PS4100

PSYCHOLOGY OF TERRORISM

2016/17
Semester 1

Lecturer:
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Office hours: Fridays 11.30-12.30 (Room 2.61)
(or email me to arrange an appointment)
Overview

Terrorism is an ancient phenomenon, going back at least to the first century A.D. where the Sicarii (a splinter group of the Jewish Zealots) fought the Roman occupation of Judea by means of an assassination campaign. Systematic research on terrorism began in the 1960s and academic interest in the topic has grown exponentially since the events of 9/11. There is now a dedicated subject of “terrorism studies” to which scholars from a wide variety of disciplines contribute. Important areas of enquiry include the social, political and economic conditions that give rise to the emergence and decline of terrorism, the aims, tactics, and effectiveness of terrorism as a political strategy, the motivations and characteristics of people engaging in terrorism, and the effectiveness and wider social consequences of counterterrorism policies, to mention just a few. The present module will introduce students to current thinking about the psychological factors and processes involved and will cover different aspects of terrorist behaviour and responses to terrorism. We will investigate terrorism at several levels of analysis, including individual, group, and wider societal aspects, and address key issues and debates.

Aims and Objectives

On successful completion of this module students should have:

- The ability to critically engage with the terminology and argumentation in the academic and public discourse surrounding terrorism.
- An awareness of the methodological issues in studying terrorism
- The ability to apply their knowledge of social psychological theory and research gained in previous years to a current social issue
- A detailed understanding of the different theoretical approaches to terrorism & awareness of their respective strengths and limitations; an understanding of academic debates surrounding terrorism
- The ability to critically handle primary source material & to evaluate and integrate complex and conflicting empirical evidence
- The ability to think about terrorism at multiple levels of analysis
- The ability to evaluate the policy implications of psychological findings
- The ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing

For a full list of generic skills developed in this module, see the appendix.

Format

The teaching will follow the standard structure of senior honours modules in psychology. The weekly 2-hour sessions will consist of student-led discussions supplemented by lecture material. Typically there will be several target articles for discussion as well as some relevant background reading. For this module to be successful it is essential that the compulsory reading is completed prior to the session. Note that while class discussions will focus on the role of social-psychological factors and processes involved in terrorism, the reading list will include articles from a number of disciplines, including political science, sociology, economics, history, and criminology. Everybody is expected to participate actively in the discussions. Please bring a copy of the papers and your notes, questions and comments to the class to guide your contributions. I will provide a list of (non-compulsory) further reading each week for those who wish to read more about particular topics. I also encourage students to explore the literature beyond the list of readings provided.
In addition, I am asking each of you to “specialize” in one particular terrorist group (or individual in the case of lone-wolf terrorism) by reading up on their history, goals, ideology, and activities. This can be a group or cause you are particularly interested in, or perhaps something close to home. Ideally, we will have some diversity in the class spanning different time periods, geographical areas, and causes (e.g., separatist/nationalist, environmental/animal rights, right-wing and left-wing, Christian and Jihadist movements). This will liven up discussions and allow us to evaluate the applicability of theoretical models in a number of contexts. Specializing in one group early on will also be helpful in developing ideas for the continuous assessment. I will give further guidelines in our first meeting.

Independent learning week (week 6) should be used to revise the course material and, in preparation for the essay, to apply it to your case study. You should also use this week to prepare a brief (5-10 mins) presentation introducing your group and summarizing your analysis. Presentations will take place in week 7 as part of a mini-conference which I will organize. This will be useful practice to hone your presentation skills and will give you an opportunity to receive feedback on your ideas prior to the submission of your essay. Presentations will not be marked but are a course requirement.

Assessment

Continuous assessment (50%)

The essay title for the continuous assessment is as follows: Choose one person or group who has/have committed an act of terrorism and explain, with close reference to relevant psychological theory and research, which factors may have contributed to their involvement in terrorism. The essay should be 2000 words (maximum); which excludes references, tables and figures, but includes footnotes. Guidelines on how to approach the essay will be given in class. Essays should be submitted via MMS by 5pm on the 10th of November 2016. I aim to provide feedback by December 1st and will keep December 2nd free to meet with students individually for additional feedback if required.

Exam (50%):

This will take place during the examination period (between December 5th and 16th) and consist of a 2-hour take-home exam. You will be required to answer TWO out of five questions. The questions will be released on Moodle.

Date & time TBA

Disabilities

I encourage students with disabilities to let me know at the beginning of the semester what (if any) special accommodations they will need.

Etiquette

Students are requested not to use their mobile phones, tables, or laptops during class for other than class-related activities. I will do my best to respond to emails quickly but I cannot always guarantee a reply in the first 48 hours. Please help minimize email traffic by not requesting information that can easily be obtained elsewhere. Also, more substantive questions that require longer replies are best left for office hours.
## SCHEDULE

All meetings will take place on Fridays (9.10-11am) in the Old Library.

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Weekly Topics and Reading Materials

There is no single text for the course but the following books (all available as e-books via SAULCAT) are useful resources:

**Week 1: Introduction.** This session will provide an introduction to the topic and an outline of the course. We will go over some historical and current examples of terrorism and discuss the difficulties in defining terrorism. Levels of analysis, research questions, and methodological issues will be introduced and the potential contributions (and limitations) of a psychological approach to the study of terrorism will be discussed.

*Background Reading*
Horgan (2014), Chapters 1 (“Psychological warfare”) & 2 (“Understanding terrorism”)
Hoffman (2006), Chapter 1 (“Defining Terrorism”)

*Further Reading (optional)*

*Other Resources*
BBC Radio 4 (2013/14). *Terror through time*. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03d0kxx/episodes/guide](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03d0kxx/episodes/guide) [An series of 28 short reports on modern terrorism, from the 1800s through to 9/11]

**Week 2: Myths about terrorism.** In this session we will be probing some of the myths surrounding terrorism. Are suicide terrorists suicidal? Is there a ‘terrorist personality’? Are there root causes of terrorism, such as poverty?

*Background Reading*
Horgan (2014), Chapter 3 (“Terrorist Minds?”)
Koomen & Van der Pligt (2016), Chapter 5 (“Individual factors: personality and demographics”)

**Key Articles**

**Further Reading (optional)**

**Other Resources**
**Week 3: Terrorism as collective action.** This week we will discuss political factors (e.g., state repression) involved in terrorism and investigate the psychological processes through which these variables operate. Specifically, we will analyze terrorism as a form of collective action aimed to achieve a group goal. This approach allows us to situate terrorism within broader theoretical frameworks that have been applied to study intergroup conflict, social movements and collective violence more generally, and to examine the roles of social identities and norms, injustice appraisals and emotions, and efficacy calculations as key psychological drivers of terrorist behaviour.

**Background Reading**
Koomen & Van der Pligt (2016), Chapter 6 (“Social identity, polarization, and collective action”)

**Key Articles**

**Further Reading (optional)**
Week 4: The strategy of terrorism. Having dispelled the myth of terrorists as irrational or ‘crazy’ and defined terrorism as a form of collective action, we will examine the strategic logic and effectiveness-based justifications of terrorism in this session. We will engage with the debate about whether or not terrorism is the result of rational, strategic choice and discuss various rationales and theories about the presumed effectiveness of violence that often form part of terrorist ideology. Rather than looking at the actual political effectiveness of terrorism, which will be examined in weeks 9 and 10, we focus here on the goals and expected effects of terrorism from the actor’s point of view.

Background Reading
Hoffmann (2006) Chapter 2 (pp. 46-53) on the strategy of the Irgun

Key Articles

Further Reading (optional)
**Week 5: The moral justification of terrorism.** Moral standards in most societies strongly prohibit the use of violence against innocent people. Thus, the strategic use of violence against civilians requires moral justification. We will examine the psychological functions and effects of strategies like social categorization, construing the ingroup as virtuous, and delegitimizing and dehumanizing the outgroup, as well as other forms of moral engagement and disengagement that feature in terrorist discourse and ideology. To address the debate about the role of religion in the causation and legitimation of terrorism, we will pay particular attention to whether and how religious belief may facilitate the use of violence.

**Background Reading**
- Koomen & Van der Pligt (2016), Chapter 7 (“Social identity, ideology, and religion”)

**Key Articles**

**Further Reading (optional)**

**Week 6: Independent learning week.** Use this week to revise the course material and, in preparation for the essay, to apply it to your case study. You should also prepare a brief (5-10 mins) presentation introducing your group and summarizing your analysis for presentation in Week 7.
**Week 7: Radicalization.** As attempts to profile terrorists have been unsuccessful, recent efforts in psychological research have acknowledged that involvement in terrorist operations can be better understood when described as a gradual psychological process that is significantly influenced by group and organizational contexts. In week 7 we will deal with the question of how individuals become terrorists. We will examine a number of theoretical models describing the processes of radicalization into terrorism and evaluate relevant empirical research.

**Background Reading**

Horgan (2014), *Chapters 4 (“Involvement”) & 5 (“Engagement”)*

Koomen & Van der Pligt (2016), Chapter 9 (“Paths to and from violent extremism”)


**Key Articles**


**Further Reading (optional)**


Other Resources

BBC Radio 4 (2015). The spy who came in from al Qaeda. Available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05mrj7f](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05mrj7f)

Week 8: Group processes. In this session we will examine the psychology of terrorist groups, particularly how internal and external factors influence group dynamics and action.

Background Reading
Koomen & Van der Pligt (2016), Chapter 8 (“From extremism to violence: Small group processes, social support, and justification”)

Key Articles

Further Reading (optional)

Week 9: Audience responses - Target groups. Terrorist violence has a communicative function and, as discussed in week 4, is often directed at (at least) two different audiences: an ‘outgroup’ or target audience which is to be coerced into making political concessions, as well as an ‘ingroup’ audience, on whose behalf terrorists claim to act and whom they aim to mobilize for the cause. In the next two weeks we will examine whether, when, and how terrorist violence achieves these goals. This week we will discuss general societal consequences and assess whether terrorism is likely to achieve the desired political changes. Our main focus will be the psychological effects among member of the groups targeted by
terrorists. We will cover research and theory on the effects of terrorism in terms of political attitudes (e.g., conservative shift, political polarization), outgroup-directed attitudes and behaviour (prejudice and discrimination, hate crimes) and ingroup-directed behaviour (e.g., group identification, patriotism). We will examine how the emotional impact of terrorism affects policy attitudes (i.e., support for the “war on terror”; acceptance of the curtailment of civil liberties) and discuss the role of the media in these processes.

**Background Reading**


**Key Articles**


**Further Reading (optional)**


**Week 10: Audience responses - Constituencies.** Is the use of terrorism an effective tactic for mobilizing political support? More so than non-violent resistance? We will examine where, when and why terrorists receive sympathy in the populations they claim to represent and discuss the importance of public support for terrorism on its occurrence and persistence. We
will also examine empirical studies which investigate the factors that influence sympathizers’ moral judgments of the use of violence.

**Background Reading**

Koomen & Van der Pligt (2016), Chapter 8 (“From extremism to violence: Small group processes, social support, and justification”)


**Key Articles**


**Further Reading (optional)**


Khalil, J. (2014). Radical beliefs and violent actions are not synonymous: How to place the key disjuncture between attitudes and behaviors at the heart of our research into political violence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 37*(2), 198-211.


Sheikh et al. (2010). Literature review of attitudes towards violent extremism amongst Muslim communities in the UK. Communities and Local Government Publications (you can focus on Chapter 4).


**Week 11: Counter-terrorism.** Much research in particular since 9/11 was driven by the question of how to deal with terrorism. The final session will cover the issue of how terrorism should be addressed and examine the psychological consequences of counter-terrorism measures. We will examine various current counter-terrorism strategies and discuss, from a
psychological perspective, what might be productive and what might be counter-productive in curbing terrorism.

**Background Reading**


**Key Articles**


**Further Reading (optional)**


OTHER RESOURCES

Books


Journals on Terrorism
*Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression.*
*Critical Studies on Terrorism.*
*Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict.*
*Perspectives on Terrorism.*
*Studies in Conflict and Terrorism.*
*Terrorism.*
*Terrorism and Political Violence.*

Special Issues of Psychology Journals


Social Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism: Processes, Causes and Consequences,
Symposium on Suicide Terrorism, Political Psychology, 2009, Vol. 30(3). 

**Useful websites**
- Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism (CPST): [http://cpost.uchicago.edu/about/](http://cpost.uchicago.edu/about/)
- Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland (CAIN): [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/)
- National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START): [http://www.start.umd.edu/](http://www.start.umd.edu/)
- RAND Corporation: [http://www.rand.org/topics/terrorism.html](http://www.rand.org/topics/terrorism.html)
- Richard Jackson blog: [https://richardjacksonterrorismblog.wordpress.com/](https://richardjacksonterrorismblog.wordpress.com/)

**Data bases**
- Global Terrorism Database (START): [www.start.umd.edu/gtd](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd)
- Suicide Terrorism Database (CPST): [http://cpostdata.uchicago.edu/search_new.php](http://cpostdata.uchicago.edu/search_new.php)
- Terrorist Organization Profiles: [http://www.start.umd.edu/tops/](http://www.start.umd.edu/tops/)

**Immerse Yourself in the Topic!**

In addition to reading the course texts and looking at relevant academic books and journals, I urge you to immerse yourself in the topic! Follow the national and international news on this topic, sign up to receive newsletters and feeds, and bring relevant articles or videos to the class to liven up discussions. Your ability to apply psychological research and theory to real-world phenomena and current events is a major part of the assessments for this course.

Furthermore, there is a vast amount of **literature about specific terrorists and terrorist groups**, including (auto-) biographies of former activists. Reading some of these can help you gain a deeper understanding of the social and psychological factors involved. Some of these books might also be useful as background reading for the continuous assessment. Here are a few examples:

Aust, S. (2008). The Baader-Meinhof Complex. Vintage. [Describes the emergence of the Red Army Faction from the student protest movement in Germany in the late 1960s, analyses the motivations of the key members and details the main events.]


Irving, S. (2012). *Leila Khaled: Fighting for Palestine*. Pluto Press. [Portrays the life of Leila Khaled, prominent member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who was involved in several plane hijackings]

O’Callaghan, S. (1999). *The Informer*. Corgi. [The memoir of a former member of the provisional IRA who became an informant for the Irish Garda. Details engagement, involvement, and the events that led to his disengagement from terrorism.]


Appendix

PS4100: Graduate Attributes

1. Demonstrate original thought
2. Construct a coherent argument or debate by demonstrating logical processing of (complex) information and deductive reasoning
3. Apply critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis to solve complex problems
4. Test hypotheses, theories, methods and evidence within their proper contexts
5. Reason from the particular to the general
6. Identify relevant techniques and concepts to solve advanced and complex problems
7. Demonstrate use of an appropriate range of resources to the task at hand
8. Evaluate relevant best practices for the task at hand
9. Engage directly with current research, developments and skills in the discipline
10. Engage with primary and secondary material and differentiate between them
11. Demonstrate active learning
12. Demonstrate creativity and curiosity
13. Demonstrate independence of thought and reasoning
14. Demonstrate skills in time management, self-discipline and self-motivation
15. Demonstrate quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis
16. Demonstrate expertise in the use of statistical software packages for analysis of data
17. Convey statistical results & methods in a manner understandable to the lay-person via written or oral reports
18. Work independently
19. Work as part of a team
20. Communicate with clarity and accuracy, orally (including presentation) and in writing
21. Engage with the views and opinions of others
22. Present work and findings in a professional manner, with attention to detail
23. Learn and use research skills