keywords:

“Intifadeh (or intifada)”

“Just war”

**Recommended Readings**

The following publications provide discussions about the causes of extremism and terrorist behavior.


