

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## Understanding and Responding to Terrorism

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The U.S. is spending hundreds of billions of dollars in the war on terrorism. Hidden in the direct costs are opportunity costs: investments in health, education, and infrastructure that are not possible for lack of resources. On top of material costs are political costs: the enlargement of government power and the narrowing of individual rights and privacy that accompany the waging of war. These costs are particularly threatening because no one expects the threat of terrorism to disappear anytime soon.

Terrorism is a form of intergroup conflict, not an expression of individual or collective psychopathology. The psychological foundations of intergroup conflict are much the same for terrorists and states alike: group identification and perceived threat. Group identification means feeling good about group successes and feeling bad about group failures, losses, or suffering. Terrorists are moved by this group identification. They identify with a larger group or cause that they see as threatened and victimized, and they identify with a smaller group of comrades who together are giving their lives for the cause. Like soldiers of the state, terrorists fight for their cause in abstract and their comrades in particular.

Perceived threats to a group include loss of material resources, loss of status or honor, loss of life, or loss of a distinctive identity. For a country attacked, the threat comes from the terrorists. For the terrorists, the threat comes from the state. As modern technology expands their power, modern states reach ever deeper into the everyday lives of citizens. Decisions about education, health, employment--even definitions of life and death--are increasingly in the hands of government. Any ethnicity, culture, or religion without the protection of a powerful state is likely to feel threatened.

From this perspective, terrorism is the warfare--and the politics--of the weak. Terrorists are usually the apex of a much larger pyramid of people who identify with the same group or cause. At the pyramid's base, many who sympathize with the cause do not approve of attacks on civilians. Higher in the pyramid are those who justify terrorist violence for the cause, but do not act in support of their judgment. Terrorists rely on the pyramid for cover, information, material support, and new recruits. Terrorists and the state they attack are therefore part of a dynamic political competition over time.

The terrorists aim to wear out the state and its supporters to get what they want. The state aims to deter or win over the pyramid of sympathizers and supporters on which the terrorists depend. Many terrorists recognize that they can use the dynamics of this competition to their advantage. An outrageous attack on the people or symbols of a state can elicit a state response that will do for the terrorists what they cannot do for

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themselves: mobilize inactive terrorist sympathizers to active support for the terrorists. In this *ujitsu politics*, the terrorists use the strength of the state against itself. All that is needed is a state response that misses at least some terrorists and strikes at least some inactive sympathizers. This kind of mistake is called “collateral damage,” and from the terrorists’ point of view, the more the better.

To combat terrorism we must look beyond war in framing our response. Unlike war, terrorism has no clear end date, successful antiterrorism looks more like police work than military action, and the threat’s indefinite duration makes it dangerous to ignore other priorities until terrorism is gone. Fortunately, democratic states have a frame that is adapted to dealing with persisting violence. The criminal justice system fights an enemy that never wins but never disappears, and does so in the context of competing for state resources. The criminal justice system has the added advantage that mistakes are less likely to produce collateral damage measured in dead bodies and to play into a terrorist strategy of *ujitsu politics*.

We are likely to have more success in cutting off terrorists from their pyramid than in deterring or eliminating existing terrorists. A small group already committed to terrorism is difficult to find or persuade. Their weakness is dependence on a pyramid of those less committed than themselves. The same social science tools that are familiar in political campaigns--policy development using focus groups, polling, and market-tested advertising--can be brought to bear in the political competition against terrorists. In this competition, the experience of democratic politics is the ultimate weapon.

*Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the many issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at [info@psysr.org](mailto:info@psysr.org). We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.*

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