

Terrorism as a Tactic of Minority Influence

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Since the late 1970s the topic of minority influence has been an important research issue for social psychologists. Introduced by Serge Moscovici's seminal papers, minority influence research was itself an example of minority influence in that it innovated and deviated from the tendency to view social influence predominantly from the majority's perspective.

However, as Moscovici aptly pointed out, majority influence serves to preserve existing knowledge whereas the formation of new knowledge, germinating as it typically does in the mind of a single individual, or forged in a small group of persons presupposes the influence of a minority on a dominant majority. The typical metaphor for much of minority influence research was nonviolent influence conducted by the minority members through socially sanctioned means, such as debates, publications, appearances in the media, lawful protests and licensed public demonstrations conducted according to rules. And the prototypical cases of minority influence phenomena were innovations in science and technology, minority-prompted change in political attitudes, shifts in the world of fashion, etc.

But in the several last decades a very different type of influence tactic has captivated the world's attention and mobilized the world's resources, going by the name of "terrorism" and considered by many the scourge of our times. Though a small groups of social scientists (primarily political scientists, sociologists, and psychiatrists) have been studying terrorism since the early 1970s, only the events of 9/11 catapulted the topic to the very top of everyone's research agenda. The number of symposia, solid-authored books and edited-volumes on the topic of terrorism has mushroomed (almost overnight) and multiple disciplinary perspectives in both the natural and the social sciences are

intensely being brought to bear on the terrorism issue, in the hope of offering a better understanding and, hopefully, finding effective ways of dealing with this unsettling problem.

The social psychological research on terrorism is relatively sparse and in its infancy. But clearly terrorism as a phenomenon is both social and psychological, hence our discipline should have important insights to offer concerning its antecedents, internal dynamics and consequences. The present conference on how minorities cope with their social environments affords an opportunity to examine terrorism as a **social psychological phenomenon**, and more precisely as a **form of minority influence**. But does it make sense to lump terrorism together with other forms of minority influence? More specifically, (2) What features does terrorism share with those other forms of minority influence, and (3) what are its unique features? And finally, if we do consider terrorism as a form of minority influence, after all (4) How effective it is as a form of minority influence, and what are the limits of its efficacy? In the following 30 minutes or so, I would like to address these questions at some length.

Terrorism's Distinctions from Other Forms of Minority Influence

Let me first consider some ways in which terrorism differs from other forms of minority influence.

Actions versus beliefs. In contrast to alternative forms of minority influence that have used verbal arguments toward the alteration of attitudes and beliefs on part of the majority, terrorism has used the argument of action (that "speaks louder than words") and that was hoped to elicit some desired reaction from the targeted majority, such as release of prisoners, withdrawal of forces, territorial concessions, etc. Nineteenth-century

anarchists, for instance, coined the term of “propaganda of the deed”, an expression used as early as 1877 to refer to an act of **insurrection** as a “powerful means of arousing popular conscience” and the materialization of an idea through actions” (Crenshaw, 1990, p.)

Admittedly, the distinction between actions and beliefs isn't very sharp, simply because actions are based on relevant beliefs. And the majority **reactions** that terrorists hope to elicit aren't divorced from an expected change in the majority's **attitudes and beliefs**. For instance, terrorist-perpetrated violence may support the belief that insisting on a given governmental policy isn't **worth** the damage that terrorism may perpetrate. Such belief may then prompt the action demanded by the terrorists, such as a release of prisoners, or a withdrawal of forces from a given territory.

The contents of attitude/belief change. In a prototypical case of minority influence, the minority attempts to convince the majority to adopt the minority's opinions, attitudes, etc.. Such is the case with scientific innovations where proponents of a novel theory attempt to convince a skeptical majority to accept it as valid. Such is also the case with religious proselytizing (e.g., by Jehova's witnesses, etc.) attempting to convince others to accept one's own faith, and such is typically the case also with political debates. In the case of terrorism, by contrast, there is no attempt to convince the majority in the minority's opinion (partly because the opinion discrepancy simply is too extensive). For instance, even though an ultimate goal of radical Moslem terrorists, or radical Marxist terrorists might be to spread Islam, or Marxism across the globe, such goals may appear too unattainable in the foreseeable future to be seriously adopted. Instead, the terrorist minority typically attempts to alter the majority beliefs about the

desirability of its response to minority demands, rather than persuading the majority to join the minority and share in the “social reality” espoused by the minority.

Terrorism as a Form of Minority Influence

Despite these differences between terrorism and more “conventional” forms of minority influence, there are some good reasons to consider terrorism as a tactic of minority influence, after all. One such reason is the considerable power it places in the minority hands in its struggle against some majority.

1. Terrorism’s equalizing potential. The term minority is usually taken to connote a weak faction compared to the majority. Indeed, terrorism has often been considered the weapon of the weak, though hardly exclusively so. In fact, the term “terrorism” was originally invented to refer to State terrorism, namely **regime de la terreur** of 1793-4, conceived of by Maximilien Robespierre and his colleagues as “an instrument of governance wielded by the recently established revolutionary state” Hoffman, 1998, p. 15). Similarly, terrorism has been pervasively used by totalitarian states and their despotic leaders against their own citizens. **Hitler’s** Nazi Germany, **Stalin’s** Soviet Union, the right wing military dictatorships that rose to power in **Argentina**, **Chile** and **Greece** as well as the elected governments in **El Salvador**, **Guatemala**, **Colombia** & **Peru** have used terror against domestic populations to keep them in check. Some authors reserve the term “terrorism” to violence committed by non-state entities, whereas they use the term “terror” to refer to state-committed violence. Be that however it may, it is of interest that in the 20th century close to 25 million people were the victims of state-terrorism, or the **governmental use of terror** (if you will) whereas approximately 5,000 persons lost their lives to non-state originated terrorism.

Nonetheless, terrorism may be particularly attractive to minorities because it may represent a particularly effective, some ideologues say the only effective, means at their disposal. As the political scientist James DeNarob (1985, Chapters 9-11) argued small organizations resort to violence to compensate for what they lack in numbers. Terrorism has been considered the **great equalizer**, and a source of tremendous power. To be sure, technology considerably boosts the equalizing potential available to terrorists. Already the invention of dynamite was thought by **nineteenth-century revolutionaries and anarchists** to equalize the relationship between them and the governments they were aiming to topple, a point that was explicitly argued in a 1885 pamphlet, authored by Johann Most and titled Revolutionary War Science. Of course, the more advanced the technology the greater is its “equalizing potential”. The specter of the weapons of mass destruction, of nuclear, biological or chemical types falling into terrorist hands is, the great incubus of our times that fuels the US and British war in Irak and has repercussions around the globe. The events of 9/11 have demonstrated the horrendous damage in life and property that determined terrorists can inflict with relatively conventional means (like flying planes into buildings). The acquisition by terrorists of weapons of mass destruction raises the stakes of horror a thousandfold. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) defined social power as the ability of one party to move another party over a range of outcomes. In terms of this definition, the terrorists wield a considerable power indeed, because at one end of the range of outcomes that terrorism can bring about consists of something no less terrible and feared as the prospect of **mass annihilation**.

2. Terrorism as a form of innovation. An important, **nearly definitional**, feature of minority influence is its innovativeness. As Serge Moscovici characterized it, minority

influence consists of a break with extant social realities, including the accepted norms and conventions. In that sense, terrorist activity fits very well the mould of a minority influence. First, the targets terrorist deliberately choose are often those protected by the strictest societal taboos women, children or the aged, teenagers at a discotheque, tourists, athletes, or ordinary citizens at their place of work.

The means whereby terrorists have been inflicting their violence have also been innovative. Flying civilian airplanes into buildings was but the last in a series of terrorist innovations including airplane hijacking, hostage taking, car-bombs, exploding packages, single shot snipings etc.

Just like with other forms of minority influence in which a break with extant forms of social influence inspires majority resistance, so also the normative break that terrorist activities represent evokes considerable resistance, loathing and revulsion on part of the majority targeted by those activities. The combination of violence and the breach of taboos engender a particularly strong repudiation of terrorism as a tactic and can empower a vehement resistance to terrorism. I will revisit that point later.

3. Conflict. A major element of minority influence is that it creates a cognitive conflict for the majority. Terrorist tactics also create considerable conflict having to do with the opposite possibilities of **acceding to terrorists** on the one hand and **resisting them forcefully** on the other hand. Acceding to the terrorist demands is appealing in the short run, for it promises to remove the threat and save lives, e.g., in a hostage taking accident. Not surprisingly, such option is particularly appealing to those most likely to be affected by the hostage crisis and most likely interested in these short term benefits, e.g. family and relations of the hostages. But from a long term perspective, acceding to

terrorist demands is viewed as an unacceptable option for it may encourage further blackmail, and involve humiliation and a loss of face to the acceding party. Thus, governmental officials entrusted with safeguarding their country's image and deterrent power, are more likely to take the long view, and opt for resisting the terrorists come what may. One might say that the beliefs that **terrorism has been eliminated** and that **terrorism has been defeated** represent two desired "closures" that are often in conflict with each other.

4. Terrorism's conditions of efficacy. Further insights into the nature of terrorism as a form of minority influence may be gained by close attention to the conditions for its effectiveness. According to minority influence theory, minority influence is likely to be effective to the extent that it exhibits behavioral consistency, persistence and internal coherence, and it is more effective if it is congruent with the Zeitgeist than if it goes against the Zeitgeist. As we shall see, similar features may contribute to the efficacy of terrorism.

a. Persistence and tenacity. Behavioral consistency, persistence, and internal coherence convey the image that the minority is committed, undeterred, unwavering and resolute. Indeed, the same features are part and parcel of the terrorist strategy. For instance, the repeated suicide bombing attempts by Palestinian terrorists, or the Tigers of Tamil in Sri Lanka, despite attempts of suppression by the Israeli and the Sri Lankan forces, are meant to convey the undeterred, tenacious nature of the terrorists' commitment to the cause. The very extremity of their actions, and their willingness to die convey this message convincingly. Indeed, "talk is cheap", "actions speak louder than words", and extreme, self-sacrificial actions speak louder than milder actions. In that

sense, terrorism is functionally similar to other forms of minority influence with which social psychologists have been familiar.

b. Conformance to Zeitgeist. Social psychological analyses of minority influence starting with Moscovici stress that the success of minority influence depends to some extent on its congruency with the prevailing Zeitgeist, that is with **values, norms** and **goals** salient for the majority. How about terrorism? On first blush, it seems to run against the Zeitgeist, in that majorities typically object to wanton violence and the killing of innocents. But things are more complex than that. Specifically, whether or not one considers terrorism as contrary to the Zeitgeist depends on **whose** Zeitgeist one has in mind.

To the extent that terrorism serves the goals of a majority it acquires an aura of legitimacy following the notion that the “end justifies the means”. Thus, the term “terrorism”, is often euphemized as a “fight for freedom” by those who share in the terrorist goals, hence, partake in the same Zeitgeist. On the other hand, those who do not share in the Zeitgeist, or share the opposite Zeitgeist, such as the group targeted by the terrorists, are particularly likely to view the terrorists activities as illegitimate and despicable, labeling it as “terrorism” that this day and age has a universally negative connotation.

In other words, terrorism as an influence tactic is particularly likely to be condoned by a group whose Zeitgeist (that is, whose goals and values) is terrorism serving, and is unlikely to be condoned by a group to which Zeitgeist it is opposed. Of course, this has implications more far reaching than the semantics of the term “terrorism” versus a “freedom fight”. Approval means also material support that the majority may

extend to the minority, including escape routes, safe houses, training grounds and the potential for recruitment from the positive “**sentiment pool**” that a majority sharing Zeitgeist with the minority may afford it.

Compare and contrast, for example, the urban European terrorists of the 1970s, like the Red Army Faction in Germany (the Bader Meinhoff group) or the Red Brigades in Italy (le Brigade Rose) with the current Islamic terrorism, the Hamas, the Hezbollah, or indeed the Al Qaeda network. The urban terrorists were largely divorced from the Zeitgeist of the majority population in whose midst they were operating. Indeed, they had a very difficult time of it and were ultimately defeated one way or the other. On the other hand, the Islamic terrorists who profess to serve goals shared by the community at large, are doing **not too shabbily**. In the Israeli-Palestinian situation, for example, in the year 2000 full 80% of the population supported suicide bombing as a tactic in the struggle with Israel, and the support for Al Qaeda in countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan also has been quite high.

It is noteworthy that mere consistency with the Zeitgeist isn't always sufficient to lend a terrorist minority an aura of legitimacy and ensure it majority support. First, there are other motivational factors that come into play. Second, there are cognitive, or belief-related factors. As to motivational factors, **one question is** to what extent is terrorism effective as a tactic of minority influence. Evidence that **it is**, for instance, the withdrawal of the American the French, and the Israeli forces from Lebanon following the terrorist attacks by the Hezbollah, increases the motivation to embrace terrorism as a tactic. **A separate question is** to what extent is terrorism incompatible with other strongly held values, such as fairness, justice, the protection of innocents, and the maintenance of the

social order and to what extent there are other effective means . In that regard, political scientists like Ted Gurr, and Ehud Sprinzak analyze the demise of such terrorist organizations as the Weatherman underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army and the Front de Liberation du Quebec, in terms of the fact that the **overall movements** sharing some objectives with the terrorist factions such as the **antiwar movement** in the United States in the early seventies and the separatist movement in Quebec didn't accept the extremism and the violence chosen by the terrorist organizations involved.

This issue of extremism and violence, rejected in most societies, requires some substantial intellectual effort for it to acquire legitimacy. It is not enough that terrorism be consistent with the Zeitgeist, or that it sub serve the group goals. It also needs to be congruent with the group's explicit norms, values, and ideologies. The Islamic terrorist movements, such as the Hezbollah, the Hamas and Al Qaeda look for direction and guidance to Islamic clerics. **Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah**, the spiritual leader of the Shia Hezbollah issued in 1996 a statement legitimizing terrorism on the grounds of self defense. As he put it "**We are not preachers of violence**", **Jihad in Islam is a defensive movement against those who impose violence**". (Quoted in Laura Marlowe, "A fiery Cleric's Defense of Jihad", Time (New York), 15 January 1996. "The Sunni extremists who bombed New York City's World Trade Center the first time around i.e., in 1993, specifically obtained a fatwa from **Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman**, and the founder and spiritual leader of the Hamas movement and a major legitimizer of its campaign of suicide terrorism is the Imam **Sheikh Ahmad Ibrahim Yassin**. Thus, in light of the general condemnation of violence against innocents, terrorism requires some powerful

ideological justification; its efficacy alone, such as it is, does not seem sufficient for an unproblematic acceptance by idealistic followers.

Terrorism's Intended Effects

a. "Unfreezing". In classic minority influence theory, a major effect of minority activity is epistemic. The innovative, dissenting views expressed by the minority crack the "smooth surface" of extant social realities and prompt an "unfreezing" of received conventions and world views. At least some terrorist ideologues seem to be explicitly aiming for just such an effect. As the Russian revolutionary **Vera Figner** described it, in 1930, terrorism is "**a means of agitation to draw people from their torpor**" (Vera Figner, *Memoires d'une revolutionnaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), p. 206. 43 Years later, Fatah's leader **Abu Iyad** made a similar point in stating "We are planting the seed. Others will harvest it..." George Habash of the PFLP noted in 1970 "we force people to ask what is going on" (cited in Crenshaw, 1990, p. 18). And Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Bader's lover stated "As for the state of the future, the time after victory, that is not our concern. We build the revolution, not the socialist model.." (cited in Crenshaw, 1990, p. 57). Such statements and similar ones reflect the awareness of terrorist ideologues of their **potential for upsetting the status quo**, and hence preparing the ground for subsequent developments.

b. Provocation. A psychologically sophisticated aspect of the terrorist rationale, and one that clearly belongs in the arsenal of tools available to powerless minorities is that it anticipates the majority's reactions to this particular tactic and in a sense it builds upon them. As Martha Crenshaw (1990, p. 19) put it "Terrorists often think that by provoking indiscriminate repression against the population, terrorism will heighten

popular disaffection, demonstrate the justice of terrorist claims, and enhance the attractiveness of the political alternative the terrorists represent. In this vein, the Red Army Faction sought to make “fascism” visible in Germany. In Brasil, Carlos Marighela aimed to “transform the country’s political situation into a military one. Then discontent will spread to all social groups and the military will be held exclusively responsible for failures” (Carlos Marighela, *For the Liberation of Brasil*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, p. 113). More recently, Osama bin Laden has expressed similar sentiments in hoping that Al Quaeda activities will transform the US into a police state, and unite the Moslems of the world against America.

c. Defeating the Majority. The “unfreezing” and “provocation” effects are relatively modest in their claims, hence are particularly likely to be aimed for by terrorists movements at the initial stages of their career, where they constitute relatively powerless minorities. Where terrorists can claim important material successes—they may become emboldened to the point of viewing themselves as sufficiently powerful to bring about the desired end states **all by themselves**. For instance, according to analysts, some Islamic terrorists subscribe to the “Spider Web Theory” of Western power, whereby even though Western states like Israel or the US appear powerful from the outside-- they are internally weak, and will retreat and crumble away when confronted with resolute force, just like a spider web that can be swept away with ease despite its solid, well constructed appearance. On this view, the Western “powers” are “soft” and “spoiled” rather than “tough”, they are alleged to be “unduly” sensitive to the loss of lives, and to public opinion. According to this theory, such sensibilities constrain their ability to carry out a sustained struggle and reduces their willingness and resolve to do it. This viewpoint cites

in its support the withdrawal of Israeli, American and French forces from Lebanon presumably under the pressure of Hezbollah suicide bombing, the Soviet's withdrawal from Afghanistan under the pressure of the Mojehadin, the lack of a resolute American response to several challenges, such as the bombing of American embassies, and military bases, the attack on the ship Cole, etc. Some Israeli analysts claim also that the second, currently ongoing intifada in the West Bank and Gaza, has been based on the "spider web theory", representing an erosion in the credibility of Israeli deterrence.

How Efficient is Terrorism as a Form of Minority Influence?

In assessing terrorism's efficacy as a form of minority influence, it may be well to distinguish between its **proximal** and **distal** effects. Terrorism certainly has a profound **proximal** impact. Loss of innocent human lives arouses widespread emotions, inspires considerable fear and disrupts the normal course of things, causing a major "unfreezing" and prompting intense cognitive efforts to solve the problems that terrorist represents. The 9/11 events inflicted damage in the billions of dollars, against an "investment" of less than a hundred thousands, and terrorism in Israel virtually killed tourism to this country, a major source of income. A tremendous amount of resources is being spent on various security measures, and the terrorist activities receive ample attention in the media. Proximally then, terrorism can be quite effective.

Up to a point, too, terrorism may be able to accomplish **distal** political ends by conveying the resolve and desperation of minorities resorting to this tactic, and by drawing attention to the possible legitimacy of its claims. Several countries such as Israel, Kenya, Cyprus and Algeria "**owe their independence at least in part to nationalist political movements that employed terrorism against colonial powers**" (Hoffman,

1998, p. 26). In those cases, the conflict between the opponent forces of yielding, or making concessions versus resisting the terrorism-employing minority is typically enabled where terrorism is replaced by statesmanship and diplomacy, occasionally carried out by the very same persons that up till now themselves resorted to terrorist tactics like Yassir Arafat, Menachem Begin or Itzhak Shamir. These shifts of tactics from terrorism to diplomacy allow the majority to reject terrorism, uphold its resolve to “never negotiate with terrorists” and hence save face, while at the same time recognizing the legitimacy of minority claims and making concessions to meet those claims. In this case too, the relevance of minority influence theory to understanding terrorism is striking, for this theory has long recognized the duality of **overt rejection** of minority claims and tactics, coupled with a **covert readiness** to accept the terrorist arguments and demands.

From this perspective, it is of interest to consider the limits to the efficacy of terrorist tactics. Specifically, terrorism may fail in two distinct ways: (1) **if** its claims are excessive, i.e. if they involve goals that the majority feels it cannot grant. For instance, the global shifts in American foreign policies that Al Qaeda leaders have been hoping for is simply not acceptable to American administrations. Similarly, allowing millions of Palestinians the right to return to Israel that spells a demographic disaster, and the end of the Jewish state in the eyes of most Israelis, and hence it is viewed as unacceptable by a vast majority of Israel’s population. (2) Where at a crucial point the minority **fails to make the switch** from the illegitimate use of violence (that terrorism represents for the targeted majority) to more legitimate forms of negotiation. The **confluence** of these two characteristics: excessiveness of demands, and the unwillingness to relinquish violence may in fact harden the resolve of the majority to resist the minority. The toughening of

the Israeli public opinion, and the election of a tough guy like Sharon in reaction to what was perceived as a return to violence after a series of fundamental Israeli concessions by Israeli governments of Rabin, Peres and Barak, and the “war on terrorism” and the resolve to demonstrate American toughness in the wars in Afghanistan and most recently against Irak represent instances where the terrorist tactic appeared to have boomeranged and produce the opposite consequences to what was intended.

Of course, it could be argued that these merely help the terrorists in the final analysis in that they represent the **succumbing to provocation** by the terrorists of the targeted majorities which may ultimately bring about their defeat. The negative public opinion in most countries that greeted the US and British led assault on Irak, could be considered an instance of an overreaction to terrorism that is going to undermine public support for the reactive majority. On the other hand, if an excessive response to provocation is effective in eliminating regimes that support terrorism, demolishing terrorist infrastructures and destroying the terrorists and their allies, the **provocation tactic** like the proverbial “chirurgical operation” may succeed yet the patient (terrorists in this instance) may be dead.

Epilogue

To summarize then, in the twentieth century and beyond terrorism has been often used by relatively powerless minorities as an influence tactic against powerful majorities. Moreover, the process whereby terrorism exerts its effects is closely akin to the way other forms of minority influence, that social psychologists have theorized about, may work. In this sense then, minority influence theory represents a powerful conceptual vehicle for thinking about terrorism. And reciprocally, the observation of the real world effects to

terrorism, reactions to terrorism, successes and failures of terrorism, and the limits of terrorism as an influence tactic may teach us a thing or two about minority influence more generally. All of which suggests that we, as social psychologists, may benefit from paying close attention to terrorism as a phenomenon and engaging in cross disciplinary discussions and research with other social scientists interested in this topic.