

→ Mark your confusion.

→ Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

→ Write a 250+ word response to the article.

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## Top Major Causes and Motivations of Terrorism

By Amy Zalman, Ph.D, for ThoughtCo; updated on 12/22/18

*Loosely defined, terrorism is the use of violence with the aim of furthering a political or ideological goal at the expense of the general population. Terrorism can take many forms and has many causes, often more than one. It can have its roots in religious, social, or political conflicts, often when one community is oppressed by another.*

Some terrorist events are singular acts linked to a particular historical moment, such as the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, which touched off World War I. Other terrorist attacks are part of an ongoing campaign that may last years or even generations, as was the case in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998.

### Historical Roots

Although acts of terror and violence have been committed for centuries, terrorism's modern roots can be traced to the French Revolution's Reign of Terror in 1794–95, with its gruesome public beheadings, violent street battles, and bloodthirsty rhetoric. It was the first time in modern history that mass violence was used in such a fashion, but it would not be the last.

In the latter half of the 19th century, terrorism would emerge as the weapon of choice for nationalists, particularly in Europe as ethnic groups chafed under the rule of empires. The Irish National Brotherhood, which sought Irish independence from Britain, carried out a number of bomb attacks in England in the 1880s. About the same time in Russia, the socialist group Narodnaya Volya began a campaign against the royalist government, ultimately assassinating Tsar Alexander II in 1881.

In the 20th century, acts of terrorism became more prevalent throughout the world as political, religious, and social activists agitated for change. In the 1930s, Jews living in occupied Palestine conducted a campaign of violence against the British occupiers in a quest to create the state of Israel. In the 1970s, Palestinian terrorists used then-novel methods such as hijacking airplanes to further their cause. Other groups, espousing new causes like animal rights and environmentalism, committed acts of violence in the 1980s and '90s. And in the 21st century, the rise of pan-nationalist groups like ISIS that use social media to connect its members have killed thousands in attacks in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

### Causes and Motivations

Although people resort to terrorism for a number of reasons, experts attribute most acts of violence to three major factors:

**Political.** Terrorism was originally theorized in the context of insurgency and guerrilla warfare, a form of organized political violence by a non-state army or group. Individuals, abortion clinic bombers, or groups, like the Vietcong in the 1960s, can be understood as choosing terrorism when they are trying to right what they perceive to be a social, political or historical wrong. During the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland, which stretched from 1968 to 1998, Catholic and Protestant groups waged an ongoing campaign of violence against one another in Northern Ireland and in England, seeking political dominance.

**Religious.** In the 1990s, a number of attacks carried out in the name of religion made headlines. The Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo perpetrated two deadly sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subways in 1994 and 1995, and in the Middle East, numerous suicide attacks since the 1980s have been celebrated as the work of Islamic **martyrs**. Career terrorism experts began to argue that a new form of terrorism was on the rise, with concepts such as martyrdom and Armageddon seen as particularly dangerous. However, as thoughtful studies and commentators have repeatedly pointed out, such groups selectively interpret and exploit religious concepts and texts to support terrorism. Religions themselves do not "cause" terrorism.

**Socioeconomic.** Socio-economic explanations of terrorism suggest that various forms of **deprivation** drive people to terrorism, or that they are more **susceptible** to recruitment by organizations using terrorist tactics. Poverty, lack of education or lack of political freedom are a few examples. There is suggestive evidence on both sides of the argument. Comparisons of different conclusions are often very confusing because they don't distinguish between individuals and societies, and they pay little attention to the **nuances** of how people perceive injustice or deprivation, regardless of their material circumstances. The group Shining Path carried out a years-long campaign of violence against Peru's government in the 1980s and early '90s in an attempt to create a **Marxist** state.

This explanation of the causes of terrorism may be difficult to swallow. It sounds too simple or too theoretical. However, if you look at any group that is widely understood as a terrorist group, you will find these elements are basic to their story.

### **Psychological and Sociological Considerations: Individual vs. the Group**

Sociological and social psychology views of terrorism make the case that groups, not individuals, are the best way to explain social phenomena such as terrorism. These ideas, which are still gaining traction, are congruent with the late-20th-century trend toward seeing society and organizations in terms of networks of individuals. This view also shares common ground with studies of authoritarianism and cult behavior that examines how individuals come to identify so strongly with a group that they lose **individual agency**. There is also a substantial body of theory that now concludes that individual terrorists are no more or less likely than other individuals to have **abnormal pathology**.

### **Analysis**

Rather than seek the causes of terrorism itself, a better approach is to determine the conditions that make terror possible or likely. Sometimes these conditions have to do with the people who become terrorists; they are described as having certain psychological traits, like **narcissistic rage**. And some conditions have to do with the circumstances they live in, such as political or social **repression**, or economic **strife**.

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon; it is a specific kind of political violence committed by people who do not have a legitimate army at their disposal. There is nothing inside any person or in their circumstances that send them directly to terrorism. Instead, certain conditions make violence against civilians seem like a reasonable and even necessary option.

Stopping the cycle of violence is rarely simple or easy. Although the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought an end to the violence in Northern Ireland, for example, the peace remains a fragile one. And despite **nation-building efforts** in Iraq and Afghanistan, terrorism remains a daily fact of life after more than a decade of Western intervention. Only time and commitment by a majority of the parties involved can resolve a conflict.

### **Response option(s):**

- Based on the causes explained in the article, do you find it likely that we will see an end to terrorism in our lifetime? Explain.
- At the end of page 1, the author writes, "Religions themselves do not 'cause' terrorism." What does the author mean? What reasoning or evidence does she use to explain this statement?
- Pick any passage and respond to it.