

# Joining a terrorist organisation and committing violence – what drives individuals?

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*What drives an individual to want to join a terrorist organisation and commit acts of violence against innocent people? Drawing on studies across a range of terrorist groups, [Saliha Metinsoy](#) outlines some of the reasons that emerge. Among them, she highlights a disconnection from society on one hand and a search for solidarity on the other as being important in instigating a process of radicalisation.*

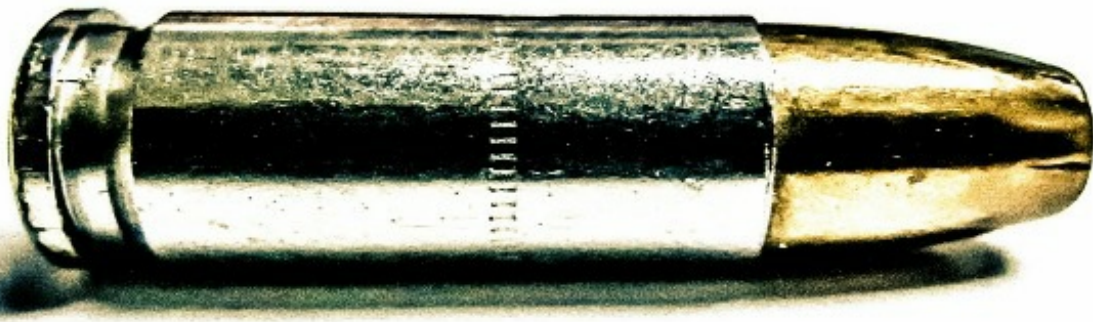


Terrorism, although being an essentially contested concept, [has been broadly defined](#) as violent attacks on civilians for political purposes with the explicit goal of gaining publicity and coverage. And we can define a three-stage process through which individuals join terrorist organisations and commit violence. At the first stage, individuals join an organisation because of alienation from society and in an explicit search for group solidarity. Once in the group, they undergo an indoctrination and norm creation process in service of the goals of the organisation, such as being part of a bigger cause and martyrdom. At the final stage, they commit violence after a split of morality for in-group and out-group members (when violence against out-group members is legitimised).

Political and economic explanations of terrorism which focus on poverty and underdevelopment are [extensively popular](#) in the [academic literature](#): excessive poverty in the absence of social security can incentivise individuals to join terrorist organisations. Conversely, dignified life and welfare benefits can create solidaristic ties within society and so discourage terrorism. Although those macro structures can predict the likelihood of emergence of terrorist groups, they do not fully depict individual-level processes.

## A need for social contact

In fact, earlier studies have found that terrorist organisations provide tight-knit loyal and intimate groups for individuals in need of social connection. [Martha Crenshaw argued](#) that terrorists are often isolated in desperate need of social contact. Terrorists can confide and trust each other in small cells of the organisation; [Max Abrahms found evidence](#) that the primary reason for joining terrorist organisations is seeking social relations and solidarity. He suggested that individuals who know someone already in the organisation are more likely to join. And moreover, new recruits demonstrated very high levels of social alienation before joining.



### Psychopathic tendencies

But why are terrorists exceptionally alienated from society? Why do they not have reproductive social relations that will tie them to their social groups? Jeff Victoroff outlined [two possible psychological explanations](#) for joining terrorist organisations; the first stems from psychopathic tendencies. Narcissistic injury—a perceived threat to the narcissist's grandiose self-perception—can occur in a problematic childhood or adolescence, and the absence or weakness of a parental figure, or his/her rejection of the child can potentially cause narcissistic injury. Such injury leads the prospective terrorist to deliberately seek grandiose fantasies or purposes in life, which might be expressed through membership to a terrorist organisation. Alternatively, early childhood traumas might lead to excessive paranoia or absolutist thinking, which would prompt the terrorist to act or react in line with internal psychoanalytic processes.

Secondly, Victoroff explained that individuals might develop varied, and sometimes problematic, reactions to the outside world. Such reactions are more likely in cases of cognitive rigidity — need for certainty and clarity, and intolerance to ambiguity — novelty seeking, and finally perceptions of humiliation and desire for revenge. In the second group of theories, individuals have a hard time adapting their behaviour to outside conditions such as uncertainty and mundaneness of life. And then in the humiliation-revenge theory, they react against a perceived unjust external force.

### Perverse perception of 'fairness'

But in fact, perception of injustice and split of morality are two main factors that are likely to mobilise much larger groups of disconnected people, unifying them around a grandiose cause. John Horgan [has pointed out](#) that identification with victims and split of morality for in-group and out-group members precipitate one to join terrorist organisations. In the split of morality, what is just and fair for one's own group is not applicable to outsiders. And so aggression against the outer group is 'justified' and 'fair' in the mind of a terrorist. Moreover, according to humiliation and revenge theory, terrorists are often convinced that they 'react' against an unjust situation rather than being the aggressors themselves. The perception of unfair treatment is one of the most [important prompts](#) of terrorist activity. It makes him/her part of a bigger and moral cause, which is perceived as correcting an unjust situation.

Studies suggest that once the person joins a terrorist organisation, his/her socialisation is ensured through constant indoctrination. Discussing the choice of western Jihadists to go foreign bases such as Palestine, Syria, Kashmir or

Chechnya, [Thomas Hegghammer emphasised](#) norm diffusion and indoctrination. His study looked at in-group indoctrination and the prevalence of clergy in controlling and directing the behaviour of the group members. At this point, the individual becomes subordinate to the leaders' goals and aims.

### **The promise of martyrdom**

Leaders [are often motivated by](#) intimidating and demoralising the government, and [the fantasy/idea of ] ultimately forcing it to give in to their political demands. An individual terrorist however does not necessarily share those goals. Their attachment to the organisation is insured via value and norm creation. Assaf Moghadam, for instance, [argued](#) that Islamic jihadists groups create a cult of martyrdom and glorify death. Such glorification serves to two interrelated purposes. Firstly, it [convinces the individual](#) that their death serves a higher cause, and by dying they will contribute to a continuity started before them. Secondly, martyrdom promises more benefits in after life than the current setting.

Knowing someone within the organisation or perhaps propaganda of the organisation facilitate the recruitment of these individuals. Once in the organisation, the terrorist discovers a form of attachment to a larger group where he/she splits his/her moral judgements in favour of the attachment group. When aggression to outer group justified through this split, the most gruesome acts of violence become possible. Perhaps shifting the debate to the individual and to the ways through which we can ensure solidarity and connection in society might be better placed to prevent terrorism.

### **About the Author**

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