

**Terrorism and Small Groups:  
An Analytical Framework for Group Disruption**

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Note: This work was supported by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the Office  
of Naval Research [grant number HDTRA1-10-1-0075-P00001].

Published as:

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Terrorism and Small Groups: An Analytical Framework for Group Disruption  
Small Group Research December 2013 44: 599-626, first published on October 1, 2013  
doi:10.1177/1046496413501892

Final publisher's version available at:

<http://sgr.sagepub.com/content/44/6/599.abstract>

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Abstract

Terrorism scholarship has revealed the importance of small groups—both cells and leadership groups—in the proliferation of violence, yet this field remains only loosely connected to small group theory and research. There exists no systematic consideration of the role that group dynamics play in the disruption of terrorist activities. This paper proposes an analytical framework for terrorist group disruption that shows how the goals and methods of counterterrorist intervention intersect with small group behavior. We use this framework to theorize how three intervention types—repression, manipulation, and persuasion—interact with group variables and processes, such as communication networks, social identities, group cohesion, and intragroup conflict. Seven theoretical propositions demonstrate how the framework can show how the direct and indirect effects of group behavior can augment or undermine counterterrorist strategies.

In October 1970, two cells of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) conducted separate kidnappings. The Liberation Cell kidnapped a British diplomat, then five days later the Chenier Cell abducted a Quebec government minister. The diplomat was eventually released, the minister murdered. The two cells had initially been a single group, but they split after a 5-to-4 vote on whether to conduct the operation. The losing side, which became the Chenier Cell, wanted to pursue a patient strategy of building up finances, logistics, and a wider underground movement, whereas those who formed the Liberation Cell wanted immediate action. The Liberation Cell planned its operation carefully and freed their hostage after winning the propaganda coup of having their manifesto broadcasted. The Chenier Cell left Canada to be outside the country during the operation but then suddenly reversed course and carried out an improvised kidnapping. Their demands were unwavering and unacceptable to the government, and when they killed their hostage, they triggered a hostile public reaction that led to the demise of the violent wing of the Quebec secessionist movement (Crelinsten, 2001).

As this example illustrates, understanding terrorists' behavior often requires understanding *group* behavior. The historical record provides many cases of terrorist cells and leadership groups debating, often fractiously, actions ranging from political engagement to property destruction to the indiscriminate murder of civilians (Horgan, 2005; McCormick, 2003). Researchers must theorize these groups not as single-minded actors but as decision-making units shaped by organizational imperatives, individual motivations, and complex group processes. According to the most influential advocates of group-centered study of terrorism (Horgan, 2005; Sageman, 2008), however, terrorism research has produced very limited data—and deployed insufficient systematic theory—concerning terrorist group processes.

In this essay, we aim to strengthen the link from small group theory and research to

terrorism studies, and we do so for many reasons. Though violent extremist groups differ from the conventional laboratory subjects (Poole, Keyton, & Frey, 1999) or field studies (Frey, 1994), small terrorist groups should fall within the scope of the most sophisticated group theories. Moreover, when viewed as a limiting case in which group cohesion, moral norms, and the gravity of decisions are pushed to extremes, the terrorism context can also test the validity of these theories at the farthest points of their theoretical reach.

Interfacing with terrorism research can advance group research along many dimensions, but to illustrate the power of this linkage, we focus on one particular way it can stimulate significant theoretical innovation. Conventional research focuses on the factors facilitating group success and satisfaction, with contrary forces blocking or constraining group achievement (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996). In the context of terrorism, however, we develop an analytical framework for terrorist group *disruption*. We encourage research that can help identify and exploit group vulnerabilities to prevent a terrorist group from functioning smoothly, limit its further radicalization, or at least moderate its reliance on violence.

Disrupting terrorist groups might yield direct social benefits by rendering them ineffective, but such interventions could also backfire, such as when an intervention splinters a larger group and produces an extremist splinter that aims to carry out indiscriminate bombings against civilians. One benefit of a concerted effort to bridge group theory with terrorism studies will be a greater appreciation and anticipation of how counterterrorism can have such indirect, adverse effects.

Toward this end, we present a group disruption analytical framework that clarifies the pathways by which small group phenomena can interact with three counterterrorist interventions—repression to degrade group capabilities, manipulation to induce group

dysfunction, and persuasion to pursue more moderate objectives. Within our framework, we advance seven propositions about how group structures and processes amplify, undermine, or complicate counterterrorist interventions. We do not attempt a comprehensive application of small group theory, though we discuss that possibility in the conclusion. Rather, we focus on particular domains of group research and generate novel theoretical propositions regarding the efficacy of counterterrorist interventions. By doing so, we hope to demonstrate the generative power—or “positive heuristic value” (Lakatos, 1978)—of our framework.

We begin by explaining the value of studying extreme group contexts and providing a conceptualization of terrorist groups as distinct from other small group types. After introducing the group disruption analytical framework, we use it to generate propositions relating to two key structural features of groups—their communication network and membership composition. We then use the framework to generate predictions concerning the relational dimension of terrorist group behavior, with emphasis on group cohesion and interpersonal conflict. In the conclusion, we summarize our propositions, discuss the practical importance of theorizing terrorist groups more systematically, and we discuss how to move toward a more comprehensive theory of terrorist groups, with an eye toward future empirical investigation.

### **Theoretical Presumptions and Definitions**

Theory and research can advance considerably through the investigation of novel contexts. There is much to be gained through “normal” research on groups, which involves straightforward replications and theoretical extensions in experimental and field research designs that gradually accumulate knowledge (Kuhn, 1970). That said, fresh insight can come from exploring new research contexts that put theories under stress and generate both empirical anomalies and original propositions—not through ad-hoc explanations but by revisiting the core

ideas in existing theories and deploying them in original ways (Lakatos, 1978).

This impulse has precedent in the field of group research. When Gouran (1999) set out an agenda for future research in the landmark volume, *Handbook of Group Communication Theory and Research*, he encouraged researchers to “venture even farther than they already have into the realm of natural and bona fide groups” (p. 25). Though subsequent work would expand the scope of group research (e.g., Frey, 2002), Gouran encouraged scholars to study more extreme and hazardous group forms, such as cults, to learn how, for instance, communication shapes “members’ unquestioned commitment and loyalty” (Gouran, 1999, p. 25). It is in that spirit that we bring group theory into contact with terrorism.

Research on terrorist behavior has often neglected the group as a unit of analysis. The more common foci are individuals (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008; Wiktorowicz & Kaltenthaler, 2006), organizations (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; Krebs, 2001), and geopolitical dynamics (Li & Schaub, 2004; Weinberg, 1991). A narrow stream of research on political violence, however, has examined factors at the small group level (Jackson, 2006; McCormick, 2003). In particular, a handful of studies have considered the extreme isolation and intense secrecy that terrorist groups (and their parent organizations) require for operational security, as well as how this isolation distorts terrorists’ judgments through groupthink, seeing false dichotomies, and biases toward violent action (Crenshaw, 1988; Horgan, 2005; Post, 1998). Even so, terrorism scholarship has typically treated group research as a static body of work, rather than seeking a more dynamic integration of the group and terrorism literatures.

Before pursuing such an integration, we begin by addressing basic definitional questions. Rigorous social scientific theory can distinguish “terrorism,” “terrorist organizations,” and “terrorist groups,” even though such terms get used as arbitrary or interchangeable labels in lay

discourse. The greater problem is that “terrorist” (and its grammatical variants) carry considerable political value, and the term has been used to decry entities viewed by others as “freedom fighters,” “revolutionaries,” or even legitimate states defending themselves against insurgents (Townshend, 2002). Consequently, any definition of the term will have its critics, but it is still possible to provide an operationally coherent definition that captures much of what is understood to be “terrorist” in the vernacular.

We define a small group as being part of a terrorist network/organization or as an independent “leaderless” cell (Sageman, 2008) if it pursues ideological/political aims through violent acts (e.g., assassination, kidnapping, hijacking) designed to instill “shock, horror, fear, or revulsion” in a general public or specific sub-public (Townshend, 2002, p. 8). This includes marginalized social groups and insurgencies that seek to discredit what they perceive as a repressive state, as well as state-sponsored violence designed to repress those same causes.

This broad definition focuses on purposes and methods, not on the institutional position of the actors or the morality of the action (see Wardlaw, 1989). By *small* group, we mean a collection of at least three people (and no more than about thirty) who are co-present (physically or electronically, even by degrees) and perceive their group as an entity. Generally, the group must have some shared goals or interests, with its members interdependent on one another. We principally use the word “group” to describe such an entity, though in some cases the word “team” applies, and we use the latter descriptor when citing scholarship focused on teams.

Some terrorist acts are planned and carried out by individuals acting alone, but most incidents involve small groups plotting or carrying out violent acts (Horgan, 2005). Sometimes that means a small cell of extremists who spend a great deal of time bonding as a group, plus more time training, planning, and preparing for their operation (Miller & Stone, 2002). In other

cases, a small group of organizational leaders, such as a leadership council in al Qaeda or the high command of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, have to decide *as a group* on their strategies for waging a campaign of violence or on the best tactics for launching particular attacks (Horgan, 2005; Jackson, 2009; McCormick, 2003). For example, one key strategic question is whether to assassinate political leaders, attack military units, execute civilian “collaborators,” or indiscriminately cause mass public casualties. Group members may disagree on the morality or strategic efficacy of targeting civilians, and disputes like this can sow dissension within insurgencies, as occurred in Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s (Hafez, 2003).

The sheer gravity of the decisions faced by terrorist groups help differentiate them from most other decision-making groups, but other distinguishing characteristics necessitate the deeper analysis of this context in its own right. Terrorist groups engage in actions that are illegal and often viewed as immoral by the larger society, putting them in stark contrast with, say, a work team or social group. Terrorist groups also operate under heavy secrecy; they face imprisonment or death if captured.

Because of the illicit and covert nature of their activities, terrorist groups share some common ground with criminal gangs (Horgan, 2005). However, terrorists have a (radical) political agenda for their countries or regions which crucially distinguishes them from criminal gangs: they must remain covert while seeking publicity; they must not merely kill but proclaim that they have done so; they must persuade as well as coerce; and their goals and violence must resonate with an aggrieved population not just intimidate local neighborhoods or extract payback. In addition, many terrorists are driven by ideological or religious zeal that gives them an inner compass and sense of mission beyond themselves and the fulfillment of immediate financial and social needs in contrast to criminal gang members. Finally, unlike gangs, terrorists



often aspire to an extremely high level of violence, accepting full blown insurgency or civil war as a necessary evolution in their challenge to the state. After all, the pathway to terrorism is routinely labeled a political “radicalization” (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), which sharply distinguishes it from passionate but democratic social movements (Evans & Boyte, 1992). These strong distinctions demand that terrorist groups be considered in a fresh light through a wide lens of group scholarship and not simply as a variant of another context of small group research.

### **Group Disruption Analytical Framework**

There are dozens of factors that influence small groups throughout their lifetime, from their creation to their eventual dissolution or evolution into a new group. The complex feedback loops between terrorist groups, their larger organizational setting, and the wider society in which they exist offer many avenues for research on these groups. We choose to look solely at communication, cohesion, and conflict in established terrorist cells and leadership groups, and this narrow focus permits to show in more depth one of the many ways the terrorist context can spark theoretical advances in small group research.

Our approach to terrorist groups requires turning the basic approach of group research upside down. Researchers generally investigate the inputs and processes that yield (or obstruct) high-quality group decisions, member satisfaction, and other metrics of functionality. In the case of groups with a darker mission, however, research might more fruitfully focus on the means by which one can deliberately *disrupt* such groups.

Disruption encompasses a range of outcomes, including dysfunctional decision making, conflict and dissension, or distorting discussions to reach particular decisions. As is often the case, however, unintended consequences (Giddens, 1984) can flow from one’s attempts to break a group apart, set it adrift, or steer it off course. It is foolhardy to disrupt a group without an

appreciation of how such counterterrorism could interplay with group variables and processes.

Thus, we propose a basic analytical framework of group disruption to assess systematically the prospects of different group-based counterterrorist interventions. The essential task in constructing this framework is the parsimonious characterization of government and counterterrorist actions and goals connected with group dynamics.

Though the framework draws on a wide range of theory, its central concepts and relationships are straightforward and are summarized in Figure 1. The framework references only those counterterrorist actions specifically designed to have *direct* effects on a targeted terrorist group. (Beyond the scope of this paper are actions governments take that do not target the terrorist group itself, such as propaganda campaigns or indiscriminate repression.) We differentiate three main types of interventions, each of which has a corresponding disruption goal: (1) *repression* intended to *degrade* organizational and group capability; (2) *manipulation* intended to cause group *dysfunction* (e.g., discord and judgmental errors); and (3) *persuasion* intended to *moderate* the group away from civilian targets and violent acts in general.

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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The first intervention type, repression, includes efforts to kill or capture group members, monitor their communications and movements, destroy their training facilities, and/or restrict their access to resources (money, arms, expertise, etc.). Killing or capturing members degrades group capability by reducing its total size and removing individuals with key functional capabilities. Surveillance (e.g., intercepting electronic messages) reduces the group's ability to plan, coordinate, and execute attacks. Destroying training facilities or other instructional mechanisms limits a terror cell's ability to develop its technical capabilities.

Whereas the direct intended goal of repression is to reduce a group's tangible resources and abilities, manipulation aims to cause dysfunction so that the group more poorly utilizes what it has. Manipulation involves efforts to create discord within a group, which may manifest as dissension, decision-making errors, ineffectual teamwork, splintering, or disintegration. For example, manipulation can employ infiltrators, co-opted group members, or media-based psychological operations to widen group faultlines, such as personal rivalries or cultural rifts.

The third intervention type, persuasion, seeks to convince terrorist groups to "moderate" their behavior: Persuasive appeals may target group attitudes, beliefs, norms, or social identities to move group as a whole, or particular subgroups, in a less violent direction or, at least, away from more ever-more-violent alternatives. Instead of pursuing indiscriminate attacks against civilians via weapons of mass destruction, persuasive interventions might prod a group into entering negotiations or abandoning violent struggle altogether. In Afghanistan, the United States has made persuasive appeals via covert infiltrators and high-level group members released from detention (Sieff, 2009). Persuasive appeals also can be communicated through the media or by direct talks with terrorist group officials, which may or may not include substantive accommodations of grievances. Even when they fail to sway a terrorist group as a whole, persuasive efforts can deepen internal disputes over the appropriate use of violence.

Looking more closely at these three types of intervention in Figure 1, counterterrorist actions can have both direct and indirect effects by virtue of their interaction with group variables and processes. The vertical arrows in Figure 1 show the two points of interaction between intervention efforts and group dynamics. Dashed lines trace the indirect feedback pathways through which the intended effects of an intervention inadvertently initiate or heighten group dynamics that impact other disruption goals, positively or negatively.

More precise theoretical propositions concerning the effects of counterterrorist interventions can be traced out in the framework using solid pathways or a mix of solid and dashed pathways. Some of the propositions we will put forth in this paper involve group processes interacting with an intervention to influence group outcomes, such as the availability of an inclusive superordinate social identity improving the prospects of persuasion interventions (Proposition 4). Other propositions involve the indirect feedback loops: An intervention, via group dynamics, produces secondary effects on other goals via the dashed arrows, as when repression degrades group capability but enhances a leader's influence on group decisions (Proposition 1). Still other propositions involve two different interventions: The first activates group dynamics (via a dashed path), which in turn limit or enhance the effectiveness of a second intervention (via solid paths). Thus, Proposition 2 holds that easing up on repression to enable group communication can increase the efficacy of persuasive interventions.

For a more narrative illustration involving these feedback processes, consider the case of the Islamist insurgency in Algeria in the 1990s, which involves repression, persuasion, and groupthink (Hafez, 2004). The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria was caught in a "spiral of encapsulation" due to government repression, whereby intra-group ties strengthened and external ties were severed. Isolation led GIA to conduct ill-advised massacres of Muslim civilians in their own strongholds. These extreme and self-destructive decisions fractured the insurgency and diminished its civilian support.

In the terms of our framework, repression successfully degraded the communication capability of the GIA and induced dysfunction by activating a feedback loop whereby groupthink mechanisms led to poorer quality decision making. More indirectly, however, this led to an adverse effect with respect to the goal of group moderation, as another feedback loop through

distorted decision making led the GIA to its indiscriminate civilian attacks. This paroxysm of violence may have been an unavoidable cost in the Algerian government's defeat of the GIA, but a framework accounting for group dynamics encourages counterterrorists to anticipate such outcomes and seek out less hazardous alternatives.

There will be times when group factors play a smaller role than in the Algerian example. For instance, small group dynamics do not directly interact with the deployment of repressive measures, the success of which hinges on the balance of counterterrorist military and police resources, competence, and intelligence with respect to their terrorist adversaries. Group dysfunction can lead to a dissatisfied group member informing on his group and yielding better intelligence for repressive actions, but such turncoating is exogenous to the intervention itself.

Finally, we acknowledge that Figure 1 cannot encompass the whole universe of interventions, goals, variables, and linkages. In designing it, we hope to strike the right balance between parsimony and complexity for generating novel propositions concerning the interplay of counterterrorism and terrorist behavior. The remainder of this essay illustrates the model's heuristic value, as it has inspired the following propositions about the roles of group structure and composition, cohesion, and intragroup conflict in the disrupting of terrorist groups.

### **Communication Networks**

Government and military repression of terrorist organizations can restructure the leadership groups and operational cells within it. Killing or capturing of terrorist and insurgent leaders, for instance, has been a subject of considerable research and controversy in political science (Jordan, 2009; Pryce, 2012), though such study has neglected the implications for small groups within those organizations. Thus, we begin by considering repressive interventions that affect a group's communication network structure and capabilities.

A group's communication network refers to who communicates with whom. Research on small groups has distinguished several network configurations: the centralized star-shaped network, in which each group member can only talk to a central figure; the chain, which connects a member only to adjacent neighbors; and the comcon or "clique" network, in which each member can talk to any other (Shaw, 1964).

Contemporary research on group networks may be sparse because the vast majority of small groups studied have comcon networks. Terrorist groups' concern with operational security and covertness, however, often demands that they employ alternatives to reduce the total number of links between group members (Enders & Su, 2007). Little research addresses the structure of network structure within terrorist cells, but one line of research suggests that cells can be made up of subgroups that have little contact with one another, as in the case with the Bali nightclub bombing (Koschade, 2006; see also Jackson, 2006).

Placing this discussion within the group disruption framework, consider how a sharp increase in repression to degrade a group's communication network could have indirect effects. Terrorist groups often respond to intense repression by restructuring their communication network to reduce their detectability and to minimize the damage resulting from a member's capture. This can result in decision making becoming more concentrated in the hands of the leader or leadership group. From an information processing perspective, this concentration can lead to poorer quality decisions, as a result of the central leader in such groups becoming overwhelmed by information from various group members (Hare, 1976).

In addition, a concentrated flow of messages through the leader may magnify the importance of that leader's policy preferences and leadership style on the group's behavior. If the leader is a "crusader" who challenges constraints and is closed to information (Hermann, 2001),

this may lead a group to pursue even more radical actions. Thus, stepped up organizational repression (even in the more benign form of more intense surveillance rather than killing or arresting group members) may not only inhibit communications but also have the adverse indirect effect of radicalizing a group toward more violent actions. We can restate this as the following theoretical proposition:

P1: Significantly increasing a terrorist group's communication costs will increase the congruence between leader preferences and group decisions.

Although Proposition 1 has been stated in language specific to terrorist groups, it may well prove amenable to investigation in other small group contexts. As explained earlier, we aim to advance small group theory and research generally by focusing on this unusual and understudied context .

Communication network structure might also influence the efficacy of counterterrorist persuasion campaigns. Researchers have distinguished centralized structures of knowledge sharing (i.e., critical knowledge is shared with a single member) from decentralized ones that share information equally, a design that tends to be more efficient and effective (Huang & Cummings, 2011). If a decentralized structure helps to ensure that more moderate arguments are shared more broadly, a persuasion campaign's prospective success may be enhanced by deemphasizing repressive measures. Doing so could reduce communication costs and facilitate a network closer to the comcon model. Accordingly, we put forth this second proposition:

P2: Significantly decreasing group communication costs will enhance the effectiveness of persuasion tactics aimed at moderating terrorist group decisions, if a substantial fraction of group members or key leaders are leaning toward moderation.

The proviso at the end of the proposition assumes that the persuasion campaign is timed with the coexistence of a sizeable or influential subgroup receptive to messages of moderation

(e.g., after the group has suffered a series of setbacks after undertaking more violent actions). In essence, Proposition 2 can be thought as a kind of corollary to our first proposition: If intensified repression allowed an extremely hawkish leader to control and allocate costly communications to further his policy preferences, then allowing freer communications could facilitate the coalescence of a critical mass of dissenters favoring moderation. In terms of the group disruption framework, this is an example of a positive indirect effect: While easing up on repression runs contrary to the direct goal of degrading a terrorist group's communication capabilities, it can indirectly facilitate the goal of moderation.

### **Membership Composition and Group Identity**

As important as the network structure of a small group is the composition of its membership. Though findings on heterogeneity remain mixed, researchers have found that membership diversity often aids groups undertaking complex tasks (Bowers, Pharmed, & Salas, 2000). Member differences can also be a source of deep fault lines within a group, especially if some group members favor homogeneity and perceive that group divisions reflect deeper cultural differences (Homan & Greer, 2007; Thatcher & Patel, 2001).

This may seem irrelevant to terrorism, since extremist groups presumably draw from specific cultural, ethnic, or religious pools presently endorsing political violence, as in Ireland, Spain, and Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, some terrorist organizations are becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse. Muslim radical groups in the United States may have members who are immigrants from the Arab world and others who are native-born, such as African-Americans affiliated with the Nation of Islam, and overseas jihadist groups can include both lifelong Muslims and recent converts (Miller & Stone, 2002). The international organization Al Qaeda has recruited across a wide range of cultures and national origins (Gunaratna, 2002), which has



spawned tensions between Arabs and non-Arabs at the “foot soldier” level (Stenersen, 2010).

The case of the 9/11 hijacking group provides a striking example (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004). The core hijacking group, composed mainly of members of the Hamburg cell, was ethnically diverse, with members from Egypt, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and other nations. A potential faultline existed between them and the bulk of the hijacking team, which consisted almost entirely of Saudi Arabian men—the “muscle” trained to overpower passengers and crew who were never told of the mission’s details.

When substantive disagreement, demographics, and group status align (Lau & Murnighan, 1998, 2005; Thatcher & Patel, 2011), such faultlines could be made more prominent and exacerbated to yield significant group dysfunction. Anticipating our discussion of intragroup conflict below, the conjunction of relationship conflict (perhaps caused by cultural differences) and task conflict over the performance of group functions is particularly damaging to group effectiveness (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). If subgroups with different functions also correspond to differences in culture, then repression that makes it more difficult for one subgroup to perform its function will increase task conflict within the group, thereby making it more susceptible to cultural conflict and ensuing dysfunction. Consequently, the especially debilitating impact of simultaneous task and relationship conflict yields the following proposition:

P3: Manipulations intended to heighten the salience of cultural faultlines within a terrorist group will be most effective when paired with repressive measures that activate task conflict along those same faultlines.

With respect to our analytical framework, group dynamics contribute to both direct and indirect effects. The direct effect comes via manipulations (e.g., information operations, psychological operations, and infiltrator incitement) intended to excite relationship conflict along cultural

faultlines, and the indirect impact comes by way of activating task conflict within the group due to repression hampering subgroup task execution.

To minimize conflict based on cultural differences, groups routinely define their “in-group” identity during a social bonding process, which develops members’ sense of what it means to belong to their group and strengthen their connection to it as an entity (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005). Terrorist organizations do likewise by providing an overarching narrative and shared identity that help motivate both their subgroups and individual members. Like so many other organizations and social movements, they offer a sense of belonging and their own particular understanding of what can be a bewildering social world (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Terrorist groups rely heavily on in-group/out-group development—building up the in-group helps create the extreme dedication to the group required in this situation, whereas out-groups are dehumanized to allow them to be more easily targeted for violence (Horgan, 2005). In addition, members are encouraged to follow the path of the organization and their operational group without deviating, and follow along with the rest of the group even if a disagreement arises. Again, Al Qaeda provides an example, as some scholars believe that the organization’s strength comes less from its actual planning and more from its ability to inspire violent jihad with its dual commitment to in-group solidarity and out-group dehumanization (Sageman, 2008).

One among many potential avenues for counterterrorists is infiltrating or co-opting members to orient toward a superordinate identity that could override the messages instilled by lower-level in-group identities (Abrams et al., 2005; Kramer & Brewer, 2006). For this purpose, the ideal superordinate identity connects oneself to humanity (Nickerson & Louis, 2008); however, even a larger in-group, such as a nationality or a religion, exists at a higher level than

the small group (terrorist cell) or organizational identity (al Qaeda member) and could facilitate persuasion toward a more moderate course of action in line with those more inclusive identities.

P4: Persuasive messages intended to yield more moderate group decisions will prove more effective in those terrorist groups with at least some members oriented toward superordinate identities that are strong enough to compete with or override the in-group identity of their group or larger movement.

Fostering a superordinate identity is not always a straightforward enterprise, since the behavioral implications of such an identity can be ambiguous. For example, while the U.S. military was engaged in Iraq, both Sunni insurgents and the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government could claim that they were acting in a way consistent with an Iraqi national identity—the former by resisting a foreign occupier and the latter by protecting Iraq from social disintegration. With the departure of U.S. forces, the anti-occupation resistance frame become harder to reconcile with Iraqi national identity, so fostering of an Iraqi identity among Sunni insurgents could more clearly serve to mitigate sectarian tensions and restrain anti-Shiite terrorism (although Sunni insurgents can argue they are fighting the “Iranian occupation;” see Gabbay, 2008).

### **Cohesion and Intragroup Conflict**

In addition to network structure and composition, another factor that can prove critical to the maturation of a terrorist cell is the time and effort that members spend *becoming* a group. Social bonding, team building, identity formation, and creation of shared purpose help individual members become a coherent entity (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003). These are important to nearly any group that will be spending time together or taking on a significant task, but cohesion may be vital to terrorist groups, which require exceptional dedication to the group and its destructive purposes (Horgan, 2005). Therefore, authorities trying to undermine a terrorist

group from the outside need to understand how to diminish cohesion to break the group apart or render it inert.

### **Social Cohesion versus Task Cohesion**

Carron and Brawley (2000) define cohesion as “a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” (p. 119). Thus, equally “cohesive” groups can differ with respect to whether their primary glue is task-based cohesion or social bonds. Either task or social bonds could aid a terrorist group because, unlike conventional militaries, their larger organizations often lack an enduring institutional unity.

The relative emphasis placed on these two forms of cohesion could result in different outcomes for disruptive manipulation. For a terrorist group whose cohesion stems predominantly from commitment to a common objective, as in the Iraqi insurgency that united diverse ethnic and political factions (Hafez, 2007), repressive measures that thwart terrorist attacks may lower the group’s perception of its own efficacy as a vehicle for achieving political goals. By contrast, groups whose cohesion flows from affective relationships among its members, as for those Taliban who fought together against the Soviets (Zaeef, 2010), should prove more resilient to repression and tactical setbacks. Socially cohesive groups can even *escalate* their commitment in response to failures, as has been witnessed in socially cohesive laboratory groups (Dietz-Uhler, 1996). Thus, our fifth proposition addresses how task-cohesive groups respond differently to successful repression than socially-cohesive groups:

- P5: Repressive interventions that succeed in degrading group capabilities (a) will spur dissolution more frequently in task-cohesive groups than in socially-cohesive ones but (b) may increase members’ commitment to socially-cohesive groups.

In the disruption framework, this is a case where an intervention achieves its direct goal (repression degrades group capabilities) but can either spur or avoid group dysfunction depending on the prevalence of two different forms of cohesion.

Though we focus on theoretical issues in this essay, a methodological aside shows other challenges in studying terrorist groups. In this case, one might wonder if it is possible to measure the task and social components of cohesion in such groups, for which questionnaires and direct observation are unavailable. With respect to terrorist leadership circles, one approach could employ the variable of “primary group identity” put forth in the literature on foreign policy group decision making. This variable assesses whether a group member’s loyalty on a policy issue lies in the group itself or an external constituency (Hermann, Stein, Sundelius, & Walker, 2001). For instance, a leader may be more loyal to the faction s/he leads than the terrorist organization as a whole. Such factions can be based on ideological, geographical, tribal, or clan subgroups. If the leadership is amalgamation of factions—as is the case for the Pakistani Taliban (Franco, 2009)—the primary group identities of factional leaders reside outside the group; therefore, cohesion of the leadership group is based on a common commitment to the task at hand, rather than from interpersonal bonds and affection.

In other groups, leaders’ primary identities are with the group itself and social cohesion trumps task cohesion. The nature and history of the bonds between members resulting from kinship, friendship, education, and shared experiences, are crucial in assessing the nature of a particular group’s cohesion. For example, the top leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar, and his principal deputy, Mullah Baradar, hail from different Pashtun tribes but they fought together against the Soviets in the 1980s. The two men cooperated in the genesis and rise of the Taliban in the 1990s; Omar even fled the approach of U.S. forces in November 2001 on the back

of Baradar's motorcycle (Moreau 2009). Consequently, they have a deep bond of trust. Thus, though Baradar was arrested by Pakistani authorities in early 2010, his position within the Taliban has officially remained vacant in his absence.

### **Intragroup Conflict**

In the popular imagination, terrorist groups are highly cohesive and act as unified entities, but in reality, they can experience detrimental interpersonal strife. For instance, Mullah Dadullah, a controversial Taliban leader known for extreme violence and a prominent media profile, had a contentious relationship with the more moderate and low-key Akhtar Osmani. At one meeting, the animosity led to a fist fight. A 2006 airstrike killed Osmani after Dadullah allegedly tipped off NATO as to his comrade's location. In turn, senior Taliban leaders may have betrayed Dadullah, who was killed by US forces a few months later (Coghlan, 2009).

Relational clashes like these may not always lead to such extreme outcomes, but they can undermine effective group performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit, Jehn, & Greer, 2012). Substantive task conflict, by contrast, has been theorized to improve group performance on non-routine tasks by spurring evaluation of alternatives (Jehn, 1995; Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001). A recent meta-analysis, however, found no clear effect of task conflict on group performance, except for studies of senior management teams (de Wit et al., 2012). Group performance suffers most when relationship and task conflict are highly correlated (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003, de Wit et al., 2012).

Thus, counterterrorist manipulations that generate *relational* intragroup conflict will be more effective in inducing dysfunction than those aimed at producing task conflict. These interventions would differ greatly from the ones discussed in the previous section. In this case, authorities would not conduct a repressive crackdown on a group to break apart a coalition;

instead, counterterrorists would manipulate a group (via information operations or infiltrators) to exacerbate personal conflicts. Such relational conflict-inducing manipulations could exploit rivalries, status inequalities, and the aforementioned cultural faultlines. (Clumsy efforts to sow dissension, however, could yield a norm against intragroup conflict, given the possibility that such discord stemmed from enemy machinations.) The more damaging nature of relational conflict on group performance yields our sixth following proposition:

P6: Counterterrorist manipulations that spur intragroup relational conflict will prove more effective at engendering group dysfunction than those designed to generate task-related intragroup conflict.

This proposition would not be of much practical value if counterterrorists were free to target both relational and task conflict independently, without any need to consider tradeoffs between them. In reality, counterterrorists have few opportunities to conduct manipulative interventions and must use them carefully; an infiltrator will not survive long if used to both spread malicious rumors and transmit disinformation that undermines missions. Thus, assuming a terrorist group is equally susceptible to both task and relationship conflict, scarce opportunities aimed at long-term disruption should target the relational dimension of groups.

Because of the incendiary quality of relational conflict, there may be circumstances in which terrorist groups experiencing such turmoil may *not* be ideal targets for repression. Actions that inhibit intragroup communication may have the undesirable effect of *reducing* group discord. Intense repression raises the cost of communicating, which could give a consensus-oriented leader both the impetus and justification to restructure a group's network so that opposing factions cannot communicate directly with one another. The severing of direct links between clashing members would end counterproductive communication (like fist fights) and

thereby ease relationship conflict and associated dysfunction. Thus, we propose the following:

- P7: For groups with high relational conflict and a consensus-oriented leader, increasing communication costs will reduce relationship conflict and, thereby, improve group performance efficiency.

This proposition provides another example of how a counterterrorist intervention (repression aimed at network degradation) can have a counterproductive secondary effect on another goal (group dysfunction). Terrorists may be aware of such a dynamic and use it to their benefit, as might have been the case with the prior example involving the Taliban and Mullah Dadullah. If the Taliban leadership was indeed culpable in Dadullah's death, then they essentially outsourced the termination of a disruptive senior executive to the U.S. military. In effect, they turned counterterrorist repression toward their own purpose of easing in-house dysfunction, with the added benefit of blaming enemy forces for the murder. Once again, the point is to draw out the adverse consequences that may flow from underlying group dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, we have introduced an analytical framework for addressing the interactions of small group phenomena with counterterrorist interventions, and we used the framework to generate seven novel theoretical propositions. In Table 1, we summarize those propositions, along with their relationship to the framework's main elements. For each proposition, the table identifies the intervention type (repression, manipulation, and/or persuasion) and its corresponding primary goal (degradation, dysfunction, and/or moderation). The table also shows the particular group process occurring within the proposition, the goal affected by that process, the effect pathway (direct facilitation of the intervention's primary goal, indirect feedback of one type of intervention upon a different goal area, and/or indirect



facilitation of another type of intervention), and the positive or negative utility of the net effects from the counterterrorism perspective.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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Though the disruption of terrorist groups can be considered from many perspectives, most previous studies have primarily focused on various aspects of the repression-degradation linkage, such as leadership decapitation (Pryce, 2012). We take a different approach by placing small group behavior front-and-center in how we model the disruption of terrorist groups. Furthermore, the disruption analytical framework provides a guide for systematically applying a broad range of small group theory to the different types of counterterrorist interventions, through both direct interaction and indirect feedback. In addition to its use in academic research, the framework can provide a conceptual architecture for counterterrorists to use in the practical assessment of small group effects in real-world terrorism situations.

Our seven propositions include relatively straightforward insertions of group theory into the terrorism context, some warnings as to potential adverse side effects of counterterrorism interventions, and reconsiderations of group theories spurred by an interest in promoting group dysfunction, dissolution, and moderation. In addition to providing insight into the effects of counterterrorist actions themselves, the disruption framework poses questions and associated propositions that push the boundaries of small group research itself beyond the terrorist context. For example, the effects of a marked increase in communication costs and the associated propositions involving the interaction of leadership and communication networks (Propositions 1 and 7), although activated by intense repression for terrorism, can be investigated in other group contexts where communication among members can be curtailed sharply by exogenous forces.

### **Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Terrorist Groups**

Though the framework has utility, it is not a single theory of terrorist group disruption, and it does not rely on any particular small group theory. Given the diverse types of group processes involved, we do not believe a single grand terrorist disruption theory is any more feasible than a grand unified theory of small group dynamics. It is, however, possible to develop well-defined theories that yield specific behavioral propositions for particular aspects of the disruption framework, such as the effects of large changes in communication costs on network restructuring or the routes by which repression can lead terrorist groups to more extreme violence via groupthink or other processes.

Moreover, a more comprehensive treatment of the broad range of group phenomena which play roles in the disruption of terrorist groups is certainly possible. Within the framework itself, more hypotheses can be generated regarding group polarization, minority influence, and groupthink. Further research aimed at systematic application of our disruption framework to a wide sweep of group behaviors would benefit by integrating the framework with a general theoretical model that has sufficient abstractness to encompass even terrorist groups.

An example would be the Embedded System Theoretical (EST) framework (Gastil, 2010). Like other system models (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000), this framework emphasizes the embedded character of groups and complex feedback relationships between the groups, their organizational setting, and the wider society in which they exist. The larger organizational context is critical for the formation, characteristics, membership, and resources of smaller terrorist groups (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Sageman, 2008). Beyond training and resources, organizations provide a grand narrative and purpose to individual members (Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003). In an equally important sense, terrorist groups are

embedded in far wider social structures, such that they can transform the political landscape of a nation where they carry out attacks, or even the wider global community. Though Fine (2012) uses the term “tiny publics” generally to refer to pro-social (or at least innocuous) groups, terrorist groups share the same ability as those micro-publics to weave the larger social reality of their members, but they also have an even greater capacity for reshaping mass cultural identities and political agendas far beyond their group boundaries.

### **Designing Empirical Research**

On the more practical question of research methods, we acknowledge that empirically testing propositions involving terrorist groups is difficult. Some guidance can be drawn from the research on foreign policy decision making. The most straightforward approach involves retrospective case studies as has been done with respect to groupthink in foreign policy decision making (Janis 1982; 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 1997). Methods devised to systematically test groupthink and related propositions across a number of historical cases may also be transferable to the terrorism context (Schafer & Chrichlow, 2010; Tetlock, Peterson, McGuire, Chang, & Feld, 1992). However, terrorist group internal dynamics are usually much more opaque than the U.S. and Western cases analyzed in these studies. Yet terrorist public statements are readily observable and it may be possible to use these to empirically assess propositions as has been done for groupthink among political leaders (Tetlock, 1979). The Soviet-era Kremlin was a famously closed leadership group but public statements by its members have been used to analyze its group decision-making processes (Stewart, Hermann, & Hermann, 1989). Terrorist rhetoric has been used to assess the leadership styles of terrorist leaders (Hermann & Sakiev, 2011) and in cases where multiple individuals within terrorist groups make statements and give interviews, it is possible that group differences and processes may be revealed.

Another distinctive group context presents similar observational problems for group researchers. Courts have shielded jurors' deliberations from public scrutiny, so researchers routinely have turned to mock juries—small groups of people set up in an experimental setting, tasked with hearing a made-up court case and reaching a decision (e.g., Hastie, Penrod, & Pennington, 2002). Though ecological validity questions persist for such simulated group deliberations, the research toolkit for terrorist groups could include experimental studies of group decision making on options with widely divergent benefits and consequences. (Obviously, such studies would need to focus on topics that are controversial but not so intense as to cause personal or political strife among study subjects.) For example, an experimental group created from an online convenience sample could be given a controversial subject and asked to decide between an array of (legal) options ranging from moderate to more extreme. Varying the shape of the group's communication network could simulate the consequences of outside repression and test the impact of network structure on the ability to achieve consensus.

Such an innocuous experimental setting should also show the wider theoretical relevance of findings inspired by questions particularly salient in the terrorism context. More generally, the framework for group disruption described herein could be useful for scholars and practitioners thinking about how to disrupt other malevolent groups—ones whose covert and illegal behavior poses a sufficiently grave threat as to demand a multi-pronged government response which coordinates repressive, manipulative, and persuasive interventions.

Whether using historical case studies or conducting experiments on “mock cells,” much work remains if we are to connect research on small groups with terrorism scholarship. Toward this end, we have introduced a theoretical framework and advanced seven propositions, but this represents an early stage of a more systematic research program. Only by advancing our

knowledge can we hope to learn what makes these groups persistent in their memberships and deadly in their decision making, as well as what leads them to dysfunction or disintegration. By applying existing theories and conducting further research on terrorist groups, we may gain additional and timely insights that could make it even harder for such groups to formulate and carry out their most destructive ambitions.

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Table 1

*List of propositions and their relation to group disruption analytical framework*

<b>Proposition</b>	<b>Intervention Type/Goal</b>	<b>Group Process</b>	<b>Goal Influenced</b>	<b>Effect Path and Utility</b>
P1: Significantly increasing a terrorist group's communication costs will increase the congruence between leader preferences and group decisions.	Repression/ Degradation	Restructuring of group communication network to enhance leader's decision-making power	Moderation	Indirect feedback; potentially negative (heightened extremism)
P2: Significantly decreasing group communication costs will enhance the effectiveness of persuasion tactics aimed at moderating terrorist group decisions, if a substantial fraction of group members or key leaders are leaning toward moderation.	Repression/ Degradation	More open communication network allows freer exchange of information, opinions	Moderation	Indirect facilitation of persuasion; positive
P3: Manipulations intended to heighten the salience of cultural faultlines within a terrorist group will be most effective when paired with repressive measures that activate task conflict along those same faultlines.	Manipulation/ Dysfunction and Repression/ Degradation	Synergistic damage to group performance efficiency by simultaneous relationship and task conflict	Dysfunction	Direct and indirect facilitation of manipulation; positive
P4: Persuasive messages intended to yield more moderate group decisions will prove more effective in those terrorist groups with at least some members oriented toward superordinate identities that are strong enough to compete with or override the in-group identity of their group or larger movement.	Persuasion/ Moderation	Less hostility to out-groups by promotion of social identity which includes them and lessens salience of terrorist group as in-group	Moderation	Direct facilitation of persuasion; positive

Table 1 (cont.)

<b>Proposition</b>	<b>Intervention Type/Goal</b>	<b>Group Process</b>	<b>Goal Influenced</b>	<b>Effect Path and Utility</b>
P5: Repressive interventions that succeed in degrading group capabilities: (a) will spur dissolution more frequently in task-cohesive groups than in socially-cohesive groups; but (b) may increase members' commitment to socially-cohesive groups.	Repression/Degradation	Task-cohesive group members lose commitment to group if it does not serve instrumental goals; failures, losses of socially-cohesive groups motivate desire to prove efficacy and justify sacrifices	Dysfunction	Indirect feedback; both positive and negative
P6: Counterterrorist manipulations that spur intragroup relational conflict will prove more effective at engendering group dysfunction than those designed to generate task-related intragroup conflict.	Manipulation/Dysfunction	Relationship conflict more consistently impairs group performance	Dysfunction	Direct facilitation of manipulation; positive
P7: For groups with high relational conflict and a consensus-oriented leader, increasing communication costs will reduce relationship conflict and, thereby, improve group performance efficiency.	Repression/Degradation	Leader restructures communication network to minimize counterproductive interactions between conflicting group members	Dysfunction	Indirect feedback; negative



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