HFG RESEARCH AND POLICY IN BRIEF

The Psychology of Killing Civilians

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Executive Summary

In this brief, we review the psychology that enables government forces or allied groups to kill civilians (politicide) and the psychology that enables nongovernment groups to kill civilians (terrorism). The two psychologies have much in common.

For both politicide and terrorism, group conflict begins in identification with a political or ethnic group and the perception by members that their group is threatened or victimized by a competing group. The perceived threats may include material, status, security, and purity threats that, in most conflicts, are likely to overlap. Purity threats are particularly dangerous because the perception of the enemy's bad essence (hate) and of the in-group's good essence (love) can be used to justify categorical killing, that is, killing solely on the basis of victims' membership in the enemy group, whether they are old or young, man, woman, or child, armed or unarmed. Research tends to focus on motivations, but killing also depends on means and opportunity, including support from groups that are not directly part of the conflict.

For both politicide and terrorism, it is important to distinguish between the psychologies of three groups: in-group leaders, the actual perpetrators of violence, and the mass in-group on whose behalf the killers and their leaders claim to be acting. Perpetrators are always a tiny proportion of the mass in-group they claim to represent; they come to participate in killing for reasons that are often more personal than political. In-group leaders usually hate the enemy; perpetrators may come to hate in the process of justifying their killing; and the level of hate in the mass in-group is variable but always cultivated by group leaders.

For both types of violence, research tends to focus on leaders and perpetrators, but understanding of the mass audience behind terrorism and politicide is only beginning. In-group members' perceptions of mass opinion (meta-opinion) can diverge from the actual distribution of opinion, but these perceptions nonetheless have the power of group norms. Belief that in-group norms favor violence against a dangerous out-group can motivate individuals and small groups seeking to move "from zero to hero" in the eyes of the in-group to commit violence against civilians.

Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, killing about 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians. Israel responded with an attack on Hamas in the Gaza Strip that has so far killed over sixty thousand Palestinians, most of them noncombatants.[1] How are human beings moved to this kind of killing?

Google Scholar lists millions of articles referring to terrorism, but only about fourteen thousand referring to politicide—large-scale killing of civilians by government forces or allied militias. The greater attention to terrorism should be surprising, given that politicide is a hundred times more deadly than terrorism. In *Death by Government*, Rummel estimates that 170 million unarmed or disarmed people were killed by states in the twentieth century (versus 34 million killed in battle).[2] The big killers were Stalin, Mao, Hitler, Chiang Kai-shek, Lenin, Tojo, and Pol Pot. Rummel estimates "only" five hundred thousand people killed by terrorists, guerillas, and other nonstate forces in the twentieth century.

This review aims to understand the psychology of killing civilians by comparing politicide and terrorism. The first section begins with definitions of mass political murder; then, it examines material, status, and security threats as motivations for killing; then distinguishes three groups with different relations to killing—perpetrators, leaders, and the mass public supposedly defended by the killing. The section ends with predictors of politicide, leading to recognition of the importance of means and opportunity in mass killing.

The second section turns to the psychology of terrorism. It begins by distinguishing radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action in a "two pyramids" model; then, it describes the role of individual-, group-, and mass-level mechanisms of radicalization in each pyramid. Finally, it suggests that perceptions of the opinion pyramid—the belief that substantial numbers of one's in-group agree with the terrorists' grievance and support violence in response to this grievance—can provide normative support for joining in terrorist violence.

A concluding section brings together observed commonalities in the psychologies that support killing of civilians by governments and by terrorists.

I. The Psychology of Politicide

Defining the problem is the first step toward understanding. The United Nations definition of genocide encompasses certain acts of violence if they are "committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group."[3]

The UN definition applies easily to the Armenian genocide of 1915 and the Nazi genocide of European Jews during World War II. It applies also to the killing of Tutsi Rwandans by their Hutu compatriots in 1994 but misses the many Hutu moderates killed by other Hutus. It misses Stalin's targeting of the kulaks, a prosperous peasant class. And it misses entirely the millions of "Cambodians with Vietnamese minds" killed by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979. In general, the UN definition omits the targeting of a group not defined by ethnic or religious identity in programs of violent political suppression.

Harff and Gurr employ a broader-spectrum term, *politicide*, to refer to mass political murder: "The essential quality of all these episodes is that the state or dominant social groups make a concerted, persistent attempt to destroy a communal or political group, in whole or in part."[4]

These definitions are difficult to operationalize, as *intent* to kill and destroy is not easily measured. Records of intent to destroy a communal or political group are not easy to find. Those who kill civilians usually claim some version of self-defense, as Hamas and Israel both do. We will use *politicide* to refer to the mass killing of civilians by government forces or their unofficial armed allies, with the term reflecting the political conflict in which mass killing occurs. Genocide is thus a subtype of politicide when the target fits the UN definition.

Politicide requires an imbalance of forces such that, at least in a particular time and place, one side is overwhelmingly stronger than the other. Paradoxically, the stronger side will usually see the weaker as threatening in ways that members of the weaker group do not recognize. Cambodian city dwellers did not see themselves as a threat to Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge, Tutsi Rwandans did not see themselves as a threat to Hutu neighbors, and German Jews did not see themselves as a threat to Hitler and his Nazis. Nevertheless, once the stronger groups begin attacking the weaker, a dynamic of mutual hostility opens a trajectory of intergroup conflict.[5]

The next section offers a typology of these perceived threats, which are part of, but, importantly, not all of the psychology that enables killing civilians. We aim to represent this psychology without assuming any particular threat or motivation as part of the definition of politicide.

In general, psychologists prefer not to include a hypothesized motivation for behavior as part of the definition of the behavior to be explained. For instance, defining altruism as behavior aimed at helping others would blind us to other possible motives such as status seeking, self-esteem enhancement, and favor trading.

It is useful to end this section by emphasizing an aspect of politicide that is key to psychological analysis: politicide is *killing by category*. The victims of politicide are not determined by any individual characteristics or behaviors but by their membership in a group defined by ethnicity, class, religion, culture, or political allegiance, among other possible attributes. Civilians killed in politicide include old and young, male and female, politically active and politically inert. The psychology of politicide must make sense of killing by category.

Four Kinds of Perceived Threat That Can Motivate Politicide

Many observers have pointed to perceived threat as motive or justification for mass political murder. Those who identify with a group react to in-group threat with increased in-group cohesion and increased out-group hostility. Drawing from the literature on genocide, Chirot and McCauley identify four types of threat associated with killing by category.[6]

Material threat is the perception that another group blocks "our" economic progress; the extreme potential response is to eliminate the source of frustration. The US removal of the Cherokee nation from Georgia in 1838, for instance—the infamous "Trail of Tears"—occurred after gold was discovered on the tribe's ancestral lands. Evicting Cherokee residents from their homes and submitting them to a forced march through unfamiliar territory produced many deaths; in this case and others, removal is a powerful means of mass political murder.

Status threat is the perception that another group has challenged our superior status; anger and revenge are a common response. Between 1904 and 1908, German colonial military forces killed or starved to death most members of the Herero ethnic group—about sixty thousand people—after members of this group had overwhelmed a small German garrison in South West Africa (today's Namibia). Many Germans were ashamed and angry that an African tribe could best their modern military.

Security threat is the perception that it is "them or us." Here, fear drives the violence, as happened in the mutual massacres and expulsions of Serbs and Croats in the 1990s dissolution of Yugoslavia. Another example is Stalin's mass murder of the kulaks, prosperous peasants who owned enough land to hire laborers and buy machinery. Stalin saw these small-scale capitalists as an intolerable threat to his Communist Revolution. Soon the category of kulak came to include anyone opposing development of state-controlled collective farms. In the 1930s, perhaps a million kulaks died in executions, gulags, and deportations to Siberia.[7]

Fourth and finally, **pollution threat** is the perception that another group is contaminating our ethnic, religious, or ideological purity. A well-known example is Hitler's fear of Jewish pollution of the Aryan race. The distinctive emotion associated with pollution threat is disgust, which was represented in Nazi descriptions of Jewish people as viruses, lice, cockroaches, and rats. These epithets convey not just an inferior animal essence, but a disgusting animal essence associated with filth and garbage (no enemies are called butterflies or penguins or mice). The behavioral ten-

dencies associated with disgust are distancing and elimination; humans try to avoid viruses, lice, cockroaches, and rats and to exterminate them if contact cannot be avoided.

Perception of a bad essence is a deep form of dehumanization. A bad essence cannot be reformed or re-educated; it can only be avoided or eliminated. All those who share the bad essence are a threat, as all cockroaches are a threat—large and small, old and young, whether they have raided our pantry or not. The perception that a category of humans has a bad essence rationalizes killing by category. Indeed, it could be argued that the perception of bad essence is a definition of hate.[8]

The four types of perceived threat often overlap. White people in the state of Georgia wanted Cherokee lands but were also disturbed by rising levels of Cherokee education and prosperity and by beginnings of Cherokee-White intermarriage. That is, White Georgians felt not only a material threat but also a status-inversion threat and a racial-pollution threat.

Similarly, German Nazis felt material threat from the commercial success of Jews in business and banking, status threat from Jewish success in universities and the arts, and pollution threat from German Jews identifying as German. Once mass killing had begun, Nazis also felt a security threat: they worried that Jewish people and their sympathizers would surely seek revenge if the "Final Solution" faltered. As Nazi forces weakened, many Germans feared the revenge of victorious enemies, including Jewish survivors, as well as Soviets and Americans.[9]

For Stalin, the kulaks represented not only a security threat but also a material threat (they resisted grain requisitions), a status threat (they competed with Communist Party officials for influence in rural areas), and a pollution threat (they "infected" others with capitalist ideas; some even tried to join the Communist Party).

Thus, although the four perceived threats can be distinguished, and any particular episode of mass killing may be motivated more by one type of threat than by the others, it appears unlikely that any politicide can be explained as response to a single form of perceived threat. More often, the four kinds are mutually reinforcing. Finally, it is important to remember that the four threats are all associated with strong emotions, notably shame, anger, fear, and disgust.[10]

Mass Killing in Aerial Bombing

A salient but controversial example of killing by category is aerial bombing of enemy population centers.[11] In World War II, Germans bombed cities in the United Kingdom, the United States and the UK bombed German cities, and the US bombed Japanese cities. UK deaths from German bombs were about forty thousand; German deaths from UK and US bombs were about four hundred thousand. In the war against Japan, the US firebombed fifty-eight cities, killing about nine hundred thousand people. The atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, dropped in August 1945, killed at least an additional 150,000.

City bombing, especially in time of war, kills mostly civilians: women, children, and the elderly—military-aged men are mostly not at home. City bombing thus fits the definition of politicide: mass killing of civilians in political conflict. In World War II, city bombing was often referred to as "terror bombing" because many believed that civilian suffering under the terror of aerial bombing would lead citizens to demand that their leaders surrender.[12]

We could find no record of US, UK, or German aircrews refusing orders to bomb cities or even protesting against this kind of mission. No doubt it helped that city bombing was conducted from high altitudes to avoid flak and enemy fighters; the suffering brought by incendiaries and high explosives is lost from view to crews flying thousands of feet above a city.

The logic of killing enemy civilians is the logic of modern warfare.[13] Beginning with the French levée en masse in 1793, wars have usually been fought by industrial states that conscript soldiers and organize every kind of production and technology for the war effort. As civilians are harnessed for war, the erosion of the distinction between soldier and civilian is increasingly used as justification for attacking civilians. This progression has not been lost on those who challenge the state with terrorism (see Psychology of Terrorism section below).

Perpetrators, Leaders, and Masses

It is easy to talk about the depravity of those who perpetrate mass killing, but who specifically are the perpetrators? Studies of politicide have found that many of the perpetrators of violence have joined a military unit or militia for personal reasons that have nothing to do with intergroup threat. Some join out of habitual obedience to authority and fear of punishment if they do not join. Some join for the status and power that come from having a gun in their hands. Some join for salary or loot, for access to alcohol or opportunities for rape, for comradeship, or to escape problems at home or with the law. It is important to note that few join for a chance to kill; most join a group that only later tasks them with killing.

With or without personal reasons for joining, some killers may perceive a threat toward their own people. Presumably many of their people feel the same threat—but only few take part in the killing. The Khmer Rouge army in 1976 numbered about seventy-two thousand, about 4 percent of the 1.6 million Khmer Cambodian males between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four in 1975.[14] Although relatively few, the Khmer Rouge controlled a nation of 5–6.5 million and in three years killed about 1.6 million.

Rwandan genocidaires probably numbered around two hundred thousand, about 17 percent of Hutu males between the ages of eighteen and fifty-four in 1994.[15] In one hundred days the genocidaires killed at least five hundred thousand Tutsi and moderate Hutu Rwandans.

For the WWII deaths of about eleven million European Jews, it is not easy to define perpetrators or estimate their numbers. Dieter Pohl of the German Institute for Contemporary History estimates that about 200,000 Germans and Austrians prepared, carried out, or assisted in these deaths.[16] If German and Austrian perpetrators totaled 200,000, they would amount to less than one percent of an estimated 24 million German plus 2.5 million Austrian men between the ages of 15 and 65 in 1939.[17]

Similarly, the two hundred thousand men who trained as pilots, navigators, or bombardiers for US Army Air Force bomber crews in World War II, a maximum estimate of those who joined in city bombing, totaled less than 1 percent of US males aged twenty to forty-nine.[18]

The numbers for perpetrators—Khmer Rouge, Hutu, German/Austrian, American—are at best approximations that can be contested. But their general magnitude in relation to population numbers is defensible and revealing. In each case, the perpetrators represent only a small percent-

age of male adults who *might* have been perpetrators: one percent of Germans/Austrians, four percent of Cambodians, seventeen percent of Hutu Rwandans, one percent of Americans. These small percentages indicate that perceived enemy threat cannot be enough to explain who joins in mass killing. The great majority of adult males who perceive an enemy threat never join in mass killing of the enemy. As noted above, perpetrators join a military unit or militia for many reasons; when ordered to kill they do so by habit of obedience or fear of punishment for refusing rather than or in addition to any threat they might feel from the targeted group.

If enemy threat is not sufficient explanation for the perpetrators, what about the leaders? The obvious answer is that the elites and leaders behind the perpetrators believe that they and their people are threatened with material loss, status loss, security loss, pollution, or, typically, some combination of these. The pronouncements of Turkish leaders, Hitler, Pol Pot, and the Hutu Radio Milles Collines in Rwanda make clear that those directing the Armenian, Jewish, Cambodian, and Rwandan politicides saw their victims as mortal threats to their own power and to the survival of their people.

What about those who are neither perpetrators nor leaders? Do they perceive the same threats their leaders do? Do they support the violence that their leaders organize in the name of group survival? Polling data from before and during a politicide are usually difficult to come by, but polls of Palestinians and Israeli Jews are relatively accessible and provide some insight into these questions.

A July 2024 poll obtained 1,270 face-to-face interviews with Palestinians in 127 randomly chosen locations, 830 in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and 440 in the Gaza Strip. An Israeli sample of nine hundred people was obtained from online panels, including seven hundred Israeli Jewish and two hundred Israeli Arab respondents. Results indicated that 66 percent of Israeli Jews believe that Palestinians intend "to commit genocide against us," and 62 percent of Palestinians believe the same about Israeli Jews.[19] When asked to rate the humanity of the other side on a scale of zero to one hundred, 51 percent of Jews rated Palestinian humanity at zero and 71 percent of Palestinians rated Jewish humanity at zero. A March 2024 poll found that 39 percent of Jewish Israelis thought the military response to Hamas in Gaza was "about right"; 34 percent thought it had "not gone far enough."[20]

These results indicate strong mutual threat perception, and strong mutual dehumanization. In the case of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, at least, it appears that mass opinion generally supports the opinions and actions of both leaders and perpetrators.

Predicting Politicide

It is easy to notice two factors in common among the greatest politicides of the twentieth century: Turks killing Armenians; Nazis killing Jews, Roma, Slavs, and political opponents; Khmer Rouge killing "Cambodians with Vietnamese minds" and ethnic minorities; Hutus killing Tutsis and moderate Hutus; and the back-and-forth killing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In each of these cases, there was war—*interstate war or civil war*—when mass killing occurred. War strengthens popular support for government, strengthens government control of news and information of every kind, raises the specter of "the enemy within," and desensitizes citizens to death. If our own people are dying, how much can we care about the deaths of those who threaten our people?

In each of these cases, there had been *earlier and smaller examples of killing by category*, that is, targeting people based on who they were rather than because of anything they had done. Turks, Germans, and Hutus killed Armenians, Jews, and Tutsis in various episodes years before large-scale killings began. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge began forcible removal of town and city populations to rural labor camps in 1973 and 1974, months before winning and emptying the capital Phnom Penh in 1975.

Past and recent killing by category is a warning of more to come, consistent with the well-established psychology that the best predictor of future behavior is previous behavior of the same kind.

A third factor common to major politicides is political and material *support from another state*. Germany supported the Young Turks; China supported the Khmer Rouge; France supported President Juvénal Habyarimana's Rwandan Hutu government, even sending French troops to help fight the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) when it invaded from Uganda in 1990. Rwanda and Uganda have supported militant factions in Congo. Even the Nazis received assistance from like-minded allies in other countries.

War, previous politicide, and foreign support are relatively nonspecific warning signs for politicide. Verdeja has reviewed efforts to predict genocide and mass atrocities and brought together a list of fifteen early warning signs that have been suggested as short- or medium-term predictors.[21]

Here we reorder his predictors, categorizing each as "threat," "means," or "opportunity," and apply them to a well-known case, the 1994 politicide in Rwanda.[22]

Threat Perception

1. **Public commemorations of past crimes or contentious historical events that exacerbate tensions between groups.** Belgians had used Tutsi officials to administer colonial Rwanda; after independence, the Hutu-dominated school system taught a history that portrayed Tutsi victimization of Hutu people.

2. **Public rallies and popular mobilization against vulnerable groups**. The "Hutu Ten Commandments" were published in a Hutu newspaper in Kigali in 1990; the commandments forbade romantic or business relations with Tutsis and demanded that all important positions in Rwanda be held by Hutus.

3. **Increased hate media, which may sanction the use of violence against already vulnerable civilian groups.** Radio Mille Collines harped on the Tutsi threat represented by RPF incursions from Uganda and on the Tutsi slaughter of Hutus in neighboring Burundi, calling for attacks on Tutsis in both vengeance and self-defense.

4. **Rapid increase in opposition capacity, increasing the threat they represent, or conversely a rapid decline in opposition capacity, which may serve as an opportunity to destroy them and their "civilian base."** In February 1993, the RPF showed new strength in a broad advance against the Rwandan army; a truce followed that led to the Arusha Accords and significant political gains for the RPF. Civilians (mainly Hutu) displaced by the fighting streamed south with stories of RPF brutality.

5. **Spillover of armed conflict from neighboring countries.** Tutsi-dominated armed forces in neighboring Burundi killed thousands of Hutu civilians in 1972, 1988, and again in 1991; Hutus in Rwanda feared similar treatment by the Tutsi-dominated RPF invading from Uganda. In October 1993, Tutsi officers in Burundi killed Hutu President Melchior Ndadaye. Tens of thousands of both Hutu and Tutsi Burundians were killed in the ensuing ethnic conflict; many Hutu refugees from this conflict living in Rwanda were easily recruited to kill Tutsi Rwandans.

6. **Upcoming elections, which may be perceived as threatening to ruling elites.** The Arusha Accords, which called for RPF participation in a transitional government and for general elections after twenty-two months, were a direct threat to the power of Hutu elites dependent on the governing party led by President Habyarimana.

Means

7. **Increase in weapons transfers to security forces or rebels.** In 1993, the Rwandan government and some of its well-to-do supporters bought machetes and small arms for the Interahamwe, a militia organized by the governing Hutu party. On the rebel side, the Ugandan government armed and supported the Tutsi RPF from its first incursion into Rwanda in 1990.

8. **Deployment of security forces against previously targeted civilian groups.** The Interahamwe were first put to killing Tutsi in the Rwandan district of Bugesera in March 1992.

9. **Nowhere for targeted civilian groups to flee as violence escalates.** Once killing began, the Rwandan army set up roadblocks on major roads and the Interahamwe set up roadblocks on smaller roads to prevent Tutsi from fleeing.

10. **Physical segregation or separation of the targeted group from the broader population, forced removal or resettlement of populations.** Rwandans had government-issued identity papers that specified Hutu or Tutsi beneath their picture; a Tutsi ID card (in practice, lack of a Hutu ID card) was a death sentence for those stopped at roadblocks.

Opportunity

11. **Natural disasters, which may overstretch already weak state capacity and embolden opposition groups.** Beginning in the late 1980s, Rwanda suffered economically from drought as well as a sharp drop in world prices for coffee and tea (Rwanda's major exports) and from limits on government spending imposed by the World Bank.

12. **Rapid change in government leadership, such as through assassination or coup, which can create a power vacuum and result in violent contestation for political power.** Rwandan President Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Naramata, both Hutu, were killed when a surface-to-air missile hit their plane as it prepared to land in Kigali.

13. **Commencement/resumption of armed conflict between government forces and rebels.** Immediately after President Habyarimana's plane was downed, the RPF resumed its offensive from Uganda, which had been suspended in the cease-fire that led to the Arusha Accords.

14. **Arrest, torture, disappearance, or killing of political, religious, or economic leaders.** The beginning of politicide in Kigali was the targeted assassination by Hutu extremists of Hutu opposition leaders and their families. Loss of moderate Hutu leaders gave Hutu extremists within the government a free hand to lead fearful Hutu Rwandans against their Tutsi neighbors.

15. **Sharp increase in repressive state practices, including removal of political, religious, civil, and economic rights and stripping of citizenship; shift from selective to widespread patterns of repression.** From 1975 to 1990, President Habyarimana controlled Rwanda as the leader of a one-party state; in 1990, he was forced to allow competing political parties. Thus, the years immediately before the politicide saw what appeared to be political liberalization rather than increase in repression.

Prediction Overview

The first thing to notice about this list is that the Rwanda politicide was heavily overdetermined, with all but one of the fifteen warning signs present (all but #15).

The second thing to notice is the distribution of warning signs across categories: six are signs of increased threat perception, four are signs of increased capacity for killing (means), and five are signs of increased political instability (opportunity). Psychological analysis of mass killing usually focuses on motives—why perpetrators and those who direct or support them feel that killing is necessary and justified. Indeed, our identification of four kinds of threats that can lead to politicide is just such an analysis of motives. But Verdeja's list is a useful corrective to the usual focus on motivation. It reminds us that killing requires not just motive but means and opportunity. Particularly for mass killing, means and opportunity are crucial predictors.

Readers are invited to apply Verdeja's list to the violent conflict between Hamas and Israel since October 7, 2023. Like the Rwanda politicide, the killing of civilians by Hamas and Israel is overpredicted.

The next section moves the focus from politicide to terrorism, though the core question remains the same: what is the psychology that enables killing civilians?

II. The Psychology of Terrorism

There are many definitions of terrorism; perhaps the one closest to consensus is the idea that nonstate attacks on civilians count as terrorism. Nevertheless, most English-speaking countries have followed the US in defining terrorism as an effort to coerce a government or its citizens with violence.[23] This section begins with a recent US definition of terrorism in order to argue, again, that a possible motive for behavior does not belong in the definition of the behavior to be explained.

Terrorism vs. Politicide

Here is the definition of terrorism in the 2023 Federal Bureau of Investigation/Department of Homeland Security *Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism*: "Any activity that involves an act that is dangerous to human life or potentially destructive of critical infrastructure or key resources; and is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State or other subdivision of the United States; and appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, or influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping."[24]

Two features of this definition are noteworthy. First, it includes motivation ("appears to be intended") in the definition of the behavior ("activity") of interest. Including "intimidation" and "coercion" in the definition of terrorism blocks attention to other possible terrorist motives, as will be discussed later in this section.

A second notable feature of the definition is that it includes the requirement that the threat be a violation of US criminal laws. One is tempted to pass over this as obvious or even redundant: *of course* threat to human life must be criminal. But the powerful implication of this requirement is that government threat to human life is not terrorism. US criminal law does not apply to actions of states or governments, including the US government, although crimes by individual members of a government can be prosecuted.

Thus politicide as described in the preceding section is not usually called terrorism. Nevertheless, this review compares the psychologies of politicide and terrorism, both of which entail violence against civilians.

Radicalization to Terrorism

Twenty years before the September 11 attacks in 2001 it was already recognized that psychopathology is no more common among terrorists than among nonterrorists of similar background.[25] If terrorists are not mentally ill, what drives them to violence?

After the shock of those attacks, security officials in the US struggled to understand how "normal" individuals are moved to terrorism. The hope was to "get to the left of the boom"—to predict and, ideally, prevent future attacks. *Radicalization* came to be the word used to refer to the developments that precede terrorist attacks—the psychology by which individuals, groups, and mass publics increasingly support violence in an intergroup conflict. For a nonstate opposition group, an endpoint of this development can be terrorism, including attacks on civilians. The trouble with this "support violence" formulation of radicalization is that it conflates two kinds of support: opinion and action. Support for violence against an enemy can mean a belief that violence is justified, a belief that can be measured by polls. Or support can mean action, ranging from contributing money or information to joining in perpetrating violence.

A prominent expression of this conflation has been increased US government attention to finding and preventing "violent extremism." The FBI/DHS report cited above notes, for instance, that "the FBI and DHS use the term 'domestic violent extremism' to refer to DT [domestic terrorism] threats." In this conception, violent extremism can mean either opinion supporting terrorist violence or joining in committing terrorist violence.

The conflation of opinion and action was not troublesome so long as it was assumed that extreme ideas are the origin and cause of extreme behavior—that radical ideas are the source of terrorist behavior. Research, however, undermined this assumption in two ways. First, polls found thousands or millions with radical ideas—justifying terrorist violence, for instance—while few turned to terrorism. In few cases are bad ideas the proximate cause of bad behavior; they are, in general, a poor predictor of bad behavior.

Second, not only are radical ideas insufficient to cause terrorism; they are not even necessary precursors to participation in terrorism. Case histories have found many who joined a terrorist group without radical ideas—for status and power, for comrades, for revenge. These are examples of joining in radical action without prior radical opinion, though radical opinions may be adopted after joining. Terrorism scholars today recognize that justifying terrorism is only weakly related to perpetrating it, just as social psychology research recognizes that attitudes are only weakly related to behavior (outside a voting booth).

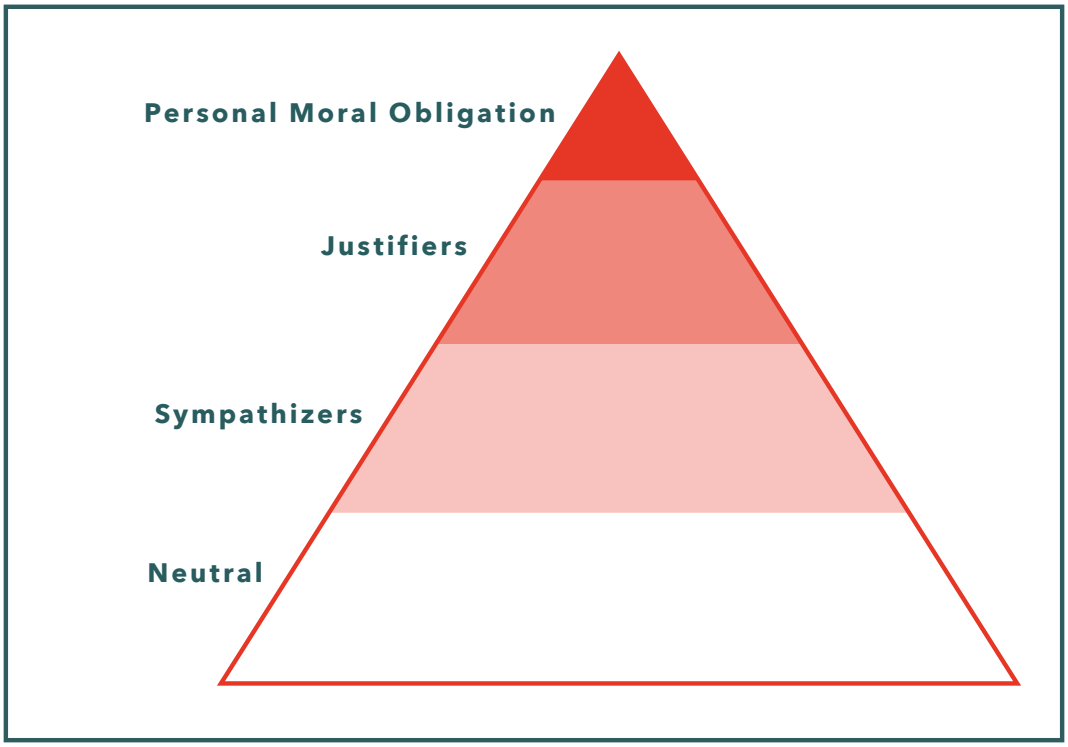
The Two Pyramids Model of Radicalization

What to do? Getting rid of the words radicalization and extremism will not help; new names would soon arise for the developments by which individuals, groups, and mass opinion are moved to support or participate in political violence. More useful is recognizing that radicalization to extremist opinions is psychologically a different phenomenon from radicalization to extremist action. Thus the Two Pyramids Model of radicalization to terrorism represents radicalization of opinion separately from radicalization of action.[26] The last section of this essay will consider several possible links between these two pyramids.

Radicalization in the Opinion Pyramid

At the base of the opinion pyramid, as shown in Figure 1, are individuals who do not care about a political cause (*neutral*); higher in the pyramid are those who believe in the cause but do not justify violence (*sympathizers*); higher yet are those who justify violence in defense of the cause (*justifiers*); and at the apex of the pyramid are those who feel a *personal moral obligation* to take up violence in defense of the cause.

Figure 1: The Opinion Pyramid



Source: Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Two-Pyramids Model of Radicalization to Terrorism," in *De Gruyter Handbook of the Psychology of Terrorism*, ed. Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, and Gina Scott Ligon (De Gruyter, 2026), 50.

This is not a stairway or stage model: individuals can skip levels in moving up and down the pyramid. Nor do the levels represent probability of moving higher in the pyramid. Instead, the pyramid shape represents the usual case where there are fewer people in each level than in the level below. An unusual, "misshapen" pyramid would exist for US opinion after 9/11, where probably most Americans justified violence ("the War on Terror") and only a few remained neutral about the conflict.

Polling data can put percentages on the levels of the opinion pyramid. In 2016 and 2017, about 30 percent of roughly two million Muslim adults in the US believed that the War on Terror was a war on Islam; these are sympathizers with the jihadi terrorist cause, even if they don't necessarily *endorse* the violence. About ten percent of US Muslims said suicide bombing of civilians in defense of Islam is often or sometimes justified.[27] This ten percent projects to about two hundred thousand US Muslim adults (a number that indicates the potential for a sizable backlash against policies that would target those with extreme opinions). Tracking over time the percent sympathizing with a terrorist cause and justifying terrorist violence can show successes and failures in the "war of ideas" against terrorism.

Readers familiar with the terrorism literature may be surprised that this discussion of the opinion pyramid does not refer to ideology or narrative.[28] These two concepts are popular in discussions of the role of ideas in radicalization to terrorism. Unfortunately, there is no consensus in defining either ideology or narrative, making empirical measures of ideology and narrative few and inconsistent.

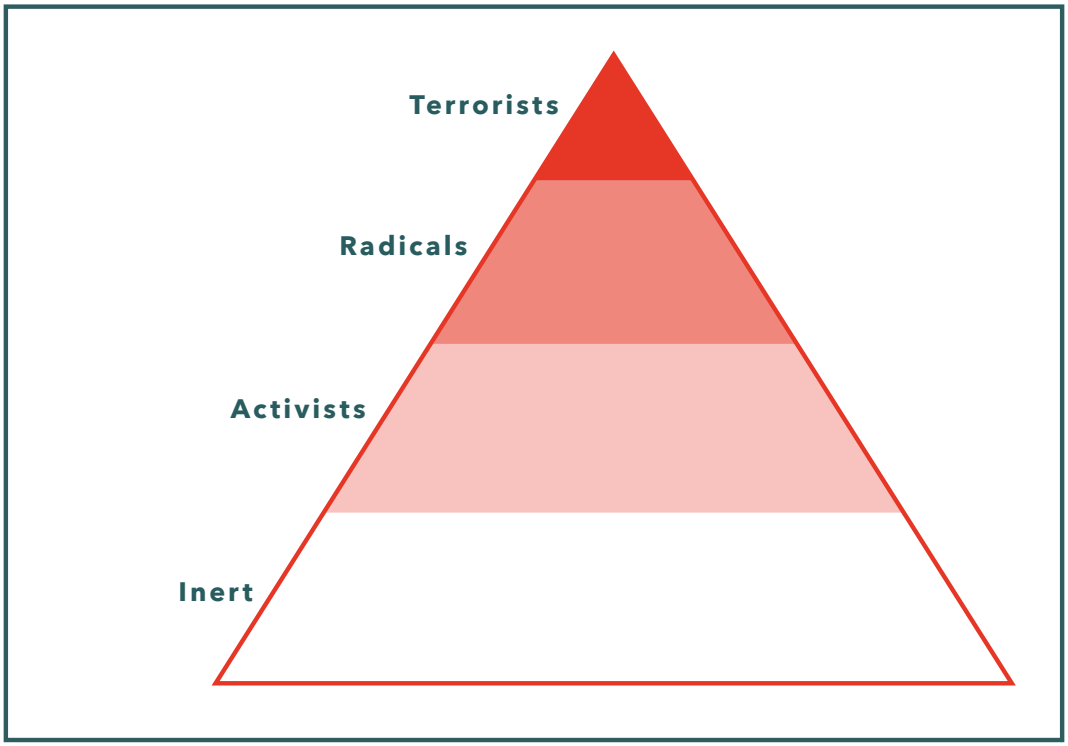
More promising is a set of concepts originating in social movement theory: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. A diagnostic frame identifies a problem of injustice and names the perpetrator. A prognostic frame states what should be done to right this wrong. A motivational frame identifies who should act and why and a vision of the better world that action can accomplish. Together the three frames can move a few individuals and groups to political action.

In the polling example referred to above, belief that the war on terrorism is a war on Islam is a diagnostic frame. Belief that suicide bombing of civilians is justified in defense of Islam is a prognostic frame. Unlike concepts of ideology and narrative, framing concepts are easily translated into measurement. Polling measures of the three frames can track radicalization and deradicalization in the opinion pyramid.

Radicalization in the Action Pyramid

At the base of this pyramid, shown in Figure 2, are individuals doing nothing for a political group or cause (*inert*); higher in the pyramid are those who are engaged in legally permissible political action for the cause (*activists*); higher yet are those involved in illegal action for the cause (*radicals*); and at the apex of the pyramid, the least populated level, are those engaged in illegal action that targets civilians (*terrorists*). Again, this is not a stairway model; individuals can skip levels in moving up and down in the action pyramid.

Figure 2: The Action Pyramid



Source: Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Two-Pyramids Model of Radicalization to Terrorism," in *De Gruyter Handbook of the Psychology of Terrorism*, ed. Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko, and Gina Scott Ligon (De Gruyter, 2026), 47.

Survey research using a scale that measures activist intentions (legal, nonviolent actions) and radical intentions (illegal, violent actions) has found that these are separable and only moderately correlated. Activist intentions correlate with self-reporting of past activist actions, whereas radical intentions correlate with self-reporting of past radical actions.[29] The survey results thus support the distinction between the second (activists) and third (radicals) levels of the action pyramid.

The next section looks more closely at the drivers of individual, group, and mass radicalization as these relate to the Two Pyramids Model.

Mechanisms of Radicalization in the Two Pyramids

McCauley and Moskalenko use case histories ranging from nineteenth-century Russian antitsarist terrorism to twenty-first-century al-Qaeda terrorism to identify mechanisms of radicalization operating at individual, group, and mass levels.[30]

Individual-Level Mechanisms (Action Pyramid)

Individual-level mechanisms of radicalization include anger and the quest for revenge for harm to self or loved ones (*personal grievance*); outrage for injustice to a larger group or cause the individual cares about (*group grievance*); participation in progressively more radical acts that culminate in terrorism (*slippery slope*—each action justifying the next); helping a friend or loved one already radicalized (*love*); risk and status seeking, especially by young men (*status seeking*); and escape from personal problems (*escape*). Finally, *unfreezing* is a loss of existing social connections that opens an individual to new people and new ideas; it is a multiplier of the power of the other mechanisms.

Among these individual-level mechanisms influencing action, only group grievance represents the power of radical ideas. The other mechanisms represent individual motives and individual rewards, including revenge, self-justification, love, status, escape, and comrades. These motives and rewards can move someone to join a militant group or undertake "lone wolf" violence. Once someone joins a militant group, they are likely to learn the radical ideas that justify violent action; these ideas may help keep them in the group even if those ideas were not the reason for joining.

Group-Level Mechanisms (Opinion and Action Pyramids)

Mechanisms of radicalization within small groups evince a number of normal social-psychological dynamics that have been well studied in both observational and experimental work. These include extremity shift in like-minded groups (*group polarization*) and three kinds of radicalizing *group conflict*: between factions within a group, between radical groups, and between a radical group and state power. A multiplier of the power of these group dynamics is *group isolation*: cohesion and the power of group norms are strengthened to the extent that group members are cut off from competing group norms. Every army takes new recruits away from family and friends to instill new norms of loyalty and obedience.

Group-level mechanisms operate in both pyramids—on both ideas and actions. Opinions and arguments in a small group tend to shift further in the direction initially favored by most members (*relevant arguments* operating in the opinion pyramid). A push toward extreme action arises from the extra status awarded to members who advance and lead the riskiest actions, including illegal and violent ones (*social comparison* operating in the action pyramid).

Intergroup conflict increases group cohesion, respect for leaders, glorification of group values, punishment of deviates, and hostility toward the threatening group (as in the US after the 9/11 attacks). Increased hostility toward a threatening group means both radicalization in the opinion pyramid (including essentializing the out-group) and probable escalation of conflict toward violence (action pyramid).

Mass-Level Mechanisms (Opinion Pyramid)

Mass-level mechanisms of radicalization influence those at every level of the opinion pyramid. These include hate (increasing perception of the enemy as inherently and immutably bad and threatening, which rationalizes killing by category); *martyrdom* (mobilization of opinion and action by a martyr's self-sacrifice that shames those doing less for the cause); and *jujitsu politics* (provoking state overreaction to terrorist attack—the US after 9/11/2001, Israel after 10/7/2023). Jujitsu politics depends on mass reaction to attack, including both emotional responses of anger, fear, and humiliation, and opinion reactions of increased support for escalating conflict.

Mass-level mechanisms increase the number who agree that they are unjustly attacking us (grievance sympathizers) and the number who support violence in response to this grievance (violence justifiers). More sympathizers, or, more precisely, in-group *perception* of more sympathizers, means the perception of a larger approving audience for those who act against injustice. More justifiers, or, more precisely, in-group perception of more justifiers, means the perception of a larger approving audience for those who take up violence against perpetrators of injustice. Thus, perceived radicalization in the opinion pyramid—seeing more sympathizers and more justifiers—provides motivation for those who would like to become heroes and martyrs. Changes in perceptions within the opinion pyramid are changes in group norms—providing the link between mass politics and political activism or terrorism.

Relation Between the Opinion Pyramid and the Action Pyramid

We have emphasized the weakness of the link between opinion and action: 99 percent of those who justify terrorist violence never move to terrorist action; 99 percent of those with extreme beliefs never move to extreme action. A conveyor belt from ideas to action is a misleading notion.

But it is equally mistaken to claim that ideas and actions are completely unrelated. In this section we consider five possible relationships, two linking action to opinion and three linking opinion to action.

At the individual level there is a strong link from action to opinion. Humans need to find reasons for what they do, especially when the action is violence, and especially when the targets of violence are noncombatants. This is the lesson of the long trajectory of cognitive dissonance research. When we do something stupid or immoral, we find reasons that make sense of what we did. Perpetrators of politicide or terrorism quickly learn diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that justify their actions. "Just obeying orders" is a popular motivational frame for perpetrators of violence.

Something similar happens at the mass level when a state goes to war. Since the French Revolution's *levée en masse,* a state going to war organizes its whole civilian economy for the war effort. Civilian production, civilian sacrifices, and civilian appreciation for those serving in the military are mobilized for military success. The result of involving masses of civilians in the war effort is increased support for the war (sympathizers) and increased hatred toward the enemy (justifiers broadening acceptable targets of violence to include noncombatants). As with the individual level, the mechanism of radicalization is finding reasons to justify action, in this case mass actions compelled by the state.

Three linkages run the other way, from opinion to action. First is an individual's sense of moral obligation to join in violence against those who have hurt the in-group. This feeling can but does not always lead to action. One can feel a moral obligation to join in violence but also numerous competing moral duties: to family, to community, or to religious strictures against violence. Or the obligation may be undermined by fear of the consequences of engaging in violence, including pain and death. Particularly inhibiting of action is the lack of means and opportunity; most people are not trained for violence or in contact with potential targets.

It is worth noting how the acquisition of means and opportunity can turn opinion to action. Such was the case for Humam al-Balawi, a physician who was excoriating the US and Israel on the internet while living in Jordan. But he did nothing, not even legal activism, until Jordanian

intelligence, believing they had turned him into an agent serving Jordanian and US interests, sent him to Pakistan in December of 2009 to try to connect with al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Balawi obtained a suicide belt from jihadist militants and killed himself and nine others at CIA Camp Chapman in Khost, Afghanistan.

A second link from opinion to action, in this case at the mass level, is the nonviolent support that sympathizers and justifiers can contribute to terrorist activity. Fundraising and money laundering, information supplied to terrorists, information withheld from police, provision of firearms—these forms of assistance will flow in proportion to the shift in mass opinion toward the terrorists. Even with normative support, however, it is only few who move to action. As the risks are less, those who move to nonviolent action are probably more numerous than those who move to violent action. Similarly, means and opportunity for nonviolent action are more easily come by.

The importance of this link becomes evident if mass opinion turns *against* a terrorist group, in which case the group is likely to decline in size and activity. The Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA, responsible for a 1983 bombing at Orly Airport) and Islamic Group (responsible for the 1997 massacre at Luxor, Egypt) both saw a sudden decline associated with sudden loss of mass support.[31]

A third link from opinion to action, status seeking, was introduced above in discussing mass-level mechanisms of radicalization. Perception within a group of substantial numbers of sympathizers and justifiers can move individuals and subgroups toward violence. Perception of in-group opinion is perception of a group norm; individuals and groups can move from zero to hero if they see an audience to applaud their violence. Again, there is the issue of means and opportunity; these necessities have been met in a growing number of cases with a vehicle as the means and a crowd the opportunity.

Consistent with this linkage is the modest but significant correlation over years, between 1970 and 2004, of the prevalence of right-wing opinions and right-wing terrorist incidents.[32] For example, polls showed a 1994–96 peak of right-wing opinions ("government out of control" poll items) just before and after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

This correlation may help explain *stochastic terrorism*. An influential member of a group uses angry or dehumanizing language toward an out-group. Violence toward the out-group becomes more likely as one or more in-group members take up the implied challenge to act. The words of an influential in-group member may change beliefs about the extent of in-group support for violence,

that is, change perception of the in-group norm toward one supporting violent action. An increase in terrorism is statistically predictable, but the few people who move to terrorism are not.

To sum up, there are mechanisms that can move individuals, small groups, and masses of people from extreme action to extreme opinion via rationalization, and mechanisms that can nudge or encourage individuals from extreme opinion to extreme action via moral obligation, reduced risk in nonviolent action, and status seeking. We believe that the link from action to opinion is much stronger than the link from opinion to action, which depends on means and opportunity. More generally, it is easy to observe that most of us are, quoting Robert Abelson, "very good at finding reasons for what we do, but not very good at doing what we find reasons for."[33] Rationalization is easy; virtue is hard.

The implication of our analysis is that the link from opinion to action is real but weak. Consistent with this implication are the observed correlations between extreme opinion and extreme action, which are not zero but are too weak to be useful in preventing extreme actions.

Using weak correlates to identify security threats will produce 99 percent false positives. As Marc Sageman observes, researchers have an obligation to explain the low-base-rate problem to security specialists who want to target common beliefs in efforts to prevent rare actions: "Pursuit of false positives not only diverts scarce resources from targeting true threats but also results in unfair harassment, persecution, and even prosecution of these false positives."[34]

Conclusions

The unsettling conclusion of this review is that politicide and terrorism depend on similar psychologies to develop attacks on civilians. The similarities suggest that politicide can be understood as "terrorism from above," which is historically much more lethal than "terrorism from below."

For both, the potential for intergroup conflict begins with in-group identification—caring what happens to one's ethnic, religious, political, economic, or national group.

For both, the origin of intergroup conflict is the perception of threat—material, status, security, pollution, or some combination—to the in-group.

For both, escalation of intergroup conflict brings the experience and perpetration of violence, with associated increase in emotional reactions of fear, anger, outrage, humiliation, shame, and sadness. Strong emotions contribute to intractable conflict by getting in the way of cost-benefit considerations.

For both, threats and losses are experienced differently by group leaders, perpetrators of violence, and the mass in-group that leaders and perpetrators claim to represent. (Though in small terrorist groups, the distinction between leaders and perpetrators can be small.)

For both, mass mechanisms of radicalization affect people at every level of the opinion pyramid, but connections between the opinion and action pyramids are complex. The "backward" links from action to opinion (individual-level dissonance and mass reaction to civilian mobilization) are considerably stronger than the links from opinion to action (which need help from means and opportunity as well as from perceived norms).

For both, perpetrators killing civilians are only a small percentage of those the killers claim to represent.

For both, perpetrators join a group for motives that are often more personal than political, including material rewards, revenge, status and power, love, and escape from difficult life circumstances.

For both, few perpetrators join the group for a chance to kill civilians, though they will later be asked to do so.

For both, essentializing the threatening out-group can help justify killing by category, including killing civilians. For leaders, essentializing the enemy is likely to precede killing civilians; for perpetrators, essentializing the enemy is more likely to follow and justify killing civilians.

For both, trajectories of escalating violence depend on means and opportunity. Both require means of killing, including organization and motivation of killers. And both require identification of and access to targets.

The recent large-scale violence between Hamas and Israel raised the question: how can normal humans be brought to wholesale killing of civilians? The short answer is that groups large and small can always find a few men and women who will kill them to save us.

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