# The Staircase to Terrorism

## *A Psychological Exploration*

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*To foster a more in-depth understanding of the psychological processes leading to terrorism, the author conceptualizes the terrorist act as the final step on a narrowing staircase. Although the vast majority of people, even when feeling deprived and unfairly treated, remain on the ground floor, some individuals climb up and are eventually recruited into terrorist organizations. These individuals believe they have no effective voice in society, are encouraged by leaders to displace aggression onto out-groups, and become socialized to see terrorist organizations as legitimate and out-group members as evil. The current policy of focusing on individuals already at the top of the staircase brings only short-term gains. The best long-term policy against terrorism is prevention, which is made possible by nourishing contextualized democracy on the ground floor.*

Despite disagreements about the definition of terrorism (Cooper, 2001) and claims that "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter," there is general agreement that terrorism has become a monstrous problem in many parts of the world and that all efforts must be made to end it. For the purpose of this discussion, *terrorism* is defined as politically motivated violence, perpetrated by individuals, groups, or state-sponsored agents, intended to instill feelings of terror and helplessness in a population in order to influence decision making and to change behavior. Psychologists have a vitally important responsibility to combat terrorism because (a) subjectively interpreted values and beliefs often serve as the most important basis for terrorist action (Bernholz, 2004); (b) the actions of terrorists are intended to bring about specific psychological experiences—that is, terror and helplessness (Moghaddam & Marsella, 2004); and (c) terrorism often has extremely harmful psychological consequences (Schlenger et al., 2002). Psychologists are contributing in important ways to a better understanding of terrorism and are providing more effective approaches to coping with its individual and communal health consequences (Danieli, Brom & Waizer, in press; Horgan & Taylor, 2003; Moghaddam & Marsella, 2004; North & Pfefferbaum, 2002; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003; Silke, 2003; Silver, Holman, McIntosh, Poulin, & Gil-Rivas, 2002; Stout, 2002). However, there is an urgent need for greater attention to the social and psychological processes that lead to terrorist acts.

A better understanding of terrorism is essential to the development of more effective policies to combat this global problem. Critical assessment of the available evidence suggests that there is little validity in explanations of terrorism that assume a high level of psychopathology among terrorists (Crenshaw, 1981; Ruby, 2002) or that terrorists come from economically deprived backgrounds or have little education (Atran, 2003). Attempts to profile terrorists (e.g., Fields, Elbedour, & Hein, 2002) and to identify demographic and socioeconomic factors associated with terrorism (e.g., Ehrlich & Liu, 2002) can yield greater benefits when incorporated within a broader conceptual account of processes leading to terrorist acts. The present discussion is intended as a contribution to a more dynamic, comprehensive account of the social and psychological processes leading to terrorism. A central proposition is that terrorism can best be understood through a focus on the psychological interpretation of material conditions and the options seen to be available to overcome perceived injustices, particularly those in the procedures through which decisions are made (Tyler & Huo, 2002).

## The Staircase to the Terrorist Act

To provide a more in-depth understanding of terrorism, I have used the metaphor of a narrowing staircase leading to the terrorist act at the top of a building. The staircase leads to higher and higher floors, and whether someone remains on a particular floor depends on the doors and spaces that person imagines to be open to her or him on that floor. The fundamentally important feature of the situation is not only the actual number of floors, stairs, rooms, and so on, but how people perceive the building and the doors they think are open to them. As individuals climb the staircase, they see fewer and fewer choices, until the only possible outcome is the destruction of others, or oneself, or both. This kind of "decision tree" conceptualization of behavior has proved to be a powerful tool in psychology. For example, Latané and Darley (1970) conceptualized helping behavior as the outcome of five choices that lead an individual either to help or not help others in an emergency.

The staircase to terrorism is conceived as having a ground floor and five higher floors, with behavior on each

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floor characterized by particular psychological processes. On the ground floor, perceptions of fairness and feelings of relative deprivation dominate. In conditions in which the millions of people who occupy the ground floor perceive injustice and feel relatively deprived, some individuals from among the disgruntled population will climb to the first floor in search of solutions. Those who reach the first floor seek ways in which to improve their situation and achieve greater justice. But if they do not see possibilities for individual mobility and do not feel that they can adequately influence the procedures through which decisions are made, they are more likely to keep climbing.

Individuals who reach the second floor but still perceive grave injustices experience anger and frustration, and in some circumstances they are influenced by leaders to displace their aggression onto an "enemy." Individuals who are more prone to physically displace aggression onto enemies climb further up the staircase.

The most important transformation that takes place among those who reach the third floor is a gradual engagement with the morality of terrorist organizations; these individuals now begin to see terrorism as a justified strategy. Those who become more fully engaged with the morality of terrorist organizations and keep climbing up the staircase are ready for recruitment as active terrorists.

Recruitment to terrorist organizations takes place on the fourth floor, where potential terrorists learn to categorize the world more rigidly into "us-versus-them" and to see the terrorist organization as legitimate.

On the last floor—the fifth—specific individuals are selected and trained to sidestep inhibitory mechanisms that could prevent them from injuring and killing both others and themselves, and those selected are equipped and sent to carry out terrorist acts.

The wider context of the staircase metaphor is the internationalization of trade and mass communications, with the consequent vast movement of people and information around the globe. The rapidly increasing flow of people and information across national borders has greatly extended the global influence of the West generally and the United States specifically (including in the realm of psychology; Moghaddam, 1987). The spread of American and Western values and lifestyles has had two broad and in some ways contradictory consequences. On the one hand, major segments of societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are strongly attracted to the affluent lifestyle and political and social freedoms associated with the United States and the West. On the other hand, there is growing frustration and anger in many non-Western societies that their higher expectations for improved economic conditions and greater political freedom are not being met. In addition, there is deep anxiety in many societies that local cultural and linguistic systems are being swept away and that traditional identities and allegiances are threatened by the massive sweep and reach of "Americanization." Authoritarian forces have attempted, sometimes with considerable success, to harness this widespread discontent and to use it opportunistically to bolster both dictatorial rule and anti-American sentiments, particularly in a number of Islamic societies.

Two points need to be clarified at the outset about the staircase metaphor. First, the metaphor is intended to provide a general framework within which to organize current psychological knowledge and to help direct future research and policy; it is not intended as a formal model to be tested against alternatives. Metaphors have proved highly useful in psychological science (see discussions in Leary, 1990) and can serve a constructive role in helping to better explain the roots of terrorism. Second, the staircase metaphor is intended to apply only to behavior encompassed by terrorism as defined earlier in this discussion; it is not intended to apply to other types of minority influence tactics. I briefly discuss the policy implications of the staircase metaphor at the end of this article.

## *Ground Floor: Psychological Interpretation of Material Conditions*

The vast majority of people occupy the "foundational" ground floor, where what matters most are perceptions of fairness and just treatment. To understand those who climb to the top of the staircase to terrorism, one must first comprehend the level of perceived injustice and the feelings of frustration and shame among hundreds of millions of people down at the ground floor. The central role of psychological factors is underlined by evidence that material factors such as poverty and lack of education are problematic as explanations for terrorist acts. In the West Bank and Gaza, support for armed attacks against Israeli targets tends to be greater among Palestinian individuals with more years of education (Krueger & Maleckova, 2002). A British army document discussing the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PRIA) in 1978, at a time when armed attacks by the PIRA had reached a peak, stated that

there is a stratum of intelligent, astute and experienced terrorists who provide the backbone of the organization. . . . Our evidence of the calibre of rank and file terrorists does not support the view that they are mindless hooligans drawn from the unemployed and unemployable. (Coogan, 2002, p. 468)

Similarly, low levels of education and impoverished backgrounds were not found to be characteristic of captured terrorists associated with al Qaeda in Southeast Asia (Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003) nor of Bin Laden or the al Qaeda members who perpetrated the tragedy of September 11, 2001 (Bodansky, 2001). Clearly, absolute material conditions do not account for terrorism; otherwise, acts of terrorism would be committed more by the poorest individuals living in the poorest regions, and this is not the case.

Psychological research points to the fundamental importance of *perceived* deprivation. The seminal research of Stouffer, Suchman, De Vinney, Star, and Williams (1949) on military personnel during World War II demonstrated that there is not necessarily an isomorphic relationship between material conditions and subjective experience. For example, members of the Air Corps expressed less satisfaction with military life than did members of some other units despite the higher rate of promotions in the Air Corps (Stouffer et al., 1949). The concept of relative deprivation was introduced to explain such trends: The higher rate of promotions in the Air Corps raised expectations and created more dissatisfaction for those who were not promoted. Half a century of psychological research underlines the important role of subjective perceptions on feelings of deprivation (Collins, 1996).

Particularly relevant to terrorism is Runciman's (1966) distinction between *egoistical* deprivation, where an individual feels deprived because of his or her position within a group, and *fraternal* deprivation, involving feelings of deprivation that arise because of the position of an individual's group relative to that of other groups. Research evidence suggests that fraternal deprivation is, under certain conditions, a better predictor of feelings of discontent among minorities than is egoistical deprivation (Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983), and in some cases such feelings translate into collective action (Martin, Brickman, & Murray, 1984). Gurr's (1970) theoretical formulation and subsequent research (e.g., Crosby, 1982) suggest that fraternal deprivation is more likely to arise when group members feel their path has been blocked to a desired goal that their group deserves and that others possess. For example, in the case of terrorism, especially important could be a perceived right to independence and the retention of indigenous cultures for a society, a perception that other societies have achieved this goal, and a feeling that under present conditions, the path to this goal has been blocked (e.g., by Americans ). Of course, such perceptions may be influenced by deep prejudices (see Moghaddam, 1998, chap. 10).

The literature on collective mobilization also emphasizes the importance of subjective perceptions (D. M. Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). From the French revolution to the Iranian revolution and other collective uprisings in modern times (Moghaddam, 2002), it is perceived injustices and relative rather than absolute deprivation that coincide with collective nonnormative action (Miller, 2000). Perceptions of injustice may arise for a variety of reasons, including economic and political conditions and threats to personal or collective identity (D. M. Taylor, 2003). Perceived threat to identity is of central importance in the case of religious fundamentalists because of the unique ability of religion to serve identity needs (Seul, 1999) and the feeling that increasing globalization, secularization, and Westernization are undermining traditional non-Western ways of life. Identity threat is also of deep concern to broader segments of non-Western populations, particularly the youth, who often grapple with the "good-copy problem" (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991), that is, the feeling that the very best they can achieve is to become a good copy of the Western model of women and men propagated as "ideal" by the international media—a good copy that can never be as good as, or better than, the original.

Among the vast populations who occupy the ground floor, then, *perceptions* of fairness are what matter most. An individual may be living in extremely poor, crowded conditions in Bombay and not feel unjustly treated despite the opulent living conditions of others around him or her in the city; however, another individual may be living in relatively comfortable conditions in Riyadh but feel very unjustly treated. In recent decades, rapidly rising expectations, nourished by images of affluence and democratic lifestyles spread by the international mass media, have fueled feelings of deprivation among vast populations, particularly in Asia, Africa, and parts of Eastern Europe. This groundswell of frustration and anger has given rise to greater sympathy for extremist "antiestablishment" tactics among the vast populations on the ground floor. Every year, a number of those who feel unjustly treated are motivated to march along alternative paths, even desperate and radical ones, to address their grievances.

## First Floor: Perceived Options to Fight Unfair Treatment

Individuals climb to the first floor and try different doors in search of solutions to what they perceive to be unjust treatment. Two psychological factors shape their behavior on the first floor in major ways: individuals' perceived possibilities for personal mobility to improve their situation (D. M. Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994) and their perceptions of procedural justice (Tyler, 1994).

A key question is whether there are doors that could be opened by talented persons motivated to make progress up the societal hierarchy. In *The Republic* (D. Lee, Trans., 1987),[1] Plato warned of the inevitable collapse of a society that does not allow for the rise of talented individuals in the social hierarchy and, correspondingly, the downward mobility of those who lack talent but are the offspring of those in power. The idea of "free circulation" of individuals is also central to modern psychological theories of intergroup

[1] Book Three, 415b–415d.

relations (D. M. Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). A variety of research evidence suggests that when paths to individual mobility are seen to be open, there is far less tendency to attempt nonnormative actions (e.g., Tyler, 1990), probably because of a strong human tendency to want to believe that the world is just and that one's personal efforts will be fairly rewarded (Lerner, 1980). Research on equity theory endorses the view that people strive for justice and feel distressed when they experience injustice (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; D. M. Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994, chap. 5). But the equity tradition also underlines the vital role of psychological interpretations of justice and the need for policymakers to understand local cultural practices and ideas—"the native's point of view"—in justice. When local cultural interpretations lead to a view that the in-group is being treated fairly, there is greater likelihood of support for central authorities.

The availability of options for participating in decision making is a key factor in perceived justice and support for authorities (Tyler, 1994). Tyler and Huo (2002) demonstrated that independent of *distributive justice*—the outcomes of justice processes—and *interactional justice*—the explanations that authorities provide for their decisions and the considerations they show to the recipients of decisions—the key factor in perceived legitimacy and willingness to abide by government regulations is *procedural justice*—how fair people see the decision-making process to be. Although much of the research on procedural justice has been conducted in Western societies, there is solid evidence in support of a few basic universals in perceived rights and duties (Moghaddam & Riley, 2004) and strong reasons to believe that procedural justice also plays a central role in many and perhaps all major non-Western societies.

A key influence on procedural justice is participation in decision making (Tyler & Huo, 2002). Opportunities for voicing opinions and participating in decision making are lacking in many parts of the world, as evidenced by recent United Nations Human Development reports:

> The spread of democratization appears to have stalled, with many countries failing to consolidate and deepen the first steps toward democracy and several slipping back into authoritarianism. Some 73 countries—with 42% of the world's people—still do not hold free and fair elections, and 106 governments still restrict civil and political freedoms. (United Nations Development Programme, 2002, p. 13)

It is clear that low income is no obstacle to democracy and that regions with an enormous deficit in democracy are the Middle East and North Africa. The democratic movements that have improved the lives of hundreds of millions of people in Latin America and in some parts of Africa and Asia have yet to have a serious impact on Islamic societies of the Middle East and North Africa. There is general agreement that options for voice, mobility, and participatory democracy are particularly lacking in Saudi Arabia, the country of origin for many of the most influential terrorist networks currently active on the world stage (Schwartz, 2002).

This is not, of course, a justification for attempting a transplantation of Western-style democracy to non-Western societies. But there is a need to support *contextualized democracy*—that is, sociopolitical order that allows participation in decision making and social mobility through the utilization of local, culturally appropriate symbols and strategies. Contextualized democracy needs to proceed with attention to the details of the cultural context in non-Western societies (see Moghaddam, 2002, particularly chaps. 2 and 3), such as that of Shi'a Islam (Moghaddam, 2004). A challenge is to avoid violent and highly disruptive political revolutions, such as the 1978–1979 revolution in Iran, that tend to perpetuate dictatorships under different guises rather than lead to genuinely open societies. Violent revolutions can best be avoided through measured and tangible progression toward contextualized democracy. The implementation of contextualized democracy should be given the highest priority in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where a combination of repression and corruption (see, e.g., Aburish, 1995) leaves minimal options available for any kind of public expression of dissatisfaction and participation in meaningful decision making. Some psychological theories (see, e.g., D. M. Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994) suggest that a range of possible interpretations will arise among people in this situation, including displacement of aggression: Those who vehemently blame "others" (e.g., "America—the Great Satan") for their perceived problems climb the stairs to the second floor.

### Second Floor: Displacement of Aggression

The idea that at least some acts of terrorism involve displaced aggression (as the concept is discussed by Freud, 1921/1955, 1930/1961, and contemporary researchers, e.g., Miller, Pederson, Earlywine & Pollock, 2003) is well known. What remains less understood is the complex relationship between some movements and leaders in Asia and Africa who are supported by the United States and other Western powers and who at the same time directly and indirectly use anti-Americanism to bolster their own positions. As Rushdie (2002) and others (e.g., Atran, 2003, p. 1538) have noted, anti-Americanism is serving to deflect criticism from governments in the Middle East, even though without U.S. support, a number of such governments would probably collapse. The displacement of aggression onto out-groups, particularly the United States, has been channeled through direct and indirect support for institutions and organizations that nurture authoritarian attitudes (see Altemeyer, 1988, for a discussion) and extremist behavior. This includes educational systems that encourage rigid, us-versus-them thinking, and fanatical movements, including violent Salafis, whose fundamentalist movement originates in and still receives support from Saudi Arabia.

In this context, individuals who develop a readiness to physically displace aggression and who actively seek out opportunities to do so eventually leave the second floor and climb more steps to try to take action against perceived enemies. As they move up the staircase, these individuals

become more deeply engaged in a morality that condones terrorism.

### Third Floor: "Moral Engagement"

Terrorist organizations arise as a parallel or shadow world, with a parallel morality that justifies "the struggle" to achieve the "ideal" society by any means possible. From the perspective of the mainstream, terrorists are "morally disengaged," particularly because of their willingness to commit acts of violence against civilians. However, from the perspective of the morality that exists within terrorist organizations, terrorists are "morally engaged," and it is "enemy" governments and their agents who are morally disengaged. The terrorist organization becomes effective by mobilizing sufficient resources to persuade recruits to become disengaged from morality as it is defined by government authorities (and often by the majority in society) and morally engaged in the way morality is constructed by the terrorist organization (for a related discussion, see Bandura, 2004). In the context of the Islamic world, terrorist organizations have fed on interpretations of Islam that laud what outsiders see as acts of terrorism but that terrorists depict as martyrdom toward a just goal (Davis, 2003). Although the struggle for control of the "correct" interpretation of Islam is for the most part public, the terrorist organizations that have incorporated an ideology of martyrdom are secretive.

Recruits are persuaded to become committed to the morality of the terrorist organization through a number of tactics, the most important of which are isolation, affiliation, secrecy, and fear. Studies of terrorist organizations and their networks (e.g., Alexander, 2002; Alexander & Swetman, 2002; Rapoport, 2002; Sageman, 2004) reveal that even when terrorists continue to live their "normal" lives as members of communities, their goal is to develop their parallel lives in complete isolation and secrecy. Recruits are trained to keep their parallel lives a secret even from their wives, parents, and closest friends. The illegal nature of their organization, perceived harsh governmental measures against them, and perceived lack of openness in society all contribute to their continued isolation and the sense of absolute affiliation with other in-group members. In essence, terrorist organizations become effective by positioning themselves at two levels: (a) the macro level, as the only option open toward reforming society, and they point to (alleged) government repression and dictatorship as proof of their assertion; and (b) the micro level, as a "home" for disaffected individuals (mostly young, single males), some of whom are recruited to carry out the most dangerous missions through programs that often have very fast turnaround.

Having started from the ground floor, where they share feelings of frustration, injustice, and shame with vast populations, potential terrorists now find themselves engaged in the extremist morality of isolated, secretive organizations dedicated to changing the world by any means available to them.

### Fourth Floor: Solidification of Categorical Thinking and the Perceived Legitimacy of the Terrorist Organization

After a person has climbed to the fourth floor and entered the secret world of the terrorist organization, there is little or no opportunity to exit alive. In most cases, the first category of new recruits consists of those who will be relatively long-term members and who become part of small cells, each typically numbering four or five persons, with access to information only about the other members in their own cells. In the case of the second category of recruits—the "foot soldiers" who are recruited to carry out violent attacks and to become suicide bombers—the entire operation of recruitment, training, and implementation of the terrorist act in some operations may take no more than 24 hours. Within those 24 hours, the recruited individual is typically given a great deal of positive attention and treated as a kind of celebrity, particularly by the recruiter (who stays by his or her side constantly) and by a charismatic cell leader.

The cell structure of terrorist organizations may have first been widely adopted among guerilla forces fighting dictatorships in Latin America in the mid-20th century and is designed to limit infiltration and discovery by antiterrorist agents. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the cell structure was being copied by most terrorist organizations, including those operating in Western societies (e.g., the Irish Republican Army [IRA]; Coogan, 2002, p. 466). Often, it is informal friendship networks and a need to belong that binds individuals to such cells (Sageman, 2004). Immersion in secret, small-group activities leads to changes in perceptions among recruits: a legitimization of the terrorist organization and its goals, a belief that the ends justify the means, and a strengthening of a categorical us-versus-them view of the world.

Social categorization is a powerful psychological process (McGarty, 1999), which can lead to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination even when the basis of categorization is trivial in a real-world context (D. M. Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994, chapter 4). A categorical us-versus-them view of the world is one of the hallmarks of terrorist organizations and the individuals attracted to them (Pearlstein, 1991; M. Taylor, 1988). The Western psychological literature has identified right-wing authoritarians as having a categorical viewpoint (Altemeyer, 1988), but in the global context, religious fundamentalism may be more directly related to an us-versus-them viewpoint among both Easterners (Alexander, 2002) and Westerners (Booth & Dunne, 2002). Just as Islamic fundamentalists have labeled the United States the "Great Satan," leading evangelical Christians in the United States have backed the view that "Islam was founded by . . . a demon-possessed pedophile" (Cooperman, 2002). This us-versus-them thinking from the West has played into the hands of fundamentalists abroad, particularly some strands within Saudi Wahhabism (Gold, 2003) and the radical form of Shi'a Islam, as represented by Hizballah in Iran and Lebanon, for example (Shapira, 2000). Of course, a categorical us-versus-them viewpoint is

not sufficient to lead to terrorism; another important element is a belief in the terrorist organization as a just means to an ideal end.

Commitment to the terrorist cause strengthens as the new recruit is socialized into the traditions, methods, and goals of the organization. Over a century of research on social influence (see Moghaddam, 1998, chaps. 6 and 7) suggests that conformity and obedience will be very high in the cells of the terrorist organization, where the cell leader represents a strong authority figure and where nonconformity, disobedience, and disloyalty receive the harshest punishments. The recruits at this stage face two uncompromising forces: From within the terrorist organization, they are pressured to conform and to obey in ways that will lead to violent acts against civilians (and often against themselves); from outside the terrorist organization, especially in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, they face governments that do not allow even minimal voice and democratic participation in addressing perceived injustices. These dictatorial governments are seen as puppets of world powers, primarily the United States—a perception endorsed by a variety of international critics (Scranton, 2002).

During their stay on the fourth floor, then, individuals find that their options have narrowed considerably. They are now part of a tightly controlled group from which they cannot exit alive.

### *Fifth Floor: The Terrorist Act and Sidestepping Inhibitory Mechanisms*

Terrorism involves acts of violence against civilians, often resulting in multiple deaths. The experience of professional military units demonstrates the intensive programs required to train soldiers to kill enemy soldiers (Grossman, 1995) and raises the question as to how terrorist organizations train their members to carry out the terrorist acts that kill innocent civilians. The answer is to be found in two psychological processes that are central to intergroup dynamics (Brown & Gaertner, 2001): The first involves social categorization (of civilians as part of the out-group), and the second involves psychological distance (through exaggerating differences between the in-group and the out-group).

The categorization of civilians as part of the out-group matches the pattern of secrecy practiced by terrorist organizations; recruits to terrorist organizations are trained to treat everyone, including civilians, outside their tightly knit group as the enemy (Sageman, 2004). Newspaper headlines announcing that a terrorist blast has killed innocent bystanders have little meaning to terrorist organizations because of the particular way in which they have categorized the world into "us" and "them" and their perception that anyone who is not actively resisting the government is a legitimate target of violence. Thus, from the point of view of the members of terrorist organizations, acts of violence against civilians are justified because civilians are part of the enemy, and only when civilians actively oppose the targeted "evil forces" will they not be the enemy.

The perception of civilians as part of the enemy helps explain how terrorists sidestep what Lorenz (1966) termed "inhibitory mechanisms." Lorenz argued that inhibitory mechanisms serve to limit intraspecies killing. For example, when two wolves fight, it usually becomes clear fairly soon that one of them is stronger, with the result that the weaker wolf signals defeat by moving back and showing signs of submission. The aggression of the winner is inhibited by the signals of submission, so that the winner does not continue to attack and attempt to seriously injure or kill the loser. Inhibitory mechanisms also evolved to limit the aggression of humans against one another and can be triggered through eye contact, pleading, crying, and other means when an attacker is in close proximity to a victim. Crime statistics (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2002) show that humans often kill other humans by means of guns and other weapons that allow killing from a distance and enable inhibitory mechanisms to be sidestepped. This is in line with Lorenz's argument that among humans, inhibitory mechanisms have been sidestepped through the use of modern weapons, which allow an attacker to destroy a target from a distance.

Because terrorists, particularly suicide bombers, often operate in very close physical proximity to at least some of their human targets, they could potentially be influenced by the kinds of pleading and other signals that typically trigger inhibitory mechanisms. But two key factors enable inhibitory mechanisms to be sidestepped during terrorist attacks:

1. By categorizing the target, including civilians, as the enemy and exaggerating differences between the in-group and the out-group, terrorists psychologically distance themselves from the other humans they intend to destroy. Psychological distancing is achieved in part through the adoption of terrorist myths, such as the idea that by attacking civilian targets, social order will be disrupted and the terrorist act can serve as a "spark" to get people to "recognize truth" and revolt against authorities (such a terrorist myth was even shared by the Oklahoma City bombers; see Linenthal, 2001). This is perhaps similar to the distancing that takes place between a rapist and the victim, particularly through the rapist's adoption of cultural myths about rape (see readings in Searles & Berger, 1995).

2. The victims seldom become aware of the impending danger before the attack actually occurs, so they do not have an opportunity to behave in ways that might trigger inhibitory mechanisms.

Thus, individuals who reach the fifth floor become psychologically prepared and motivated to commit acts of terrorism, sometimes resulting in multiple civilian deaths. But in order to understand the actions of the few who climb to the top of the staircase to terrorism and plunge into terrorist acts, one must begin by considering the conditions of life and the perceptions of justice among the millions on the ground floor. A solid body of psychological research (see Moghaddam, 1998, chap. 7) demonstrates that under certain conditions, some individuals will probably climb from the ground floor and wind their way up the staircase to terrorism. Of course, certain individuals are more likely than others to become terrorists, but it would be shortsighted to base policy entirely or mainly on identifying profiles of likely terrorists. It is conditions on the ground

floor that lead to terrorism, and removing one set of individuals will only make room for another set to step forward and climb to the top. Only by reforming conditions on the ground floor can societies end terrorism.

## Some Policy Implications

In this final section I highlight four important policy recommendations arising from the staircase metaphor.

### 1. Prevention Must Come First

The staircase metaphor has an overarching policy implication that is familiar to psychologists researching and practicing in mental health: Prevention is the long-term solution to terrorism. This is in line with a model of mental health that is integral to a larger public health care system and that provides broad-based services.

But why should policymakers be expected to "go preventive" in the terrorism domain when they have not shown much enthusiasm to do so in other domains? And what role is there for psychologists? In response to the first question, policymakers have no choice but to adopt a preventive approach to terrorism because the survival of the United States as a democratic superpower is at stake. This is not an exaggeration. The psychological, social, political, and economic costs of the tragedy of September 11 are too high to be repeated, and the continued risk of repeated attacks of the same or even greater magnitude is too high for the United States and its allies not to adopt preventive policies. Some measures have already been taken toward at least initiating preventive policies through tentative steps in support of contextualized democracy in parts of the Middle East (e.g., in Bahrain), but in some Islamic countries (e.g., Pakistan, Egypt), democracy has been taking significant steps backward, and dissatisfaction among millions on the ground floor is increasing.

The message of psychological science should be expounded clearly: *under certain conditions* some individuals will more likely be influenced to harm both others and themselves. As long as conditions are perceived to be unjust and hopeless by vast populations on the ground floor, some individuals will very likely be influenced to climb the staircase to terrorism. The conditions on the ground floor must be improved if terrorism is to diminish.

Second, psychologists should articulate the limited effectiveness of short-term strategies that have dominated policy in this area for decades: secretive "counterterrorist" units and measures, a total concern to hunt for the so-called bad apples or needles in a haystack, and a naive reliance on improved technology and superior military might as the solution to defeating terrorism. The strategy of identifying and eliminating individual terrorists is extremely costly and counterproductive, because *as long as conditions on the ground floor remain the same, every terrorist who is eliminated is quickly replaced by others*. Obviously, long-term and short-term policies can be implemented hand-in-hand, but psychologists have an important role in helping to turn policies toward foundational long-term solutions.

### 2. Support Contextualized Democracy Through Procedural Justice

Psychological research clearly highlights the important role procedural justice can play in bringing about contextualized democracy. Local cultural practices and symbolic systems need to be incorporated and used to enable greater legal opportunities for voice and mobility, as well as to influence perceptions of available opportunities. Such policies must include women and other minorities in the decision-making process. The experiences of numerous countries demonstrate that the full and equal participation of women in all domains of life, including social, economic, and political spheres, is a prerequisite for healthy national development. Strong support is needed for democratic processes even when they contradict local traditions, such as a tradition of allowing only a very limited role for women in the public sphere (as is still the case in much of the Middle East and North Africa). In this regard, special attention must be given to equal opportunities for voice and mobility in educational as well as professional and political domains. As is clear from the case of Iran, where the women are now the majority of undergraduate students in major universities, women can gain access to higher educational opportunities by successfully competing in open academic examinations but still be prevented from fulfilling their potential role in national development because of state-sponsored barriers against women at work and in politics.

### 3. Educate Against Categorical Us-Versus-Them Thinking

In order to influence greater voice and mobility in societies such as those in the Middle East and North Africa, an important step concerns the framing of the fight against terrorism, particularly in how the social world is categorized. As individuals climb the staircase, their categorization of the world into us-versus-them, the forces of good versus the forces of evil, and so on, becomes more prominent and rigid. The challenge is to prevent such a rigid style of categorization from becoming the norm at the foundational level, where most of the people are situated. A starting point for implementing this policy is to avoid, and indeed to combat, a categorization of the world into us-versus-them, good versus evil, and so forth. Such categorization only endorses the views of fundamentalists and increases the probability that more individuals will climb the staircase to commit terrorist acts.

### 4. Promote Interobjectivity and Justice

In addition to providing treatment for the victims of terrorism (Moghaddam & Marsella, 2004), psychologists must help to mentally and emotionally prepare the U.S. population and other "victim societies" to enter into dialogue with and achieve better understanding of those who have climbed the stairway to terrorism. Dialogue with extremist groups intent on attacking the United States is presently unthinkable for perhaps most Americans, but it must be kept in mind that there are numerous historical examples of

former terrorist groups being brought into mainstream political processes (a recent example is the IRA in Northern Ireland, whose political wing now participates in mainstream politics). Greater international dialogue and improved intercultural understanding must come about as part of a long-term solution.

Psychologists have a unique role to play in formulating and implementing international policies to influence *interobjectivity*—the understandings shared within and between cultures (Moghaddam, 2003)—to strengthen a shared worldview on justice, rights, and duties. Such policies can build on a foundation of probable psychological universals in justice but must also take into consideration the perceptions among many non-Western people that their indigenous identities are threatened as a result of increasing globalization and Western, particularly American, influence.

## Conclusion

The staircase metaphor directs us to build a solid foundation of contextualized democracy so that there will be minimal incentive for individuals to climb to higher floors in order to join terrorist organizations. Ultimately, terrorism is a moral problem with psychological underpinnings; the challenge is to prevent disaffected youth and others from becoming engaged in the morality of terrorist organizations. A lesson from the history of terrorism is that this moral problem does not have a technological solution; this lesson is at odds with the contemporary tendency to try to find technological solutions to moral dilemmas (Moghaddam, 1997). More sophisticated technology and increased military force will not end terrorism in the long-term. Over at least the last few decades, policies for ending terrorism have tended to be short-term, often driven by immediate political demands rather than by scientific understanding. The necessity of shifting to long-term policies is underscored by psychological research on populations most directly affected by the fight against terrorism, such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq (e.g., Wessells, 2004). The focus of policies for the most part has been on individuals who have climbed all the way up the staircase and are already committed to carrying out terrorist acts. Policies must be revised to address foundational problems at the bottom of the staircase and to encourage the development of contextualized democracies.

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