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The Logic of Terrorism: Existential Anxiety, the Search for Meaning, and Terrorist Ideologies

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Drawing from the work of political theorists, theologians, anthropologists, journalists, philosophers, and contemporary psychologists studying Terror Management Theory (TMT), it becomes possible to see that the concepts of existentialism and ideology may be useful for modern thinkers attempting to understand a problem such as terrorism. Integrating work from these fields makes it possible to see that terrorism may be driven by an existential-terroristic feedback loop: a cycle in which people support or engage in terrorism to alleviate existential anxiety but ultimately find this anxiety exacerbated in the wake of the violence they create or sanction. The loop is closed when this exacerbated anxiety compels them to reaffirm their support of, or participation in, terrorist violence. If this model is valid, then effectively addressing the problem of terrorism requires joining existing U.S. policies with policies that address ideologies. Specifically, policies must aspire to a) mitigate existential anxiety, b) provide a compelling counter-narrative, c) address environmental factors conducive to radicalization, d) prevent the formation of radicalized groups, and e) deradicalize existing ideologues.

Keywords Al Qaeda, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, existential anxiety, ideology, psychology of terrorism, search for meaning, terrorism, TMT

> There can be no adequate understanding of the most important issues we face when disciplines are cloistered from one another and operate on their own premises.
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> —Mark Taylor, *New York Times* Op-Ed, April 2009[1]

The separation of philosophical thought and empirical science is a cornerstone of contemporary academia, but it is only relatively recently that the two have split and empirical work has overtaken theoretical work. Given the great leaps in knowledge that have occurred since this break, there are certainly compelling reasons to sanction these changes. However, while this new paradigm has engendered unparalleled scientific advancement, it has also produced a sort of intellectual poverty.

Abstract and theoretical thought is sidelined in the absence of quantifiable proof, and understanding is measured in tiny incremental steps forward. This approach has become the status quo, but there is no reason not to integrate both theoretical and empirical work. Thus while early 20th century thought on existentialism and ideology may seem like a relic of the past, it may actually be a useful resource for modern thinkers attempting to make sense of a contemporary problem such as terrorism.

Philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and political theorists have long speculated that human beings are driven to imbue life with meaning in order to cope with the existential anxiety that comes from recognizing human mortality. Following this tradition, contemporary psychologists have attempted to map the relationship between existential questions and human anxiety. Drawing on both theoretical and empirical work, it is possible to argue that the radicalized ideologies underwriting terrorism actually serve as meaning-giving constructs functioning to relieve existential anxiety. Additionally, recent research in existential psychology makes it possible to present a new theoretical model, an existential-terroristic feedback loop, for understanding the function of terrorist ideologies. The feedback loop is predicated on the idea that when a terrorist ideology acts as a meaning-giving construct, it may result in events that increase the existential anxiety it was intended to relieve and reinforce the original ideology. The cycle is relatively simple: existential anxiety compels individuals to seek meaning; for some individuals, support of a terrorist ideology functions as an anxiety-reducing, meaning-giving construct; these terrorist ideologies often result in acts of terrorist violence; terrorist violence ultimately exacerbates existential anxiety, compelling terrorists to defend their ideologies and returning them to the very state the ideologies were meant to relieve. Though this model suggests that choosing terrorism may be the rational act of an individual seeking to relieve anxiety, it should not be interpreted as a defense or justification of terrorism. The existential-terroristic feedback loop merely represents a novel way of understanding why seemingly rational people would consistently choose to support or engage in terrorist acts. Understanding the mechanics of this loop, its reinforcing characteristics, and the rational reasons that bring people to terrorism is a critical step in the process of developing and implementing policy intended to address this phenomenon.

To date, crafting effective policies to answer the problem of terrorism has been challenging in part because research has focused on the problem of causality. Researchers have examined the root causes of disenfranchisement, and attempted to identify factors that engender radicalized ideologies and lead to terrorist violence. Unfortunately, identifying the constellation of sociopolitical, psychological, and economic factors correlated with the rise of terrorist ideologies and terrorist violence is only part of the challenge. The existential-terroristic feedback loop is unique in that it focuses not on risk factors for radicalization, but on the intransigence of terrorist thinking in individuals who have already committed to terrorist ideologies. It explores the question of why individuals continue to embrace terrorist ideologies and violence despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles and in the face of compelling incentives to deradicalize. The existential-terroristic feedback loop fills a critical lacuna by integrating meaningful work from a variety of academic fields. This model makes it possible to see that conventional counterterrorism/counterinsurgency policies, while effective, must be joined with a well-articulated strategic communications plan and a more sophisticated development policy. These new initiatives must address the ideological drivers of terrorism, and should aspire to a) mitigate existential anxiety, b) provide a compelling counter-narrative, c) address environmental

factors conducive to radicalization, d) prevent the formation of radicalized groups, and e) deradicalize existing ideologues.

Anxiety, Reminders of Death, and the Search for Meaning

Thinkers in a variety of fields have explored the idea that people search for meaning in an effort to relieve existential anxiety. Theologian Paul Tillich noted that "the anxiety of fate and death is the most basic, most universal, and inescapable" of human anxieties.[2] He suggested that this fear was omnipresent, latent, and reinforced by the recognition of our mortality and the experience of watching others die.[3] Moreover, he argued that assuaging this anxiety, and finding meaning in life, was central to man's existence.[4] This same theme can be found in the writings of early existential psychologist Viktor Frankl, who wrote that "man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life."[5] Frankl went on to argue that human happiness was contingent not merely upon discovery of some meaning-giving construct, but upon participation in meaning-giving activities. He held that man could not be happy in some bucolic, tension-free utopia, and that what man actually needed was "the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task."[6] Similar attention has been given to the question of where people search for this meaning and how people mitigate this anxiety. Political theorist Hannah Arendt addressed these issues in her exploration of ideologies. She argued that the appeal of an ideology lay in its capacity to make sense of a senseless world, imbue the seemingly random with an order and logic that might not exist, and promise a meaningful and important future.[7] Tillich echoed this thought, and suggested that people relieve anxiety by cleaving to ideologies that promise certitude and are promulgated by trustworthy, authoritative institutions with strong traditions.[8]

Though the language of empirical psychology differs significantly from that of philosophy or theology, modern psychology's concept of Terror Management Theory (TMT) is fundamentally existential. TMT is a psychological paradigm predicated on the idea that people experience fear and anxiety as a result of being aware of human vulnerability and mortality, and that they manage these emotions by investing in a cultural worldview that gives meaning to their behaviors.[9] Specifically, TMT posits that existential anxiety, or fear of death, is a consequence of human consciousness:

> Potentially paralyzing dread of death is thus the inevitable result of a self-conscious organism. This horror is compounded by the realization of one's profound vulnerability. Death can occur at any time for reasons that often cannot be anticipated or controlled.... Furthermore, this horror and dread of death becomes amalgamated into unmitigated terror when combined with the recognition that humans are ... no more fundamentally significant or enduring than a fly.[10]

TMT researchers contend that man strives to assuage anxiety by holding onto a cultural worldview. Cultural worldview is defined, using language that clearly resonates with Arendt's definition of ideology, as a "culturally derived conception of reality that imbues life with stability, order, and permanence .... [and] promises safety and death transcendence to those who meet the cultural standards of value."[11]

Current TMT work has focused primarily on quantifying the relationship between human mortality, anxiety, and anxiety-mitigating mechanisms.*

TMT research is unique insofar as it brings a certain empirical credibility to the more abstract work of early theologians, psychologists, and political theorists like Tillich, Frankl, and Arendt. In order to demonstrate the ameliorating power of cultural worldview, psychologists required a reliable means of eliciting and measuring existential anxiety. To this end, TMT research has relied heavily on the concept of mortality salience. A psychologist hoping to increase existential anxiety merely increases mortality salience (the degree to which an individual is aware of his mortality) by exposing a subject to stimuli that reminds him of human vulnerability and mortality. Researchers contend that cultural worldview, or ideology, reduces this anxiety by permitting man to make sense of the world, and research over the last 25 years has consistently demonstrated that heightened mortality salience (induced via exposure to an essay question about death, threat of electric shock, violent graphic images, etc.) is positively correlated with a person's tendency to favorably evaluate their own cultural worldview.[12] In simpler language, people defend their ideologies when reminded of their mortality. TMT researchers note that this defense is functional because it "strengthen[s] the extent to which an individual feels embedded in his or her own benign, culturally derived conception of reality."[13] Furthermore, empirical research demonstrates that this defensive posture may further reduce existential anxiety by making thoughts of death less accessible.[14] This work essentially quantifies what Arendt suggested decades earlier: that maintaining and defending an ideology is both meaning-giving and anxiety-relieving.

It may be tempting to conclude that TMT's emphasis on mortality correlates to an emphasis on death-anxiety and is unrelated to man's search for meaning. However, it is possible to transition easily between the two by recognizing that death-anxiety can function as a trigger for meaninglessness-anxiety. Recent research in existential psychology suggests that the self-reflecting capacity of human beings leads them to confront not only the inevitability of their own deaths but also the speculative nature of their beliefs. Human intelligence and self-awareness lead people to recognize "that their most sacred beliefs and values, and even their own identities, are uncertain; that they face a bewildering array of choices in their lives; and that in many ways they are alone in an indifferent universe."[15] Moving beyond earlier models that focused exclusively on death-anxiety, contemporary researchers have identified five major categories of existential anxiety: death, isolation, identity, freedom, and meaning. In this paradigm, the first four essentially culminate in the fifth, a desire for meaning that arises "in a world where the only real certainty is death."[16] Tillich also suggests that death-anxiety might trigger meaninglessness-anxiety. Writing about the evolution of human anxiety through the ages, Tillich claimed that death-anxiety is problematic only insofar as it serves as a reminder of the transient and potentially meaningless nature of the human condition.[17] Thus confrontation with human mortality functions as a trigger for meaninglessness-anxiety and precipitates the search for a meaning-giving construct.

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*TMT also identifies self-esteem as a construct that mitigates the existential anxiety precipitated by awareness of human mortality. A significant body of research exists on TMT and self-esteem, and though this article focuses exclusively on the relationship between cultural worldview and terrorism, there is likely value in exploring the role that self-esteem plays in this dynamic.

Terrorism as a Rational Choice

The idea that choosing terrorism might be rational has, for the most part, been limited to rational choice theory models that suggest terrorism yields unique sociopolitical gains. Political scientist Robert Pape has argued, for example, that the seemingly irrational phenomenon of suicide terrorism can be understood as logical if it is accepted that the irrationality of the individual act (suicide) is superceded by the group's reasonable expectation that its strategy (coercing political concessions via a reign of terror) will yield results.[18] Viewing terrorism through the lens of TMT makes it possible to approach the question of rationality from a fundamentally different perspective and to conclude that terrorism may be rational even when it has no hope of yielding tangible sociopolitical results. This research suggests that terrorists are satisfying a specific psychological need in addition to pursuing the more traditionally acknowledged sociopolitical objectives. They are, in response to feelings of existential anxiety, seeking respite in an ideology, a meaning-giving construct.

If this is the case, then choosing a radicalized and violent ideology is no less sane, rational, or functional than choosing a prosocial ideology commensurate with Western values. The idea that it is rational to seek meaning in a terrorist ideology is also commensurate with over 30 years of research demonstrating that, exceptions notwithstanding, individuals who commit or support acts of terrorism show no signs of psychopathology or sociopathy.[19] Moreover, that terrorist ideologies and activities might serve a meaning-giving function is also consistent with contemporary psychological research showing that people cleave to a wide variety of constructs in an attempt to assuage existential anxiety. Social psychologists have argued that people derive meaning from constructs such as volunteer work, hobbies, family, work, and religion.[20] In a similar vein, philosophers have noted the meaning-giving capacity of war.[21] Speaking more generally, anthropologist Ernest Becker noted that there were countless paradigms with the potential to fill this void. He argued:

> It doesn't matter whether the [system] is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a [system] in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning.[22]

Though these meaning-giving entities may seem relatively dissimilar, they share a rudimentary framework insofar as each provides the opportunity to find meaning via an external construct. Radicalized ideologies espousing terrorism serve a similar function and harness a variety of meaning-giving systems: they exist as transnational organizations, they often arrogate religious paradigms for articulating their ideologies, and they actively wage war.

Organizations

TMT research suggests that organizational identification (i.e., a situation in which an individual derives meaning via membership in, or alliance with, some external organization) meets a distinctly personal need insofar as it helps to bring meaning to life's seemingly arbitrary course.[23] This meaning-giving effect is best accomplished via identification with a highly desirable goal or an organization that has

permanence and consistency.[24] In essence, it is important to differentiate organizational identification from relational identification. The latter, merely forming a relationship with a colleague or friend, is inadequate to the task of relieving existential anxiety. Instead, people must identify with organizations that have both tangible goals and the potential to offer vicarious immortality. Obviously, terrorist organizations offer both of these attributes. Contemporary terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda have clearly articulated local and global goals and offer both literal (via martyrdom) and symbolic (via identification with a righteous cause that will outlive its individual advocates) forms of immortality.[25]

Religion

Religious ideas and institutions are particularly powerful constructs in the struggle to assuage existential anxiety. Becker argues, for example, that religion is the best construct for ameliorating existential anxiety because it ''solves the problem of death.''[26] This emphasis on religion's capacity to mitigate existential anxiety is also salient in contemporary psychological research. Modern researchers note the efficacy of religion in meeting a variety of psychological needs and write, ''No other repositories of cultural meaning have historically offered so much in response to the human need to develop a secure identity. Consequently, religion often is at the core of individual and group identity.''[27]

To be clear, this model does not suggest that religion is the primary catalyst for terrorist ideologies or violence. Psychologists have noted that ''there is no special relation between religion and violence''[28] and counterterrorism expert David Kilcullen concluded that ''while religion was subjectively very important to members of [terrorist] movements, the theological content of their ideology did not seem to be the primary driver.''[29] Similarly, in a 2001 study on the relationship between terrorism and religion, political scientist Mark Juergensmeyer found that though religion served an ideological and organizational role in facilitating terrorism, it was not a principal motivator.[30] Juergensmeyer concluded that religion alone was inadequate to engender terrorism, and that it must be combined with a social or political agenda before it will lead to violence.[31]

Research on the psychology of religion suggests that one of the primary purposes of religion is to imbue world events with meaning and order by offering believers a cohesive totalitarian worldview.[32] Not surprisingly, each of the world's three primary monotheistic faiths espouse internally consistent, immutable, and dogmatic visions of the world that attempt to bring meaning to the seemingly meaningless. Moreover, recent psychological research on the function of religion has shown that religion alleviates stress in the face of adverse situations. One study found that, when exposed to terrorism (i.e., when existential anxiety was heightened), participants characterized as religious and ultra-religious experienced less ''psychological distress'' than participants described as traditional or secular.[33] This research helps to explain the observable reality that contemporary terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda often arrogate religious themes, adopt religious language, and politicize existing religious conflicts. These groups are able to amplify the efficacy of their meaning-giving constructs by marrying organizational identification to an overarching religious paradigm. As a result, terrorist recruits are offered a two-for-one deal in which the terrorist ideology combines the meaning-giving value of organizational identification with the meaning-giving capacity of religion.

War

Despite the undeniable historical overlap between religion and war and the frequency with which the two intersect (i.e., holy war, crusades, *jihad*), war does not need religion to be meaningful. Recognition that war serves a meaning-giving function was articulated quite clearly by philosopher-psychologist William James, who argued in 1911 that war represented a compelling alternative to the shallow materialism of the contemporary world.[34] James believed that the meaning-giving power of war lay in its ability to help individuals transcend the self-centered individualism of modernity. He wrote:

> The plain truth is that people *want* war. They want it anyhow; for itself; and apart from each and every possible consequence . . . The born soldiers want it hot and actual. The non-combatants want it in the background, and always as an open possibility, to feed imagination on and keep excitement going . . . What moves them is not the blessings it has won for us, but a vague religious exaltation. War, they feel, is human nature at its uttermosto. . . . It is a sacrament.[35]

Fifty years earlier, British philosopher John Stuart Mill made a similar observation as he watched the American Civil War unfold. Mill commented that "a war to give victory to their own ideas of right and good, and which is [a people's] own war, carried on for an honest purpose by their free choice—is often the means of [a people's] regeneration."[36] This idea was later discussed by Becker, who argued that in order to overcome existential anxiety an individual must be permitted to feel heroic because heroism changes "the fear of death into the security of self-perpetuation."[37] According to Becker, heroism effectively relieves existential anxiety by offering an opportunity for immortality. Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda explicitly provide recruits with both a battlefield and the opportunity to be a hero, and thus tap into both the broad meaning-giving nature of war and the more narrow meaning-giving quality of heroism.

Obviously the wars described by James and Mill are of a different era. Today's wars are characterized by technological advances that often, though certainly not always, create a comfortable cushion of anonymity between aggressors. These joystick wars have been described by a former British Air Chief Marshal in Iraq as "virtueless" endeavors "requiring neither courage nor heroism."[38] Notwithstanding this criticism, the idea that war is meaning-giving has been increasingly salient in recent years as well. Journalist Christopher Hedges, in his 2005 book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, wrote that the "enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it gives us what we all long for in life. It gives us purpose, meaning, a reason for living."[39] Hedges noted that war alone, with its communal and nationalistic themes, has the capacity to meet the sociocultural need for a shared cause, and is able to "[reduce] and at times [erase] the anxiety of individual consciousness."[40]

Psychological research supporting the idea that war is a meaning-giving construct has largely substantiated the more philosophical work of James, Mill, Becker, and Hedges. Research on Vietnam War veterans has shown, for example, that the soldiers reported experiencing feelings of meaning and purpose during their deployments that they were unable to recapture after returning to civilian life.[41] Some

veterans actually reported that the only meaning-giving construct capable of filling this post-war void was religion.[42] Echoing earlier thought on the topic, the researchers argued that war helps people find meaning in their lives by enabling them to transcend their individuality and risk their lives for a noble cause.[43]

The Feedback Loop

Religion and war are only two of a myriad of meaning-giving paradigms available to relieve anxiety, and taken alone neither will precipitate terrorist violence. However, when acting in concert under the rubric of some radicalized terrorist organization, these constructs form the foundation of an existential-terroristic feedback loop. For individuals who choose to find meaning in a radicalized terrorist ideology that sanctions political violence, the organization, ideology, religious themes, and combat environment all serve to mitigate existential anxiety. However, each act of terrorism effectively heightens mortality salience which subsequently results in renewed existential anxiety. Common sense suggests that in some instances existential anxiety compels people to reevaluate their lives. But research shows that this increased anxiety
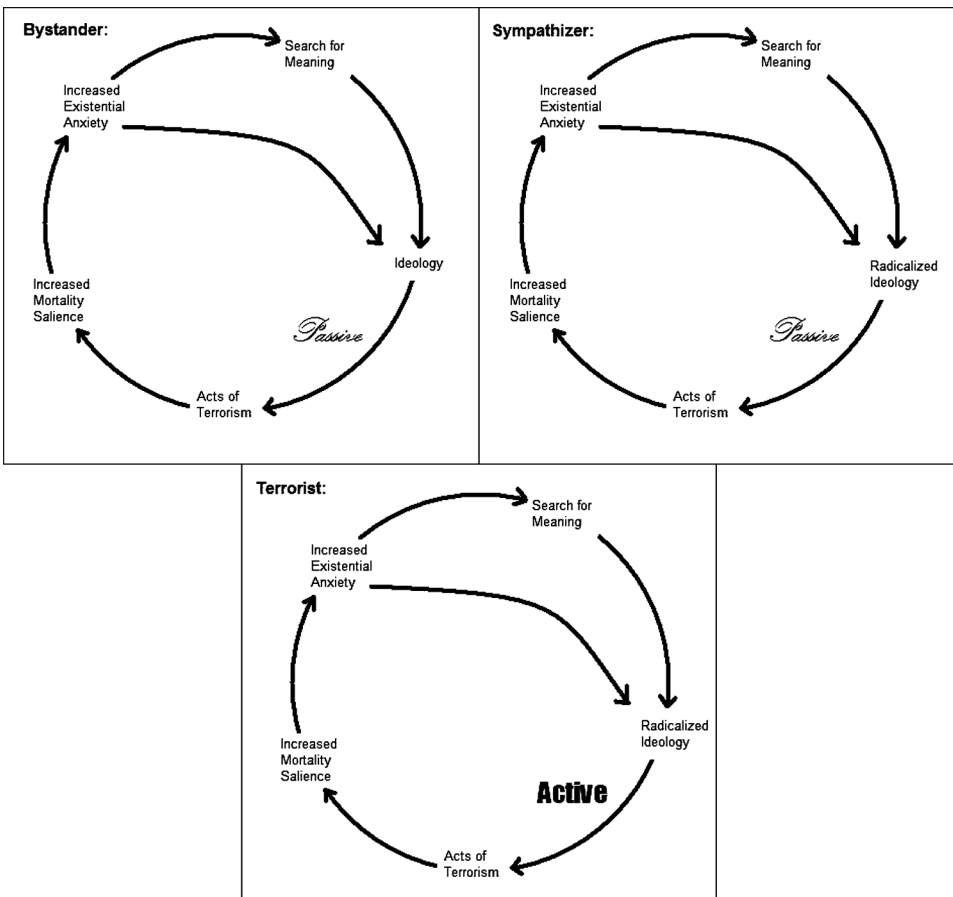

Figure 1. The existential-terroristic feedback loop.

often results in cultural worldview defense, or a reaffirmation of the existing ideology. Thus for terrorists the very acts of violence committed in order to assuage existential anxiety ultimately amplify this feeling and drive them back to their radicalized ideologies. Because the relationship between anxiety, radicalized ideology, and violence is cyclical, once individuals choose to find meaning and purpose in life by endorsing or actually joining a terrorist organization they are caught in a process which compels them to reaffirm their participation in, or support of, terrorist violence. This recommitment to terrorism is not exclusively contingent upon the meaning-giving power of terrorist ideologies. Obviously terrorists are loyal for a variety of other reasons including peer pressure and threat of reprisal if they try to leave. However, while these factors have attracted the attention of policy-makers, the relationship between existential anxiety, terrorist ideology, and violence has been overlooked.

The psychological constructs supporting the existential-terroristic feedback loop stem primarily from TMT research. A 2003 TMT study found that exposure to an act of terrorism was positively correlated with the likelihood that an individual would ponder existential questions.[44] These researchers found that the "psychological confrontation with deep existential concerns occurs most dramatically in the aftermath of extreme negative events—whether personal ones . . . or more globally significant ones like the terrorist attacks of 9/11."[45] Additional research found that thoughts of 9/11 served the same psychological function as mortality salience primes commonly used in psychological research, and had the expected result of increasing a person's access to thoughts of death.[46] While these studies were limited to individuals best described as bystanders, this mechanism likely occurs in sympathizers and terrorists as well. Thus it seems likely that terrorists and sympathizers may ultimately come full circle and find that the acts they took to relieve existential anxiety simply make it more salient (Figure 1).

Why Civilizations Are Clashing

The need to seek meaning transcends superficial delimiters such as culture, nationality, and religion. However, while the causes of terrorism may be universal, its justifications are culturally and religiously specific. Thus the question of why an individual might choose a radicalized, violent ideology instead of a more moderate ideology is infinitely complex. The relative escalation of terrorist violence in the past decade, and the increasingly transnational nature of this activity, has consequently engendered a significant body of research on the question of why people radicalize. While factors such as poverty, disenfranchisement, and under-education go far to explain this process, there is simply no single proximal cause to be identified. People choose terrorism for a variety of reasons, including the desire to ameliorate existential anxiety. Moreover, people choose terrorism at a specific time and engage with a specific enemy.

Answers to the question of why terrorism is on the rise *now* are somewhat more subjective than those to the question of why people radicalize. One possible explanation, though, is that people are choosing terrorism now because the ideologies and cultural structures via which they had previously found meaning are currently under attack. It is possible to argue that the implacable advance of Western cultural institutions has undermined indigenous meaning-giving constructs and created a void now filled by radicalized, and often violent, ideologies. That modernity begets existential anxiety is hardly a new concept. Karl Marx wrote extensively about the social

and individual ramifications of modernization, and argued that the industrial revolution had severed the relationship between meaning and work and transformed labor into a conduit for alienation.[47] Arendt wrote more explicitly on the relationship between modernity and ideology, noting that while loneliness had been a fate of only "marginalized" groups for most of human history, it had become a mainstream condition in the 20th century.[48] She noted: "Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideological or logicality . . . is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution."[49]

In a similar vein, Tillich noted that traditional meaning-giving institutions have been enervated in countries both central to and peripheral to the advances of the modern world.[50] Tillich also noted that while some meaning-giving constructs lose power as a result of personal doubt, others "lose their meaning because the actual conditions of the present period are so different from those in which the spiritual contents were created that new creations are needed."[51] The idea that modernization threatens indigenous institutions and meaning-giving constructs has also been echoed by existential psychologists. Frankl, for example, argued that in the wake of modernization institutions that traditionally provided meaning and direction were losing influence and disappearing, leaving man isolated and directionless.[52]

The reality that Western-driven globalization threatens indigenous cultural institutions at least partially explains the vitriolic anti-Americanism that characterizes contemporary Islamist terrorism. Writing nearly 20 years ago, historian Bernard Lewis argued that the anti-American nature of these radicalized ideologies was entirely logical because it reflected the legitimate grievances of a people aware that modernization brought "alien, infidel, and incomprehensible" forces that undermined indigenous sociocultural institutions and meaning-giving constructs.[53] He went on to write:

> The instinct of the masses is not false in locating the ultimate source of these cataclysmic changes in the West and in attributing the disruption of their old way of life to the impact of Western domination, Western influence, or Western precept and example. And since the United States is the legitimate heir of European civilization and the recognized and unchallenged leader of the West, the United States has inherited the resulting grievances and become the focus for the pent-up hate and anger.[54]

Lewis contended that the roots of this anti-Americanism were largely unconscious. He held that Islamic fundamentalism effectively directed the "otherwise aimless and formless resentment and anger of the Muslim masses at the forces that have devalued their traditional values and loyalties and, in the final analysis, robbed them of their beliefs."[55] Kilcullen has echoed this theme, noting that "traditional societies across the world have experienced the corrosive effects of globalization on deeply held social, cultural, and religious identities—sparking violent antagonism to western-led modernization and its preeminent symbol: perceived U.S. cultural and economic imperialism."[56] This cultural deterioration has engendered a pervasive anxiety and an environment conducive to dogmatism. One researcher commented that "under these conditions of fear, uncertainty, doubt, and failure, fundamentalism can rear its ugly head and offer an alternative: blind belief in religious dogma issued by demagogues who pander to simplistic solutions for complex problems."[57]

From Ideology to Violence

Unfortunately, the reality that holding a radicalized ideology is a rational and efficient mechanism for relieving existential anxiety does not account for the transition from ideology to violence. While this shift can be partly explained by the meaning-giving value of war and the fact that certain psychological characteristics predispose some people to find meaning in violence, it is made more comprehensible by research on groups, aggression, and self-defense. Researchers have found that groups are more likely than individuals to engage in behavior characterized as risky and violent.[58] Thinking, in groups, is affected by a sort of "group polarization" that causes the members to make more extreme decisions.[59] The dynamic is further exacerbated by the reality that radicalized extremists often segregate themselves from society; severing ties with individuals outside of the group effectively insulates their non-normative ideology by reducing challenges to their decision making process.[60] An NYPD study on radicalization noted the significance of groups, commenting that " 'group think' is one of the most powerful catalysts for leading a group to actually committing a terrorist act [because] it acts as a force-multiplier for radical thought."[61]

TMT researchers have also found empirical evidence that heightened mortality salience and threat to cultural worldview increase aggression.[62] Researchers found, for example, that heightened mortality salience increased Americans' support for military intervention in the Middle East.[63] A separate study found that increased mortality salience caused participants who traditionally supported non-violent action to shift their support to individuals espousing suicide bombings.[64] This research demonstrates that heightened mortality salience is positively correlated with an increased willingness to sanction violent solutions to geopolitical problems. This helps make sense of terrorist recidivism insofar as it demonstrates that individuals, in the aftermath of a terrorist act causing increased mortality salience and existential anxiety, will be more likely to endorse violent and aggressive activities.

Finally, theologians and modern psychologists contend that threat-to-identity is functionally tantamount to threat-to-life. Tillich wrote that "the threat to [a man's] spiritual being is a threat to his whole being."[65] More recently, psychologists have noted that "the quest for identity, meaning, status, wealth and power has merged with the need for survival, creating a contemporary situation unique in cause and consequence."[66] Moreover, "the threat to identity becomes a crucial part of the equation for violence . . . [because] cultural identity is the crucible in which human survival and human purpose become yoked to promote a sense of well-being, meaning, and cohesion."[67] In essence, a threat to an individual's cultural worldview, or to the individual's perceived role within this worldview, undermines the validity of the worldview, making it a less effective "death-denying psychological apparatus" and resulting in an inclination to attack the individuals who threaten the ideologies upon which these identities are constructed.[68] Because the utility of a cultural worldview lies in its capacity to shield an individual from the realities of an admittedly uncertain world, it follows that the targets of attack will include both those who explicitly threaten the cultural worldview and those who maintain distinct cultural worldviews (since the very existence of competing ideologies undermines the certainty with which an individual can imbue his or her own worldview).[69] Recognizing that modernization and pluralism pose significant threats to indigenous meaning-giving constructs, it is possible to frame terrorism as an act of self-defense. To be clear, though,

responding to a threat-to-identity by supporting or engaging in violent attacks on civilian populations is not morally normative, and the idea that terrorist ideologies (and their manifestation in terrorist activities) may be a form of self-defense should not be interpreted as a defense or justification of terrorism.

The Difficulty of Deradicalization

Viewing terrorist ideologies as a solution to existential anxiety can also shed light on the trenchant nature of the terrorist ideologies and the serious challenge that they pose for counterterrorism/counterinsurgency experts. This work suggests that deradicalization is made more difficult by the role that constructs such as religious thinking, zeal, religion, group dynamics, and stereotypes play in perpetuating terrorist ideologies.

Religious Thinking and Ideology

In a sense, the problem of radicalization is a problem of ideology and religious thinking. Arendt wrote extensively about the intractable nature of ideology. She commented that ideological thinking is a fundamentally abnormal phenomenon that begins with some dogmatically accepted first principle, and builds with logical perfection from this premise, proceeding "with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality."[70] She went on to note that this consistency is the most compelling (more so than the actual content or themes) characteristic of ideology.[71] Arendt held that ideology is immune to logical argumentation for two reasons. First, ideological truth is contingent on the fruition of some future reality and, as Arendt pointed out, "there is hardly a better way to avoid discussion than by releasing an argument from the control of the present and by saying that only the future can reveal its merits."[72] Second, ideology is structured around a set of intangible universal laws and interpretations. Consequently, "ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a 'truer' reality concealed behind all perceptible things."[73] For Arendt, ideological thinking is diseased thinking immune to reason and rational argument.

Similarly, Tillich noted that people mitigate existential anxiety, uncertainty, and doubt by engaging in fanatical thinking. Per Tillich, individuals who engage in fanatical thinking identify with some "transindividual" concept that permits them to escape the psychological and intellectual burden of asking, answering, questioning, and doubting by simply accepting truths imposed authoritatively by some accepted source.[74] Tillich's analysis of fanatical thinking is particularly appropriate to the question of terrorism given his contention that it "shows the anxiety which it was supposed to conquer, by attacking with disproportionate violence those who disagree."[75] A more contemporary framing of this problem occurs in Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*. Harris notes that religious thinking is characterized by the selective withholding of reason and logic. He contends that people maintaining ostensibly illogical and flawed belief systems simply absolve these systems from generally accepted standards of inquiry.[76] Obviously terrorists that hold radicalized violent ideologies with religious overtones engage in ideological, fanatical, and religious thought, and are thus unaffected by logical argumentation.

Psychologists have also noted that radicalized ideology is relatively immune to reason and rational argument. Empirical evidence of this pattern of thought can

be found in recent TMT research showing that individuals with heightened mortality salience display confirmation bias in seeking information related to their cultural worldview. In practical terms, individuals who were reminded of their own mortality were more likely to seek information consistent with (and not in conflict with) their ideologies.[77] For individuals who engage in or support acts of terrorism the parallel is clear: as the dust settles from some terrorist activity they will seek information confirming the validity of their radicalized ideology and non-normative morality.

The Power of Zeal

A compelling empirical counterpart to religious thought is personal zeal, a construct that psychologists define as "proud conviction that seems unreasonable or self-defeating."[78] Research has found that increased mortality salience, epistemic threats, and self-threats all motivate zealous reactions.[79] More interestingly, zeal functions like cultural worldview as an anxiety-mitigating mechanism that "insulates people from concern with self-threats."[80] Research indicates that "zealous expression of pride and value-conviction continued to quell threat salience even after . . . repeated reminders of the threat."[81] It is easy to see how zeal might operate as a force-multiplier in the existential-terroristic feedback loop. Following an act of terrorist violence, individuals will cling more zealously to their chosen ideologies, thus making them less vulnerable to reasonable and rational discussion.

Defensive/Intrinsic Religion

Psychologists have suggested a number of paradigms for characterizing religiosity. In one model believers are described as defensive or existential. Defensive believers are individuals who embrace faith in an effort to relieve existential anxiety. They are characterized by a desire to assuage anxiety and are typically dogmatically convinced that their ideology is correct.[82] By contrast, existential believers are willing to tolerate a degree of existential uncertainty. They embrace religion, but acknowledge that the commitment to religion is ultimately an act of faith that comes with no guarantees.[83] This type of religiosity is not intended to relieve existential anxiety. Research has shown that individuals who demonstrated defensive religiosity were more likely, in high mortality salience environments, to positively evaluate ingroup members than were individuals who demonstrated existential religiosity.[84] In essence, using religion to assuage existential anxiety is correlated with a predisposition to show favor for ideological peers and disfavor for ideological dissidents.

In a similar model, religiosity is classified as intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic believers use religion to relieve existential anxiety and extrinsic believers use religion to connect with a community.[85] Researchers found that individuals who are intrinsic believers demonstrated less worldview defense in situations of heightened mortality salience than individuals who are extrinsic believers.[86] This result is a derivative of the previously cited research concerning defensive and existential religiosity. In essence, individuals who use religion as a mechanism for finding meaning and value in life (i.e., intrinsic religiosity) are less likely to show symptoms of existential anxiety (i.e., worldview defense) than individuals who use religion as a means to connect to a community (i.e., extrinsic religiosity).[87]

The research on defensive/existential and intrinsic/extrinsic religiosity effectively demonstrates that religion intended to answer existential questions is a) a more

effective defense against existential anxiety and b) more likely to elicit positive ingroup and negative outgroup evaluations. These conclusions resonate with the observable reality that contemporary terrorist ideologies often attract individuals who are heavily invested in a type of faith that is hostile to non-believers. The important concept here is that while not all religious participation relieves existential anxiety, the type of religiosity that serves this function is a dogmatic, reactionary faith whose adherents negatively evaluate outgroup individuals when reminded of their own mortality.

Ingroup Sanctioning

The psychology of groups also helps to explain the trenchant nature of terrorist ideologies. TMT researchers have found that increased mortality salience has a polarizing effect on ingroup/outgroup evaluations and increases an individual's likelihood to defend ingroups and ingroup-sanctioned cultural practices, to favor ingroup members, to demonstrate prosocial behavior towards ingroup members, and to evaluate outgroup members derogatively.[88] One study found that increased mortality salience was correlated to preference for both individual members of the ingroup as well as to the ingroup as an organization.[89] In essence, existential anxiety "increases the intensity of [an individual's] reactions to those who bolster and threaten those beliefs."[90] In practical terms, this research suggests two significant mechanisms that connect with the existential-terroristic feedback loop. First, following a terrorist attack, individuals will show increased support for ingroup individuals who praise culture and share a similar worldview.[91] Second, these same individuals will show negative reactions to outgroup individuals who criticize culture and hold dissimilar worldviews.[92] Thus the NYPD study on radicalization notes that "the world for these [terrorists] becomes divided into two sides: the enlightened believers (themselves) and the unbelievers (everybody else). The unbelievers become their arch enemy."[93]

Stereotypical Thinking

Another variable affecting terrorist thought is stereotypical thinking. Research shows that heightened mortality salience leads people to embrace stereotypes, likely exacerbating us-versus-them paradigms, because the stereotypes alleviate existential anxiety. Commenting on this finding, researchers concluded that "attributing stereotypic traits to [outgroup] members presumably functions to verify one's view of social reality through the perception of individual members of various social categories as sharing the traits ascribed to them by one's cultural stereotypes."[94] Stereotypes serve an additional anxiety-assuaging function in that they promise a certain order and predictability in the actions of potentially inscrutable outgroup members.[95] Thus while stereotyping may seem illogical, it may also be highly effective:

> Although viewing [outgroup] members in a stereotypic manner in no way changes the fact that death is inevitable and does not even relate to this ultimate reality in a logical or semantic way, such conceptions are part of the meaning-providing conception of reality that enables people to live out their daily lives with minimal confrontation with the ultimate inevitability of death.[96]

Crafting Sound Policy

In the near-decade since the 9/11 attacks, the United States' approach to combating terrorism has evolved significantly. Unfortunately, governmental application of academic research on terrorism is currently handicapped by three inescapable realities. First, terrorism research is occurring within a variety of distinct academic departments and few comprehensive models attempt to integrate research from these disciplines. Second, quantitative research often requires narrow and discrete hypotheses focusing on a single element in the complex process that results in radicalization and political violence. Third, policymakers attempting to implement meaningful and measurable initiatives to counter terrorism are naturally inclined to focus on research with obvious practical application. The resultant policy is, consequently, characterized by an overemphasis on economic development and quality-of-life improvements despite the reality that radicalization has a diverse set of root causes and perpetuating factors. These policies consistently marginalize the role played by terrorist ideologies and effectively fail to recognize the complex, passionate, and heterogeneous nature of the terrorist threat. By contrast, the existential-terroristic feedback loop focuses on terrorist ideologies. It does not attempt to account for the behavior of individuals who engage in, or support acts of, terrorism for wholly practical and financial reasons. These terrorists are largely addressed by existing policies that focus on economic development. Thus these policies should not be abandoned, but supplemented with policies that speak to the more trenchant problem of terrorist ideologues.

To be clear, there is little doubt that the U.S. has identified the major elements of a successful strategy for combating terrorism. The existential-terroristic feedback loop simply provides an overarching framework to inform this approach. It makes it possible to see what part of the problem current counterterrorism/counterinsurgency efforts address and what part is neglected; it gives direction to strategic communications efforts; and it facilitates the identification of clear development policy goals beyond the somewhat reactionary scramble to address a set of contributory risk factors. An inclusive model such as the existential-terroristic feedback loop accommodates the empirical and quantifiable research preferred by policy experts, the more intangible results of contemporary academics studying existentialism and TMT, and the unquantifiable knowledge of theologians, philosophers, political theorists, and anthropologists. As such, the existential-terroristic feedback loop is sufficiently encompassing to engender a coherent whole-of-government policy.

Given the cyclical structure of the existential-terroristic feedback loop, U.S. policy should be designed with a primary emphasis on precluding the transition from anxiety to radicalized ideology to violence. Policy should aspire to a) address the existential anxiety that ultimately leads people to seek these anxiety-relieving mechanisms, b) undermine the appeal of terrorist ideology, c) address environmental factors conducive to radicalization, and d) prevent the formation of groups articulating radicalized anxiety-relieving ideologies. Additionally, any comprehensive counterterrorism/counterinsurgency policy must include e) a plan to de-radicalize those who have already embraced a radicalized and violent ideology.

Mitigating Anxiety

Designing policy to mitigate existential anxiety may seem to be an inappropriate task for a national government. A successful development policy for addressing the

problem of terrorism, though, is contingent not merely upon delegitimizing terrorist ideologies, but also upon spreading and sustaining healthy, peaceful, alternative ideologies. The U.S. should purposefully commit to supporting existing indigenous sociocultural structures that serve an anxiety-relieving function and are currently threatened by globalization and westernization. Stabilizing these constructs effectively serves two purposes. First, it ensures that long-standing cultural solutions to the problem of existential anxiety continue to serve their purpose. These institutions filled this role before they were threatened by globalization and westernization and sustaining them ensures that they will continue to do so. Second, since the actual deterioration of these institutions is an additional source of existential anxiety, efforts to prevent this decay effectively neutralize this potentially exacerbating factor.

Delegitimizing Terrorist Ideology

The U.S. should work to delegitimize existing radicalized ideologies by spreading the messages of disaffected former terrorists. Terrorism expert Michael Jacobson has made a compelling argument that former terrorists are a powerful vehicle for delegitimizing terrorist ideologies.[97] He suggests the development of a forum in which former terrorists might communicate the disillusionment, frustration, and disappointment they felt as members of terrorist organizations.[98] U.S. policy should therefore include quiet initiatives, such as supporting online forums, that give voice to these disaffected former terrorists in the hope that their frustrations will dissuade others from radicalizing.

In addition to providing a forum for the messages of former terrorists, U.S. policy regarding the delegitimization of radicalized ideology should be structured around four fundamental pillars. First, the U.S. should ensure that its strategic communications avoid hero-making since creating heroes increases the desirability and marketability of radicalized ideology.[99] Second, U.S. strategic communications should aspire to undermine the rhetorical claims of terrorist ideologies. For example, radicalization taps into themes of perceived deprivation. Terrorism expert Marc Sageman suggests that the U.S. mitigate the efficacy of this rhetoric by highlighting the relative success of Muslim Americans.[100] Certainly these stories might serve as examples to be followed, but such an initiative has additional value in that it undercuts terrorist claims of Muslim oppression. Third, the U.S. must honestly and accurately, without injecting its own inflammatory rhetoric, highlight the contradictions in radicalized ideologies. Recent developments indicate that radicalized individuals defect from organizations such as Al Qaeda for reasons including disagreement with tactics such as the targeting of civilians and disillusionment with a leadership lacking in military experience. The U.S. should aspire to communicate, without commentary, the simple, straightforward facts that highlight the relatively poor quality of terrorist leadership and the dissonance between the terrorist ideology and terrorist methodology.

Fourth, the U.S. should direct messaging towards nations and indigenous populations actively supporting terrorist activities as well as communities forced by circumstances to passively tolerate the presence of terrorists. In addressing these audiences, the U.S. should highlight the controversial tactic of intentionally attacking civilian targets and the threat that this represents to host communities. Jacobson argues that because "disillusionment with the terrorists' strategy and ideology has,

historically, been a major reason why militants have left their groups," there is likely utility in calling attention to the hypocrisy of an organization predicated on the defense of Islam but often engaged in the murder of Muslims.[101] Additionally, communications directed at host populations should emphasize the security threat that terrorism represents.

Addressing Environmental Factors

The U.S. must also supplement its existing policy with a series of initiatives that address local environmental conditions, beyond poverty and undereducation, conducive to radicalization. For example, researchers have proposed that faith in the fairness of governmental decision making is critical to persuading a people that a government is legitimate, and to ensuring that a people will accept governmental authority.[102] This suggestion is derived from work identifying perceived injustice and its attendant frustrations as a fundamental grievance of those who ultimately radicalize.[103] The reality or perception of injustice is problematic insofar as it fosters discontent and creates an environment in which "a number of those who feel unjustly treated are motivated to march along alternative paths, even desperate and radical ones, to address their grievances."[104] Moreover, this same study suggested that people want to believe that the world is fair, and are consequently less likely to choose radicalized solutions when they feel that legitimate paths to rectify injustices and improve their circumstances are available.[105] Given the critical role that real or perceived injustice therefore plays in radicalization, and given that radicalized individuals frequently reject the legitimacy and authority of their governments, the U.S. should prioritize its campaign against governmental corruption. In this effort, the U.S. must guard against its reflexive tendency to equate fair decision making with democracy, and be cognizant of the reality that the important underlying principle is actually rule of law. To this end, initiatives such as USAID's effort to counter corruption and foster rule of law are critical.[106]

Preventing Group Formation

The U.S. must attempt to mitigate the influence of radicalized groups. Unfortunately, the Internet makes it nearly impossible to prevent group formation and conformity research indicates that online communities have as much social influence as real world communities.[107] Sageman notes, for example, that "the same support and validation that young people used to derive from their 'real world' peer groups are now found in these forums."[108] The reality that a very small percentage of Muslims are radicalized, and that a very small percentage of radicalized individuals actually engage in terrorism, makes it difficult to justify any type of thought-police action. Even if this approach were possible, the U.S. could not in good conscience suppress group formation and free speech. That said, the U.S. should focus on providing a powerful counter-narrative that undermines the us-versus-them paradigm critical to radicalization.

Research on conformity and group formation suggests that internal dissent is more influential than external dissent.[109] It is therefore essential that the U.S. provide substantive support to moderates native to the geographic and cultural regions from which transnational terrorism arises. This need to engage with and support moderate Islamic leaders is also critical to preventing radicalization because research

shows that "having an ally, regardless of whether that ally is one who completely agrees with you, can help you resist the pressures of the majority."[110] Consequently, the U.S. should encourage the proliferation of diverse interpretations of Islam using a very narrowly defined litmus test for whether or not the interpretation is acceptable (i.e., the U.S. should promote Islamic pluralism, and support any interpretation that repudiates political violence) since this approach is likely to ensure that non-violent forms of Islam reach the widest possible cross-section of the population.

Facilitating Deradicalization

Deradicalization programs have been implemented in a number of countries where radicalized ideologies and terrorism have taken root. Generally speaking, this process has two fundamental components: a) a psychological deradicalization in which the individual rejects the radicalized and violent ideology, and b) a behavioral disengagement in which the individual refrains from participating in terrorist activity. While psychological deradicalization is likely the desired goal of most programs, behavioral disengagement is a critical first step in this process. An emphasis on behavioral disengagement is logical given that it is more directly linked to national security, but programs should not focus exclusively on behavioral disengagement given the critical role that group formation has in fomenting radicalization. An individual who has merely disengaged, but who remains sympathetic to the terrorist ideology and maintains social ties to the terrorist group, contributes to an environment conducive to radicalization.

   None of these initiatives are meant to replace conventional counterterrorism/counterinsurgency policies, strategic communications efforts, or development policies initiatives. They are merely meant to supplement existing approaches, and to compensate for the reality that existing initiatives are driven predominantly by empirical research that, while important to terrorism policy, is not representative of the academic body of thought on terrorism. To be effective, policy must continue to evolve and policymakers must take their cues from both empirical and theoretical thinkers.

Conclusion

Academic research continues and the problem of terrorism is untangled more with the publication of each new article, book, and essay. Even without all the answers, though, it is easy to see the critical role that existential anxiety plays in terrorist thinking. That said, there is no direct path from existential anxiety to political violence, and there should consequently be no expectation that terrorist ideologies will take root wherever globalization threatens indigenous cultural institutions. The rise of terrorism in the Middle East is the result of a unique confluence of factors including, but certainly not limited to, heightened existential anxieties. Upon close examination it is easy to see why a terrorist organization like Al Qaeda is such a juggernaut. Al Qaeda powerfully combines the anxiety-reducing benefits of war, religion, and organizational identification in a relationship fortified by religious thinking, ideology, zeal, intrinsic/defensive religion, ingroup sanctioning, and stereotypical thinking. It capitalizes upon a longstanding cultural conflict and harnesses the frustrations and anxieties of a people not clearly benefiting from globalization, a phenomenon that in addition to undermining indigenous meaning-giving constructs also radically intensifies the distinction between the world's haves and

have-nots. Additionally, it finds its stronghold in nations where oil wealth has made governments unresponsive to popular opinion and where the people feel disenfranchised and powerless. In a sense, Al Qaeda is the product of a perfect storm; it is the result of a unique combination of sociopolitical, economic, psychological, cultural, and anthropological factors that make it a trenchant and unyielding problem nearly immune to rational arguments and conventional diplomacy.

The existential-terroristic feedback loop is compelling both because it integrates work from a variety of fields and because it is not limited to a specific radicalized ideology, a specific population, or a specific era. Existential anxiety is a human quality that transcends geographic, socioeconomic, religious, and political boundaries. This paradigm consequently explains the behavior of ancient, modern, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, proletariat, and anarchic terrorists. Furthermore, it accommodates a variety of terrorist subtypes. One critical flaw in the existing canon of research on terrorism is the consistent failure of researchers to acknowledge the different motivations of contemporary terrorists. In speaking to this error, Kilcullen notes that individuals espousing radicalized violent ideologies are "terrorist and guerrilla, postmodern and premodern, nihilist and traditionalist, deliberate and accidental."[111] Kilcullen might reasonably add "religious and secular" to his taxonomy, but even without this addition his approach is unique to the extent that it attempts to differentiate between differently motivated terrorists. Similarly, the existential-terroristic paradigm applies to all varieties of terrorist. It is a meaningful paradigm for understanding the rationale driving violent ideologues, regardless of whether or not their ideology is transnational or local, secular or religious.

There is a tinge of irrationality to terrorism, initially interpreted as evidence that terrorists were mentally ill, that is now almost wholly ignored by researchers focused on concrete causes. However, the critical role that seemingly irrational ideologies play in the perpetuation of terrorist groups and violence should not be overlooked merely because it is difficult to measure. Terrorism is ideological and largely immune to reasoned argumentation, but choosing terrorism is rational insofar as it meets a specific human need. Recognizing the symbiotic relationship between anxiety and ideology is, therefore, critical to formulating effective policy. Unfortunately, theoretical models, including the existential-terroristic feedback loop, make it clear that we will not defeat terrorism even if we redesign our policies to address existential anxiety, delegitimize terrorist ideology, mitigate environmental factors conducive to radicalization, prevent the formation of radicalized groups, and support deradicalization programs. The reality is that existential anxiety is a hallmark of modernization, and as Tillich has noted, "one cannot remove anxiety by arguing it away."[112] Moreover, radicalized ideologies reduce anxiety and consequently will be nearly impossible to eradicate. The objective then, is disappointingly mundane: we resign ourselves to living with terrorists, but we aspire to design policies that reduce the likelihood that people will radicalize.

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