# Who is a terrorist? Exploring the utility of interdisciplinary fields

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to discuss the dilemma of terrorism as a political phenomenon that many political scientists care about; however, they find themselves incapable of explaining some of its aspects and they resort to other disciplines. The second part of the dilemma is related to the incapability of well-established disciplines to provide political scientists with much help. This raises the following question: Will political scientists be able to enhance their knowledge of terrorism with the help of scholars from consolidated and well-established disciplines or with the help of scholars from interdisciplinary fields?

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research depends on the main theories of psychology and of social psychology and adopts a comparative approach to assess the effectiveness of both disciplines in providing political scientists with the knowledge they lack.

**Findings** – In spite of being a well-established and consolidated discipline, psychology is not the perfect discipline that can help political scientists know who a terrorist is. Social psychological theories of aggression provide political scientists with greater ability to understand what psychological and sociological factors motivate a person to turn to aggression and terrorism. Moreover, social psychology developed the "terror management theory" which clarifies various aspects of the phenomenon.

**Originality/value** – This research paper calls the attention of scholars of terrorism to the importance of adopting an interdisciplinary approach to understand the various aspects of a complex phenomenon such as terrorism. The interdisciplinary field adopted will differ according to the research question that a researcher needs to answer.

**Keywords** Terrorism, Psychology, Aggression, Interdisciplinary, Social psychology, Social identity

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Terrorism is known to be a political phenomenon which is intriguing to many political scientists. Due to its complexity, political scientists who study terrorism celebrate their victory as they solve the mystery of this phenomenon. Truly, political scientists successfully revealed several aspects of the phenomenon. They contributed to defining the concept of terrorism (Weinberg *et al.*, 2004), the causes of terrorism (Crenshaw, 1981; Gupta, 2004; Krieger and Meierrieks, 2011), state terrorism (Wilkinson, 1981; Byman, 2005), counter-terrorism (Mogire and Agade, 2011; Jarvis and Lister, 2010), the foreign policy of a country and its relation to terrorist attacks (Bolechow, 2005; Azam and Thelen, 2010) [. . .] etc.

However, some aspects of terrorism urge political scientists to cooperate with scholars from other disciplines and admit that they need their help. One of these aspects that seems problematic to political scientists is the question: Who is a terrorist? Or who can become a

terrorist? To make it clearer, who has the ability to commit such horrific acts of violence which result in killing and maiming innocent civilians? More importantly, who is willing to kill himself/herself (e.g. a suicide bomber) in a terrorist attack? When faced with these questions, political scientists (and even ordinary people) answer in one word: a psychopath. These psychologically disturbed people are the ones who can commit such dreadful deeds.

Here comes the role of psychologists who can, by means of their theories and explanations, advise political scientists on this dimension of terrorism. However, various studies prove that not all terrorists are psychologically disturbed. This rather disappointing conclusion raises the question: will political scientists benefit from collaborating with scholars of well-established and consolidated disciplines or with scholars of interdisciplinary fields? To answer this question, this research paper presents the various contributions of psychology on one hand and social psychology on the other hand in an attempt to discover the importance of interdisciplinary fields such as social psychology.

This paper consists of four sections. The first section discusses the contributions of psychologists; whereas the second evaluates the ability of psychologists to help political scientists grasp the individual motivations to engage in terrorism. The third section elaborates on the achievements of the interdisciplinary field of social psychology. Finally, the fourth section is an attempt to discuss and analyze these theoretical contributions. The paper ends with a conclusion and implications for further research.

## 2. First: the contributions of psychology
Political scientists need to know who the persons capable of engaging in terrorist attacks are. If they are a group of lunatics, then political scientists should seek the assistance of scholars of the prominent and well-established discipline of psychology to explain the dynamics and mystery of the human soul. Psychology presents several theories in this regard and this section explains the most important ones.

### 2.1 "Parental upbringing and childhood experiences"
Some psychologists such as Jerald Post explained the terrorist behavior in terms of how this terrorist was raised by his parents and the impact of some experiences that he went through during the early years of life. Post classified the terrorists into two categories: the "anarchic-ideologues" and the "national separatists". According to him, the behavior of the first group was nothing more than an act of revenge. They hated the world to which their fathers belonged; which according to them, caused them much suffering. On the contrary, the second group of terrorists had an opposite perception. They sought vengeance for their parents against the unfair world that they lived in and suffered from. Therefore, Post suggested that terrorists who belonged to the first group were raised in unstable families in which family problems (especially with the father) prevailed. Whereas, the second group had some childhood experiences that left a clear impact on their behavior (Kissane, 1989, p. 59). They mostly had "mixed ethnic backgrounds", which resulted in a shaken loyalty to the principles and ideals they were defending.

Post was able to diagnose the disease and believed that terrorists who belonged to either group had "a psychic split in either their personal or social identities". Therefore, these terrorists carried out their attacks "to resolve a split and be at one with oneself and with the society" (Kissane, 1989, p. 60).

### 2.2 "Configurations of guilt"
Some psychologists who tried to elaborate on the reasons behind engaging in terrorist attacks believed that these terrorists had a "suicidal urge to destroy" themselves; suggesting

a correlation between the feeling of guilt and engaging in terrorist attacks. Therefore, Franz Fanon's work was accused of pushing ordinary people, especially leftist highly educated people in western countries, to commit violent activities. Those who adopted this viewpoint believed that Fanon's writings "instilled that sense of guilt, that feeling that the Third World of ex-colonies had right on its side, which has provided so much support for international terrorism" (Kissane, 1989, pp. 61-62).

There was another argument by some theorists who were able to link the terrorist attacks to the feeling of guilt, which was referred to as "the Collective Guilt Rationale". This argument proposed that ordinary citizens were leading a pleasant and comfortable life and were mostly stupid. So targeting them would not be due to their misdeeds, but actually because of what they didn't do. "Their sins of omission make them guilty" (Kissane, 1989, p. 63). In the final analysis, scholars realized that the terrorist attacks had a dual function: relieving the terrorist of the burden of feeling guilty and withdrawing the right to safety that innocent civilians should enjoy (Kissane, 1989).

### 2.3 A lack of Self-Esteem

According to some psychologists, some people become terrorists because they suffer from low self-esteem. Interviews with people who were terrorists revealed that they were individuals who grew up with a feeling of low self-esteem. These individuals felt they did not belong to their society; therefore, they started to hold the society accountable for their inability to adapt (Kissane, 1989, p. 64). Therefore, these terrorist activities helped remedy their deficiencies and develop their personality. This would make them stop perceiving themselves as weak and useless in their society (Kissane, 1989).

### 2.4 Narcissism

One of the early theories developed by psychologists to understand how people became terrorists was the narcissism theory. When people tried to describe who a narcissist person was, they usually referred to a person who was egoistic and self-obsessed. In a scientific attempt to define the term, Chaplin's Dictionary of psychology explained it as: (Pearlstein, 1986)

> Self love; exaggerated concern with the self [...] an early stage in human development characterized by extreme concern for the self and lack of concern for others. Narcissism may persist into adulthood as a fixation (p. 390).

Starting from Morf's contribution (1970), psychologists paid attention to the correlation between being a narcissist and engaging in terrorist attacks; believing that turning to this violent behavior could be a result of "a personality defect that produced a damaged sense of self". The behavior of narcissists could be understood in terms of "an overvaluing of self and a devaluing of others" (Borum, 2004, p. 19).

### 2.5 Paranoia

This feature attracted the attention of many psychologists; as they believed that paranoid persons were relevant nominees for becoming terrorists. Conrad Hassel (1977) was one of the psychiatrists who believed that this kind of illness pushed people to participate in terrorist activities. One of the features of this disease was "an overwhelming sense of mission" and it was noticeable in reality that terrorists were overwhelmed by this feeling. Scholars confirmed that paranoid individuals could find a justification for the horrors that they committed. Terrorists normally believed that most of the people on earth were evil (Kissane, 1989, p. 66). Moreover, the paranoid individual always felt threatened (Kissane, 1989).

This was a sample of the most prominent psychological theories that represented the contributions of psychologists who tried to answer the question: How did ordinary individuals become terrorists? However, many empirical studies were published that made one suspect the utility of the contributions of psychologists. Some of these studies explicitly criticized the psychological contributions (direct critique) and others focused on studying the causes of terrorism and revealed the preeminence of other factors in addition to the psychological one (underlying critique). This is the theme of the second section of the paper.

### 3. Second: Did psychologists enhance our understanding of terrorism?

Unexpectedly, what the psychologists offered us in the area of terrorism studies was harshly criticized. The aim of this section is to examine how different studies are doubtful of the findings of psychologists. This will help us know to what extent psychologists provided political scientists with the necessary assistance to comprehend this problematic aspect of terrorism.

*3.1 Direct critique*

Many scholars were suspicious of the utility of the psychological contributions in explaining the causes of taking part in terrorist attacks and their conclusions confirmed these suspicions. In the decade of the seventies, Morf (1970) and Rasch (1979) studied the members of two terrorist groups in Canada and Germany respectively and concluded that these terrorists were psychologically normal.

Then in the decade of the eighties, both Corrado (1981) and Jamieson (1989) wrote about Italian terrorists and reached the same conclusion. Jamieson (1989) realized that they were intelligent and rational actors. During the same decade, the Irish psychiatrists Lyons and Harbinson (1986) empirically compared a sample of "political murderers" with a sample of "non-political murderers" and came up with a rather interesting conclusion about the characteristics of "political murderers". These people "came from more stable backgrounds and the incidence of psychological disturbance was much less than in the 'ordinary criminals'". It is noteworthy that some psychologists criticized how they studied terrorism as a phenomenon: "As psychologists studying terrorist behavior, we are responsible for improving our own contributions at least" (Horgan, 2003, p. 16, 17, 23).

In addition, Kissane (1989) discussed some major psychological theories then he reiterated what psychiatrist Martha Crenshaw concluded earlier: "What limited data we have on individual terrorists [. . .] suggests that the common outstanding characteristic of terrorists is their normality" (p. 67). Crenshaw presented evidence from the psychological diagnosis of some terrorist groups. Kissane admitted that psychologists succeeded in explaining some dynamics of the terrorist personality, but blamed them for their incapacity to interpret several parts of the phenomenon (Kissane, 1989).

Other recent examples of this direct critique included Weatherston and Moran's (2003) study which proved the absence of a "causal connection between an individual's mental disorder and engagement in terrorist activity". To explain the reasons behind turning to terrorism, there were other factors that should be taken into consideration. However, they suggested through their study that the relationship could take an opposite direction i.e. taking part in terrorist activities for a relatively long time might endanger the status of the mental health of some individuals (p. 698).

Moreover, scholars who wrote about the basics of terrorism taught students that only very few terrorists suffered from psychological disturbances. These scholars examined previous contributions such as the classification of terrorists, according to the American psychologist Frederick Hacker, into three categories: "crusaders, criminals, or crazies"

(Lutz and Lutz, 2011, p. 30). However, they responded to this claim saying that one could suggest that some terrorist organizations would find it plausible to recruit psychologically disturbed individuals for a short period of time, because conceiving them as significant members of the organization could jeopardize its interests and safety (Lutz and Lutz, 2011).

*3.2 Underlying critique*
In addition to the efforts to test the validity of the psychological abnormality thesis, other studies offered an indirect or an underlying critique. This is not to say that these studies show the irrelevance of the psychological factors. Actually, these studies discovered the motives behind the terrorist behavior, which included both psychological and non-psychological motives.

As an example, Gill *et al.* (2014) conducted a study to understand the nature and behavior of lone-actor terrorists. The conclusions that this study reached did not emphasize the psychological dimension only, but discussed other factors as well. Concerning gender or marital status, they concluded that there were great differences among the sample of terrorists. Before committing the crime, other people knew that this terrorist was offended or endorsed extremist ideas. On the psychological side, a large number of the sample was isolated from other people. In addition, these terrorists received some training and before committing the act, they had connections with an interest group or a terrorist group. This showed the significance of psychological and non-psychological factors.

In a rather influential study, Urooj and Tariq (2015) tried to detect the reasons behind suicide terrorism in the case of Pakistan. Five media analysts were interviewed and the researchers were able to evaluate the factors that led to these attacks using Likert scale. Arranging the factors in a descending order showed that, according to the interviewees, the most important factor was "misinterpretation of religion", i.e. the Islamic concepts of jihad were manipulated by terrorist leaders. The second factor was "revenge" against the militants whose attacks caused severe damage, or against "America and Pakistan army". The third factor was "collective identity" i.e. economic and political problems in Pakistan that caused a sort of "identity crises", while joining terrorist groups would help a person feel "affiliation and belongingness". The next important factor was "ideology", and then comes "relative deprivation". The least important factor was the "material rewards" to the family of the terrorist (p. 98, 100-103).

The same theme that was dominant in the Pakistani case (misinterpreting religion and religion is a component of culture) was repeated in the attempt to analyze the behavior of suicide bombers and the call for understanding the cultural norms of these individuals. Such studies examined the concept "martyr", who had no standard characteristics and welcomed death because of his utmost support to a noble principle (Ward, 2018, p. 107). The emphasis on culture was apparent in another study which focused on the "most anxiety-prone cultures" and concluded that they were "the most terror-prone cultures" (Wiedenhaefer, 2005, p. 95).

The aim of this analysis was to discuss empirical studies that proved that terrorists were not psychopaths who wanted to end their lives and destroy the world. The above analysis was not trying to prove the irrelevance of the psychological factor or to underestimate the contributions of psychologists, but rather it was just a warning that the conventional wisdom was not accurate. Most of the terrorists were sane, rational actors and a process of strategic calculations led them to commit these acts. Sometimes psychological emotions or problems drove them to engage in terrorist attacks, but these were not the primary or the only motives.

After proving the invalidity of the conventional wisdom, it is worth mentioning that when psychologists cooperated with sociologists (the interdisciplinary field of social psychology); this enriched the study of terrorism. The role of social psychology is the focus of the third section.

## 4. Third: the role of interdiscplinarity: social psychology
The field of social psychology has various theoretical premises, but this section is devoted to examining the theories and the main findings of social psychology that are related to terrorism or aggression in general.

### 4.1 Theories of social psychology
Social psychology proposed various theories that could resolve the dilemmas of political scientists who were in bad need of the contributions of scholars of another discipline to know who could become a terrorist.

*4.1.1 Relative deprivation.* Scholars of social psychology recognized the value of this theory in explaining the reaction of people towards the conditions of inequity. Within the framework of relative deprivation, some social psychology theories emerged. The most important of which were:

4.1.1.1 Frustration–aggression theory. Dollard *et al.* wrote about this hypothesis in 1939 suggesting that frustration was the reason behind aggression. This theory proved to be valid; however, it soon was criticized because not every frustrated person resorted to aggression, in addition, the aggressive behavior could take place because of factors other than frustration. Therefore, the theory was modified to explain that frustrated people could adopt nonaggressive behavior (Warburton and Anderson, 2015). Also Berkowitz added an important part to the theory suggesting that the possibility of committing an aggressive act would become stronger for people who hoped to reach a desirable target and their hope was not fulfilled (Carrillo *et al.*, 2011).

4.1.1.2 Justice theory. This theory could be traced back to the scholarly work of Lerner. Its main premise was about emphasizing how important it was for individuals to feel that they lived in a fair world. To persuade themselves of this argument, this required resorting to some "cognitive and behavioral strategies" (Carrillo *et al.*, 2011, p. 141).

4.1.1.3 Davies's J-curve theory of revolution. After analyzing racial riots, Davies (1962) was able to develop a theory that proposed that "anger is most likely to occur in individuals lacking X if they both want and previously had X" (Carrillo *et al.*, 2011: p. 142).

Therefore, this group of theories that tackled the theme of relative deprivation revealed how injustice and deprivation could cause violence.

*4.1.2 Cognitive theories.* Several theories depended on cognition and enriched the ability of social psychology to explain the factors that resulted in aggression.

4.1.2.1 Cognitive dissonance theory. It explained the psychological tension that happened as a result of having different cognitions by different people. The cognition of a person referred to knowledge about his/her traits, the surrounding environment or the whole world. Festinger wrote about this theory in 1957 calling it "Cognitive Dissonance". According to the theory, this dilemma could become less severe by making "dissonant elements [of cognition] consonant by changing one of the inconsistent elements" (Nail and Boniecki, 2011, pp. 46-48).

4.1.2.2 "Arousal: Cognitive labeling and excitation transfer". This is another major theory that showed how cognitive psychology helped social psychologists develop theories. This theory was the result of the efforts of Schacter and his fellow scholars who proposed, "that if aroused people were exposed to another person who was angry, they tended to

*cognitively label* their arousal as being angry themselves". Then Zillman made use of this hypothesis and presented the "excitation-transfer theory" (ETT). According to this theory:

> [. . .] if two arousing events are separated by a short amount of time, arousal from the first event will add to arousal from the second. However, the cognitive label given to the second event will be misattributed as being relevant to all of the arousal experienced, thus producing an inappropriately strong response.

As an example, a person might become so angry despite being exposed to a small problem. The impact of "the cognitive label (or attribution)" could lead to the continuance of this high level of anger for a long time (Warburton and Anderson, 2015, pp. 374-375).

4.1.2.3 Cognitive neoassociation theory. One of the cognitive theories that emerged in this field was the "Cognitive Neoassociation Theory". The goal of this theory was to introduce the frustration-aggression argument after acknowledging the dynamics of "neural connectivity". After realizing that "concepts, emotions, memories, and action tendencies are interconnected within the brain's associative neural network", Berkowitz wrote in the late eighties that being confronted with frustrating, negative or disappointing events or surroundings had a negative impact which would be "neurally linked to various thoughts, feelings, and behavioral tendencies that are themselves linked to both fight and flight tendencies". Both the individual and the situation would determine how a person could respond, "with dominant "fight" responses linked with anger and being more likely to elicit aggression" (Warburton and Anderson, 2015, p. 375).

*4.1.3 Social identity theory.* This theory contributed to clarifying an important aspect of the terrorist behavior. Terrorists appear to consider themselves and their supporters as a coherent group and their enemies as another group. This theory suggested that people usually conducted a "social comparison with other groups, i.e. a comparison between the in-group ("us") and relevant out-groups ("them")". The theory emphasized the "need for positive distinctiveness", which meant that a person would like to view his own group as "better than, or at least different from the out-group" (Schmid, Hewstone and Al Ramiah, 2011, p. 218).

4.1.3.1 Terror management theory. One of the crucial and specific theories that developed within the framework of the Social Identity Theory was the Terror Management Theory. This theory emphasized that people were known to "have an inherent need for self-preservation". However, when an individual became so much connected to a social group, his fear of death would decline. The connection to the group would create "a sense of meaning and stability, allowing individuals to adopt a cultural worldview" which would instill "a sense of symbolic immortality". It is noteworthy that people saw those who did not belong to their group unfavorably, because their presence would be inconsistent with how their group perceived the world (Schmid, Hewstone and Al Ramiah, 2011, pp. 220-221).

*4.1.4 A leap forward: General Aggression Model.* There were newer and more comprehensive theories that social psychologists developed and believed they could be very helpful in explaining aggressive behavior, such as the "General Aggression Model". According to social psychologists, this new model could be described as "a bio-social-cognitive model" and would assist in clarifying the impact of many factors on aggressive behavior. According to the model, any aggressive response meant that an individual was replying to a negative condition around him. His characteristics and the surrounding conditions would affect his "cognitions, affects, and physiological arousal". Therefore, a person could feel pushed to adopt an aggressive behavior. However, this might not be the result if a person had a chance to think in addition to having cognitive resources (Warburton and Anderson, 2015, pp. 375-376).

This part of section three dealt with the major theories that explained aggressive behavior according to social psychologists. The second part of this section has a complementary function as it presents some research findings and conclusions.

### 4.2 Social psychology: research findings

In addition to the theories, social psychologists came up with important conclusions about aggression, which could provide valuable answers to political scientists about the phenomenon of terrorism.

*4.2.1 Provocation, weapons, violent media and violent environment.* They highlighted the importance of provocation in causing aggression. They confirmed that the source of provocation did not need to be a person. Provocation could be the result of several factors such as social exclusion. They also confirmed the significance of a "weapons effect" which referred to the effect seeing a "real or virtual weapon" had on the person which would be generating "aggression-related cognitions", and consequently increasing the likelihood of resorting to aggression. They also believed this same effect (resorting to aggression) would happen due to the impact of a violent environment or violent media. The social psychologists were careful enough to suggest a "risk factor approach". They believed that any factor by itself could not be enough to lead people to adopt an aggressive behavior. Actually, the presence of many strong risk factors would increase the possibility of resorting to aggression and this possibility would increase with the weakness of protective factors (Warburton and Anderson, 2015, pp. 378-379).

*4.2.2 Social exclusion (rejection).* Social psychologists conducted experiments and were able to confirm the negative consequences of social exclusion. Socially excluded persons were more likely to behave aggressively no matter how innocent the victim was. Also socially excluded persons showed "self-defeating behaviors like risk-taking". This aggression would be expected to grow even more if the excluded persons were narcissists. Social psychologists explained the reason behind this through emphasizing the importance of "the need to belong". People could make sacrifices to get connected with others. To further understand the devastating impact of social rejection and exclusion, social psychologists tried to explain how this could lead to aggression in a manner like "If you can't join them, beat them" (Twenge and Baumeister, 2005, pp. 27-28).

When some scholars tried to prove that social exclusion could lead to the opposite result (less aggression), scholars Twenge, Baumeister, Tice and Stucke carried out several experiments to confirm that social exclusion would actually lead to more aggression not only towards people who let the aggressors feel excluded, but towards other people as well (Twenge and Baumeister, 2005).

*4.2.3 Belonging to a group.* Social identification and affiliation to groups proved to be very important themes that helped scholars analyze the reasons behind aggressive behavior. Goldman (2014) wrote his dissertation in which he adopted the social identity theory to answer the question: "why some individuals go to antisocial extremes for their group, and why others join violent rather than pro-social groups"? Goldman conducted two experiments in his empirical study to come up with the conclusion that people strongly affiliated to a group "were most likely to support or show a willingness to participate in behaviors that defend or promote their group" (abstract).

Even when studying the behavior of lone wolf terrorists, some scholars highlighted the impact of group identification. According to: Moskalenko and McCauley (2011)

> We can care about large and abstract groups so much that the welfare of the group can compete with our personal welfare [. . .] Positive identification with a group, combined with the perception

that this group is being victimized, produces negative identification with the group perpetrating the injustice (p. 122).

*4.2.4 A general explanation: turning from good to evil.* In a very abstract manner, social psychology did political scientists in general and terrorism scholars in particular a great favor when it dealt with the broad question of how good people turned evil. Providing a clear answer to this question showed that both psychological and non-psychological factors led to this transformation. The first factor was a rational one i.e. violence could be employed as "a means to an end". When people engaged in conflict to reach what they desired, they might favor using violence as a strategy of conflict resolution. The second factor that led to violence was "threatened egotism" which referred to the tendency of people to use violence against those who hurt their "image of self". This factor had its psychological dimension. Theorists believed that this factor actually contradicted with the traditional psychological theory that stated that people with low self-esteem were more likely to commit violent acts. Actually, low self-esteem would lead a person to become a follower and refrain from taking risks. More studies that were published later on confirmed that some people with high self-esteem resorted to violence and others did not adopt this kind of behavior (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004, pp. 91-92).

The third cause of becoming evil was, ironically, being ideal. This referred to the fact that some people were fully aware that violence was not good; however, it was an important tool that could help them carry out a very highly regarded task. The fourth and last cause was purely psychological, which referred to people who were sadists. Hurting or harming other people would always be a source of pleasure to sadists (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004).

Finally, it is important not to believe that any of these four factors leads to violence in a direct relationship. There is an important cause that happens, in most cases, "just before the violent act" which is "a breakdown in self-control". This is due to the fact that the presence of self-control has a critical role in preventing the aggressive behavior. (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004, p. 98).

## 5. Fourth: discussion and analysis

This paper presented theories of psychology then theories of social psychology. Political scientists needed some help from psychologists to understand more about ordinary people who became terrorists and were willing to sacrifice innocent people's lives and even their own lives. This paper explained some main theories that psychologists presented to help answer this question. They discussed the effect of parents and the time of childhood on individuals, and they also explained how the feeling of guilt could motivate an ordinary citizen to turn into a terrorist. They also explained how the terrorists perceived victims as guilty. Digging deep into the human soul and mind, they revealed how suffering from low self-esteem, narcissism or the mental disease paranoia could push a person to carry out violent attacks.

No one could underestimate the significance of understanding the impact of psychological and mental problems on transforming an ordinary person into a terrorist. However, studies have been conducted throughout the previous decades and almost all of them emphasized that most of the terrorists were rational individuals and not victims of psychological or mental diseases. Therefore, one could say that the theories of psychology provided a relatively limited contribution to political scientists.

This conclusion highlighted the significant contributions of the interdisciplinary field of social psychology in studying aggression. The third section of the paper tried to accomplish the task of clarifying the efforts of social psychologists in explaining aggressive behavior or terrorism. Various theories and explanations were examined in that section. Reviewing the

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main theories and research findings of social psychology would help political scientists compare the contributions of psychology to those of social psychology. First, social psychology revealed how deprived and frustrated people could be motivated to behave aggressively, which represented an important finding for those who studied motives behind terrorism. Second, cognitive psychology helped social psychologists understand the tension that erupted from different cognitions, the interactions that happened within the human brain and how they formulated a certain reaction, and cognitive labeling and excitation transfer that showed how minor frustration could cause a very strong reaction such as a high level of anger. Third, terrorists were known to cherish their group and compare it to other groups, therefore the social identity theory and the logic of "us" versus "them" highlighted this perception which facilitated attacking innocent people. Fourth, under the umbrella of social identity, the terror management theory emerged to clarify how terrorists could be willing to face death and this was a significant finding. Fifth, the research findings of social psychological studies provided helpful insights as they revealed the impact of seeing weapons and living in a violent environment on acting aggressively. Sixth, the research findings also detected a critical factor that helped in studying terrorism which was social rejection or social exclusion and how this could result in aggression. Finally, they provided scholars of other disciplines with an answer to the perplexing question: why good people turned evil? This was crucial not only for those who studied terrorism, but for anyone who studied violence in general. It was clear from this analysis that social psychologists did a good job analyzing both the psychological and the sociological factors that motivated people to turn to aggression.

## 6. Conclusion

This research paper started from a dilemma that faced political scientists. When they studied a political phenomenon such as terrorism, they found themselves obliged to seek the help of scholars of other disciplines of knowledge. One aspect of the phenomenon (realizing how people turned to be terrorists) forced political scientists to resort to psychologists hoping to find answers to their question. Another aspect of the dilemma was related to the value of the psychological contributions and their efficiency in providing political scientists with concrete answers, which raised the question: Would political scientists benefit from their cooperation with a well-known and consolidated discipline (like psychology) or with scholars of an interdisciplinary field (like social psychology)?

This research paper tried to answer this research question through tackling a very intriguing aspect of terrorism: who could become a terrorist and perform these terrible acts? Since the finger of blame usually pointed towards the psychopath, this question required the efforts of psychologists who had the necessary analytical tools and theories and could reveal the mysteries of the psychologically or mentally unstable persons. This paper presented some theories that explained the cases of such abnormal persons. It was tempting to answer the research question saying that a well-consolidated discipline like psychology would be a perfect companion to political science.

Then it became clear that a well-established and highly popular discipline like psychology was not able to satisfy the curiosity of political scientists, as a very small percentage of terrorists had psychological or mental problems. Psychologists themselves started to recognize this fact, which gave greater strength and credibility to the contributions of the interdisciplinary field: social psychology.

This paper traced some theoretical premises of social psychology that dealt with terrorism and aggressive behavior in general. In comparison, the theories and research findings of social psychology proved to be more beneficial to the political scientists, to

understand this aspect of terrorism that they could not grasp. Actually many scholars realized the critical role of interdisciplinarity in studying terrorism. As Vertigans (2011) noted:

> I am therefore arguing that terrorism is rooted in broader social processes and activities and these have to be drawn into the sub-discipline. This can be best achieved through sociological concepts, epistemological tools and ways of thinking that complement and supplement psychological, political and economic contributions (p. 169).

Therefore, answering the research question according to the findings of this paper will be emphasizing the importance of collaborating with scholars from interdisciplinary fields, to fully explain this complex phenomenon: terrorism. As Niel J. Smelser (2007) noted, "For the study of terrorism I regard interdisciplinarity as strength, because the topic itself knows no disciplinary boundaries and spreads into all of them" (p. 4).

## 7. Future research
This research paper compared the significance of the psychological contributions to the social psychological contributions and revealed the importance of social psychology to understand some aspects of terrorism. The author recommends that future scholars interested in terrorism should be willing to study the phenomenon using an interdisciplinary approach.

The author focuses on the interdisciplinary field of social psychology (sociology and psychology); however, the author is not trying to convince scholars of terrorism that they should adopt the interdisciplinary approach in disciplines other than political science; it all depends on the aspect of terrorism that the researcher studies. Some aspects of terrorism need to be studied using the perspective and the tools of political economy, political sociology [. . .], etc.

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