Is terrorism a group phenomenon?

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A B S T R A C T

This paper offers a critical review of the role of group processes in terrorist behavior. It draws on a fundamental distinction between terrorist ‘involvement’ and terrorist ‘events’ to explore what group phenomena might contribute to our understanding of actual terrorist behavior, as opposed to the context to terrorism. It does this through the use of a number of case studies of terrorist incidents, and explores how generalizations that might be made about potential group-focused causal accounts fail to offer sufficient explanations of the behaviors identified. These case studies include the Jewel of Medina arson attack, and the PIRA attack that led to the death of Garda Jerry McCabe. The paper concludes by suggesting a need for a greater focus on individual activity in its immediate context, through empirical research into terrorist behavior, rather than its extensive hinterland.

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1. Introduction

To undertake an analysis of terrorism as a group phenomenon implies two broad agendas and assumptions: (1) that we are clear what terrorism is (and its relationship with political violence), and (2) that we are clear what we mean by group phenomena in the context of terrorism. If we can establish these issues, we then need to understand what the relationship is between commitment with terrorism (i.e., becoming a terrorist, engagement with terrorism and disengagement from terrorism; Taylor & Horgan, 2006), terrorist behavior and group membership, and also the level of analysis we want to adopt to address terrorism.

The basic position taken in this paper is that collective activity that we normally associate with group phenomena are of significance in terrorist behavior as a contextual factor, but are of little significance when we consider the causal qualities of specific terrorist behaviors. The argument to support this draws on the Rational Choice perspective, and in this paper this is illustrated by reference to a number of disparate...
terrorist situations and events. The position taken here stands in direct contrast to that offered by Post (2005) who asserts that group, organizational, and social psychology provides the greatest analytical power in understanding terrorist activity. The view taken here is that the issues of primary concern in terrorism research relate to violent acts, not propensities to commit violence or their presumed social context. It is in that context that this paper should be understood. First, I will consider definitional and conceptual issues related to terrorism. Following this, I will provide case study accounts of terrorism and analyze each account regarding how terrorist behavior might relate to group phenomena. Finally, I will examine and evaluate the specific case of suicide terrorism.

This paper draws largely on UK examples of terrorism. There has not been in the UK the dramatic example of mass casualty terrorism that characterized 9/11, but there has been in the UK a much greater incidence of lower levels of lethal and serious casualty related terrorist activity. Indeed, the UK has probably experienced more direct terrorist violence from multiple sources than most if not all Western countries (excluding Israel as sui generis), and has, therefore, both more examples and greater complexity from which to construct analysis. However, taking this approach does assume that there are generic processes in terrorism that extend across national and geographic boundaries, and that generalizations can therefore be made from the UK experience to other situations. Social, political, and cultural practices undoubtedly influence the context from which terrorism emerges but we do not know if these also affect the expression of terrorist violence beyond the situational context in which terrorism occurs. However, regardless of how we express the statistics of terrorist-related deaths (and the hugely greater amount of physical, social, and psychological terrorist induced trauma), the sheer scale of terrorism makes understanding of the processes involved, and the structure of terrorist activities, all the more imperative.

2. What is terrorism and how might we investigate it?

This paper is not the arena for an elaborate exploration of what we mean by terrorism. But it is necessary to at least explore some of the issues of what we mean by terrorism, to help locate terrorism within a context of group membership. Most States express either implicitly or explicitly a sense of what terrorism means in their legal provision. Legal provision is not of course the only perspective from which we might understand terrorism, although it is of obvious significance in responding to terrorism. Carlile (2007) presents a very useful overview of the UK and US legal context to understanding definitions of terrorism, and concludes that from a legal perspective “...There is no single definition of terrorism that commands full international approval.” (p. 47). Many would also echo that conclusion from a social science perspective. As an operational definition of terrorism, however, the FBI definition (cited in Carlile, 2007 p. 3), “The use of serious violence against persons or property, or threat to use such violence, to intimidate or coerce a government, the public or any section of the public, in order to promote political, social or ideological objectives” is acknowledged by Carlile as having many virtues, and is the definition broadly followed in this paper.

In a fundamental sense, however, one of the basic problems anyone faces when trying to understand terrorism, is to know what the subject matter is. Are we concerned with violence (including murder), aggressive behaviors, or challenging behavior that gains meaning from some political context? Are we to understand terrorism from an individual perspective, a social perspective, state perspective, or a global perspective? Are we concerned with the potential to commit violence (as in the contemporary emphasis on radicalization processes) or is terrorism something very focused; related to the expression of actual, rather than potential, violence? Furthermore to which discipline do we to look to structure our understanding — psychology, sociology, or political science? Hayden (2006) has characterized terrorism as a “wicked problem”, and the comments by Schmid and Jongman (1988) seem as appropriate now as in 1988 when they noted “there are probably few areas in the social science literature in which so much is written on the basis of so little research” (p.89).

Part of the problem is that the concept of terrorism is, to a large extent, socially and politically constructed rather than being grounded in a behavioral analysis. Stohl (2005) describes the area as “socially constructed, culturally specific and changing” (p. 2). Or rather, to be more accurate, the qualities that are used to distinguish terrorist behavior from what at times seems to be similar criminal behavior draw on essentially political, rather than other more normative qualities. This has tended to lead to the dominance in the academic literature of political science approaches to terrorism, in contrast to approaches from other disciplines. In the context of UK political science this tends to lead to a focus on theoretical rather than scientific approaches.

Ransdorp (2008) offers a coherent criticism of the effects of a political science focus on terrorism research, in particular pointing out the lack of empirical studies in the area. Sageman and Hoffman (2008) have similarly been highly critical of the lack of scientific evidence in the study of terrorism, in contrast to the plethora of politically influenced secondary analyses and what at times are weak journalistic accounts of events. Taking this point further, Stohl (2005) critically notes that much of terrorism research is what “... Popper (1934) might caustically designate as ‘wisdom’ rather than ‘science’. Thus, the assembled wisdom might be correct but the demarcation between wisdom and science that would allow proposing the necessary conjectures, collecting the appropriate data and subjecting these conjectures and data to tests which might arguably demonstrate their falsifiability has not yet met the standards of social science epistemology” (p.3).

Sageman and Hoffman (2008) have similarly characterized the weakness of work in terrorism areas in terms of a lack of evidence-based research. The problem is, however, that there are very few actual terrorists (that is to say individuals who have been involved in either political violence, or conspiracies to commit political violence), and our knowledge of terrorists tends to be mediated by the State rather than openly available to the scientific community. Furthermore our knowledge of terrorists tends to be after the event (and generally after arrest and conviction); of course our knowledge of other forensic populations tends to be similarly constrained.

A complicating factor is that inaccessible terrorists generally exist within (but at a distance from) a body of supporters that are generally accessible, and frequently what is represented as terrorism research is actually about that terrorist hinterland, rather than terrorists themselves. The available evidence on which to develop empirical studies about terrorists and their behavior (as opposed to their supporters) is difficult for most researchers to identify let alone access. Sageman in Sageman and Hoffman (2008) assert that “…there is no substitute for careful scrutiny of primary documents, field research and analysis of court documents” (p. 1). However, even this latter source becomes more difficult in circumstances where defendants plead guilty (as in The Jewel of Medina case presented below) and evidence is therefore not openly available because it has not been presented in court.

3. What are group phenomena?

As far as the general concept of what we mean by group phenomena is concerned, it seems rather trite to assert that groups are an important element in our social lives, and then uncritically identify the same group processes as influencing terrorist behavior. We might on a priori grounds assume that generic group processes influence individuals in terrorist organizations. However, this would only be
plausible if we assume that: (1) terrorist organizations function like other kinds of organizations and (2) terrorist group membership is the same as any other form of group membership. This, of course, might be a reasonable assumption. However, unfortunately comparative studies to establish that rather critical relationship remain to be undertaken.

Given the political and social significance of terrorism, it is probably more important to determine what role groups might play in two further senses. First, what is the extent to which terrorist involvement is necessarily associated with some form of group membership or activity? Second, if group membership is associated with terrorist involvement, what influence might such involvement have, in terms of influencing and presumably contributing to the specific violence of terrorist behavior as opposed to non terrorist violence or political dissent? A further difficulty, however, is to disentangle the influence of political ideology (and its relationship with violence), and the related quality of identity as elements in terrorist activity, and the effects of that on group membership per se.

An even further area of conceptual confusion relates to the sense of what, in psychological terms, we might describe as group phenomena. Should concepts such as obedience, conformity, leadership, collective behavior, and terrorist networks be regarded as group phenomena? Or should only basic group processes such as group cohesiveness, social norms, and group socialization be included? Networks as organizational structures undoubtedly play a part in directing terrorist behavior, and they may also be elements in the formation of ideology and identity; but it might be argued that they direct behavior rather than contribute to its formation.

What then do we mean by group phenomena? A group is something more than an aggregate of people, and a customary de
terestion. The detail of this incident gives some insights into its group context, and whilst it should not be regarded as representative, it clearly offers a significant effect on determining identity, and an individual’s sense of who they are.

Expressed in this way, groups represent fundamental and necessary elements of our lives; and clearly membership of groups either by birth, accident, or choice, set the scene for social and psychological development. But the point at issue here is not whether or not groups influence our lives, but rather is the violence of terrorism a product of that influence? More specifically, do group influences provide a necessary and sufficient account of terrorist behavior?

4. The emergence of terrorist violence

In many ways the perspective taken here on the emergence of terrorist violence is similar to what Moghaddam (2005) describes as a staircase to terrorism. Moghaddam distinguishes between contextual and specific factors. He describes some six potential levels the individual might progress through in becoming a terrorist, the early elements of which prepare the individual for greater involvement (and might be regarded as contextual in character), the latter focusing and confirming the choices made (being in consequence more specific in character). Moghaddam grounds his analysis largely in notions of identity, and the perceived legitimacy of the terrorist organization, sidestepping inhibitory mechanisms and resulting in potential engagement in terrorism. Taylor and Horgan (2006) have offered a somewhat more sophisticated model of essentially a similar process, based on more empirically grounded Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) analogies. Taylor and Horgan similarly refer to a process account of terrorism as:

“Involvement in terrorism, at least in psychological terms, as a process rather than a state; this implies a focus not on the individual and their presumed psychological or moral qualities, but on process variables such as the changing context that the individual operates in, and also the relationships between events and the individual as they affect behavior. Such an approach would be consistent with the way we tend to see other forms of problematic behavior” (p. 586).

This approach emphasizes situational context as a primary factor in terrorism involvement suggesting that preventative initiatives should perhaps focus on situational and contextual information.

5. Terrorism case studies

To move the debate forward, it is useful to explore some specific examples of what might be regarded as terrorist political violence. The following represent accounts of events (obtained from numerous sources) surrounding specific terrorist events. Alongside each, an analysis of the behavior is presented in relation to possible causative factors.

5.1. Case study 1: The Jewel of Medina

The following is an account of the events surrounding an attack related to the publication of the novel, The Jewel of Medina. The value of this particular account in this context, even given the limited information available, is that it allows us to focus on the behavior involved, rather than the political context to the event. The Jewel of Medina is a historical novel by Sherry Jones that was scheduled for publication in 2008. It describes a fictionalized version of the life of Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Mohammed, who is regarded by Muslims as accompanying Him as He received most of His revelations. In the book account, Aisha was allegedly betrothed to the Prophet at the age of 6, and remained with Him until his death. Although a fictionalized account, the book generated many protests largely around, amongst other things, alleged implications of pedophilic behavior of the Prophet in being betrothed to and marrying so young a girl.

On September 27, 2008, a London Muslim, Ali Beheshti, was charged in London along with 2 others (Abrar Mirza and Abbas Taj) with ‘conspiracy to commit arson, being reckless as to whether life was endangered’. The events that gave rise to this charge against Beheshti, Mirza, and Taj was that Beheshti and Mirza poured diesel through the letter box of the home of the potential UK publisher of The Jewel of Medina, Martin Rynja, of Gibson Square Books Ltd; Taj’s role was to drive the getaway car. This was clearly a political act (it had its origins in political protest) and attempting to set fire to a building in this context can reasonably be described as an act of political violence.

In the context of politically motivated (and instrumental in character) aggressive behavior that we might refer to as terrorism, this is not a usual charge; it is more commonly used to prosecute in situations where there has been a gross threat to life for some kind of commercial gain, particularly in cases of insurance fraud, or in cases of fire-raising (although more typically the explanations of such fire-raising tend to relate to psychopathy or avarice rather than politics; Prins & Prins, 1993).

The detail of this incident gives some insights into its group context, and whilst it should not be regarded as representative, it clearly offers a perspective on the factors behind the particular behaviors involved. On the night of the 27th September, to their families Beheshti, Mirza, and Taj appeared to be planning to spend the night at Regent’s Park Mosque, in North London, as part of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. However shortly after Taj and beheshti arrived at the Mosque, they left and set out for the home of Martin Rynja. They had a change of clothing.
with them, and also some Diesel bought by Beheshti, from Ilford, East London, which was stored in a green container inside a white plastic bag, and which was transferred to the boot of Taj’s Honda Accord at around 10:30 pm the evening before the arson attack. Taj and Beheshti then drove to pick up Mirza from near the Queen’s Road Mosque in Walthamstow, Northeast London. The three men were observed driving twice through the square in Islington where Rynja lived, before Beheshti and Mirza left the car and approached the front door with the petrol can in the white plastic bag. They poured the diesel fuel through the letter box and used a disposable lighter to set it on fire. Beheshti and Mirza were arrested after being stopped by armed London Metropolitan Police officers in an intelligence-led operation as they attempted to flee the scene. Taj, the getaway driver, drove off when he saw the police, but was stopped in his car and arrested near Angel tube station in the early hours of September 27, 2008, just after Beheshti and Mirza had attempted to set fire to the premises. Due to previous intelligence, police had warned the potential UK publisher (Martin Rynja and his partner) to move out of their four-storey townhouse, which had an office in the basement.

Prior to this incident, the men were under close police surveillance. Beheshti and Mirza were seen carrying out reconnaissance “drive throughs” of the area around where Mr. Rynja lived in the weeks leading up to the attack. Beheshti was also filmed on CCTV filling the petrol can with diesel. He later put that can into the boot of Taj’s car, which again was filmed. The three defendants were seen meeting before the September 27 arson attack driving between various locations, and at one point Beheshti changed his clothes in an apparent attempt to disguise himself. Following their arrests, police searches found research had been conducted into Gibson Square Books. Mirza also had photographs of the house on his iPhone taken some 3 weeks earlier. It would seem that this was a premeditated attack, and Ali Beheshti, and Abrar Mirza, 23, pleaded guilty at Croydon Crown Court to conspiracy to recklessly damage property and endanger life. Abbas Taj denied his charge, but was subsequently found guilty.

Beheshti was the principle actor in this event and although it is difficult to know exactly who initiated the act and its preparation, Beheshti played a leading role. Taj appears to have been recruited at a relatively short time before the event. Beheshti’s role can be inferred from the following: as part of the surveillance operation police had bugged Taj’s car and their conversation was recorded as they drove to the square. Beheshti was heard asking Taj: “You wanna be the emir [leader], yeh?” and Taj replied: “That would be you.” “You know what we gotta do, anyway, innit?” Beheshti added 1.

The proposal to publish The Jewel of Medina attracted a lot of adverse comments in some Muslim quarters, and this attack gains adverse comments in some Muslim quarters, and this attack gains 124

How are we to understand this incident? It was clearly a premeditated aggressive attack on the home of a publisher, who planned to publish something that offended sections of Muslim society that Bekashi was associated with (by creating a fictionalized representation of The Prophet which included alleged sexual relations with His child bride). The offence presumably sought to intimidate Martin Rynja into not publishing the book (which succeeded and the book was published eventually in the US). Furthermore, the offence had the potential to cause considerable property damage, and similarly potential risk to life, and it is reasonable to assume that the group had been under surveillance, considerable damage would indeed have been done. The offence did not appear to hold any financial motives.

It is not however an example of a “mindless” form of vandalism or property damage. This offence gains meaning from being placed within the broader context of Muslim extremism and protest, and the specific protests around the preparations for publication of the book. Although there is no evidence that Beheshti had been involved in other politically violent acts, he was associated with aggressive political demonstrations and with people who undoubtedly did have links with political violence and terrorism, and he had strong social links within that milieu.

Was Beheshti a terrorist because of these associations? Was he involved in political violence, a form of dangerous vandalism, or a criminal conspiracy not motivated by money? Do the instrumental qualities of this event serve to separate out this kind of behavior from other forms of anti-social behavior? If so, should we therefore seek special explanations other than those related to social deviancy to explain them? Beheshti was not charged under the various UK Terrorism Acts because there was no evidence of a specific offence under those acts, and there seems to have been insufficient evidence of intent to cause physical harm. This does not mean however that his actions do not fall within a legal context of terrorism; what he did fell within the provisions of criminal law, and the UK Terrorism Acts were designed to extend, rather than replace, existing legal provisions.

Unlike most people involved in property damage, Beheshti was not an adolescent (he was aged 41 at the time of the offence), and was not under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Nor does Beheshti readily fall within the categories of adult arsonists identified by Geller (2008) such as those with developmental disabilities, firefighter fire setters, those who use fire to self-mutilate, or serial arsonists. The political instrumentality of Beheshti’s acts do place him within a category identified by Geller (2008) as of growing significance (eco terrorists) but foresetting then becomes (as in terrorism) a tactic and a choice with a political framework rather than something with a psychological pathogenic focus. Perhaps of more significance, Beheshti’s actions more readily fit within the context of gang culture (National Gang Crime Research Center, 2001), in the sense that his behavior might be understood within two of the clusters that distinguish gang behavior; high commitment to gang life, and gang organizational sophistication (Wood, 2006).

Does this then place understanding of Beheshti’s actions within a group framework? Members of his Mosque or his particular radical political group might reject the negative implications of the label “gang” (see Wood & Alleyne, this issue), but in the sense used here, it might relate to notions of community, and in that sense it does seem at first sight a plausible analogy. On the other hand, many hundreds of people attend the Mosque used by Beheshti and only three (the three defendants) were known to be involved in this violent (and essentially individual) protest, as distinct from more collective acts of

1 Unattributable source.
2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v-FG4fZNPLgWY.
non-violent protest. Beheshti does not appear to have received mass support or sympathy from within his own community, and to the extent that we can make a judgment in this case, group processes—however construed—do not seem to adequately identify why these three became involved in this violence as distinct from the many hundreds who were not. Above all it is this measure of utility that seems to be of significance in understanding terrorist violence.

5.1.2. Aggression

From another perspective, however, we do know that aggression as a trait within individuals may be expressed across a range of situations (e.g., Baron & Richardson, 1994) and we also know that impulsivity has been strongly implicated in aggressive behavior (Hollander & Stein, 1995), with even some suggestion that it is impulsivity that reliably differentiates offenders from non-offenders (Pallone & Hennessy, 1996). Smith, Waterman and Ward (2006) describe driving aggression in terms that bear some similarity with the events that seem to characterize Beheshti, in that anger and aggression were predictors of driving violence and were perhaps also relevant in this case. It is tempting to try to extend the analogy to understand Beheshti’s behavior. However in the absence of more formal clinical assessment it is not possible to explore this further. Nevertheless the difference between Beheshti’s behavior and all these situations is that behind Beheshti’s behavior is also an ideological commitment and structure, associated with a common social framework that is supportive and facilitating of the expression of violent behavior (as illustrated by Beheshti’s involvement in the cross burning protest, for example).

Understanding Beheshti’s actions (and those of his co-defendants) comes closer (but on a much smaller scale) to the analysis offered by Sageman in Sageman and Hoffman (2008) of the relationship between Al Qaida and its multiple international client elements. The analogy can be seen in terms of distributed non-hierarchical structures, rather than locating terrorist actions within a hierarchically defined group structure that issues commands and directs strategy. Beheshti’s actions undoubtedly contributed to the broader objectives associated with protesting about publication of the book, and in a more general sense represent an assertion of radical Islamic identity. But there is no evidence of Beheshti’s particular actions being in any sense determined by any group membership or structure.

5.1.3. Social identity and cohesion

If we want to place Beheshti’s actions within a framework of group phenomena, what might be a more profitable area to explore are notions of social identity, and associated processes such as social cohesion. Social identity has been defined by Tajfel (1981) as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from [his] knowledge of [his] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 225). Our self-concepts might relate to a number of groups and foci, but one of particular note in our context relates to ethnicity. Drawing on Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004), Phinney and Ong (2007) identify a number of components of ethnic identity as “self-categorization, commitment and attachment, exploration, behavioral involvement, in-group attitudes (private regard), ethnic values and beliefs, importance or salience of group membership, and ethnic identity in relation to national identity” (p. 272).

Eidelson and Eidelson (2003) although arguing from a different conceptual perspective (primarily a CBT context) relate structures like these to conflicts defined by ethnicity (and related concepts of nationality and religious identity). They identify five core belief domains of individuals and collective worldviews of groups that may either trigger, or limit, the expression of violence—superiority, injustice, vulnerability, helplessness and distrust. These concepts certainly seem to apply to Beheshti in a general sense. Although there are no specific verifiable accounts of Beheshti’s views that can be cited, his views are quite vividly illustrated in the address given by Omar Bakri in the Koran Desecration Protest at the US Embassy in London on 20 May 2005 referred to above in which Beheshti participated (and with which he presumably agreed). Social cohesion might be said to draw upon similar processes to those identified by Eidelson and Eidelson (2003), yet also emphasize emotional qualities as an element in the co-ordination of social interaction.

5.1.4. Communities of practice

A further avenue to explore relates to the sense in which situational factors can exercise influence in communities through communities of practice (Lave & Etienne, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice refer to shared and emergent sociocultural practices when people with common goals interact towards achieving those goals. It is a form of collective learning that frequently has informal as well as formal qualities. Joint activities, discussions, and common agendas are features that relate to effective communities of practice, and which can generate behavior change.

Military training, with its combination of formal and informal learning strategies illustrate how effective communities of practice can be in shaping behavior. Lankford (2009) explores how:

The U.S. military transformed relatively normal soldiers into the abusive guards at Abu Ghraib [through] a combination of (1) basic recruitment and training strategies, (2) general authorizations for increased aggression and violence after 9/11, (3) specific authorizations for more aggressive interrogations, and (4) coercive pressures, protections, and the use of dehumanization at the Iraqi prison (p. 3).

A central explanatory tool that can help make sense of this relates to communities of practice, which in Lankford’s case describes the environment created by military training and hierarchical command structures.

Communities of practice may help us to better understand how membership of communities shape and focus behavior. Membership of Al-Muhajiroun (or any political party) can probably be characterized in this sense as a community of practice, and the intense discussion, religious observance, and active political protest that occurs for its members may well create environments that bear analogy with Lankford’s analysis of US military training practices.

These notions may help to provide an understanding of the context from which Beheshti emerges as both a radical activist and a rather ineffective terrorist. But they still do not offer a sufficient account of why Beheshti engaged in his violent excursion, as opposed to any other member of Al-Muhajiroun. Perhaps we need to recall Lichbach’s (1998) caution: “Individuals more or less purposefully make history, society, conditions, and rules, yet history, society, conditions, and rules make individuals. We are both autonomous creators and dependent creatures, innovators and prisoners” (p. 403). Thus, a sense of reciprocal process is likely to be associated with terrorist behavior.

5.1.5. Involvement and events

In drawing this element of the discussion to a close and in an attempt to move the debate on, there may be an important distinction to draw here from the Rational Choice criminological literature. Clarke and Felson (1993) make a critical distinction between “criminal involvement” and “criminal events”, which may be equally relevant in thinking about terrorism (Taylor & Horgan, 2006). In the terms used by Clarke and Felson, criminal involvement refers to “the processes through which individuals choose to become initially involved in particular forms of crime, to continue and to desist from that involvement.” (p. 6). Different stages of involvement therefore imply different decisional factors, and need to be considered as separate. In contrast, criminal event decisions refer to, “the decision processes involved in the commission of a particular crime (i.e. the criminal event) [that] are dependent upon their own special categories of
It might be argued that Kaczynski is atypical of terrorists in general, in the sense that he was so very socially isolated. On the other hand, it might be argued that Bilal Abdullah, the medical doctor at the centre of the 2007 London attempted bombing and the Glasgow Airport car bombing, whilst not so socially isolated as Kaczynski was nevertheless relatively isolated from any engagement with radical Muslim activity in the UK, and was certainly much less socially involved in radical politics than Beheshti. Abdullah appears to have had close (possibly indirect) operational links with extreme radical groups in Iraq, and security sources (unconfirmed) suggest he sought to undertake a suicide mission in Baghdad but was denied permission. Whilst in the UK he appeared to have had some marginal but noticeable connection with Hizb ut-Tahrir in Cambridge University, such that the intelligence services took note of him. He had, however, no known contact with any terrorist activity in the UK and was certainly not visibly active in any political or other group (unlike Beheshti, for example, who was very visibly active in political agitation and protest). Abdullah formed a close relationship with Kafeel Ahmed, the young student who died in the Glasgow attack, who he needed to construct the bombs used. This hardly constitutes a sense of group involvement, however, in the sense that we might normally understand it.

5.2. Case study 2: The Provisional IRA

Other terrorist activities do appear to belong within highly structured networks if not groups. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) is one such example. Horgan and Taylor (1999, 2003) describe organizational structures in PIRA with particular reference to financial activity, and Taylor and Horgan (2006) describe inter alia a linear depiction of terrorist roles and functions based on the organizational structure of PIRA. This is reproduced as Fig. 1, and represented in terms of role distance from violent events. It also represents a dimension of illegality/legality, for of course not all activities associated with terrorism are necessarily illegal.

In a highly structured organization such as PIRA, superimposed onto the functional elements outlined in Fig. 1 is a command hierarchy. This command hierarchy holds at its apex the PIRA Army Council, and beneath it a General Headquarters made up of Departments broadly conforming to the functional elements diagrammatically shown above. A regional command structure of a Northern Command (covering the nine Ulster counties and Counties Leitrim and Louth) and Southern Command (covering all other counties) gave regional expression to the command structure. Actual terrorist activity however was conducted by Active Service Units (ASU’s) that were made up of groups of around 6 members, supported by a Brigade and Company structure for logistical support, and directed by the Command structure. A Quartermaster reporting to the PIRA leadership controlled ASU weapons. Other structures based on older battalion structures existed to maintain control over local communities.

PIRA activity was on the whole tightly controlled, and targeting was generally the result of deliberate choices made at Command level to reflect organizational priorities, which were passed down the chain of command. ASU activity was approved and controlled, therefore, by the command structure. Thus in this sense, the terrorist activity undertaken by PIRA was directly opposite to that undertaken by both Beheshti and Bilal Abdullah. PIRA action was (at least in theory) identified and sanctioned by the command hierarchy acting in the name of the central command, in contrast for example to Beheshtis’s unstructured although planned initiative. Such tight organizational structure clearly has implications in terms of group membership, and the opportunity for group influences on behavior. On the other hand, at least as far as operational activity was concerned, the small size of the ASU and the need to maintain security such that ASU members would not have knowledge of other ASU members severely limits the sense of influence of broad group membership for the people involved.

5 http://cyber.eserver.org/unabom.txt.
However, not even all PIRA activity neatly fits into the hierarchical command–control structures described above, suggesting that factors other than organizational control were at times at play in determining action (or at least claims for attribution of action). This is an important point for in the absence of a claim for an event it is often difficult to attribute actions to organizations. We should also note that claiming an event (or not) is itself part of the terrorist organization’s tactical activity. An example of this can be seen in the events around the shooting of Garda Jerry McCabe in Adare, County Limerick, in 1996 (for a detailed account see Horgan & Taylor, 1999 and Horgan, 2005).

In an Irish context this was a very significant event, in that PIRA did not attack members of the Security forces of the Republic of Ireland, yet this action led to the death of an Irish Garda, and serious injury to another. Garda McCabe and Garda Ben O’Sullivan were guarding a Post Office van making a cash delivery in the village of Adare. An ASU in a Pajero SUV followed the Post Office van, crashed into the van, and in controlled fire two masked men fired 14 rounds from AK47’s into the Garda car containing McCabe and O’Sullivan, killing McCabe and seriously injuring O’Sullivan. A second car (a Lancer) then arrived, and the ASU members escaped. Despite there being cash in the Post Office van, no money was taken, nor was any effort made to take it. Both cars (the Pajero and the Lancer) were stolen, and abandoned and left with incendiary devices typical of PIRA attacks. Forensic evidence from the bullets fired also associated the attack with PIRA.

Initially, PIRA denied any involvement, but subsequently (and arguably under pressure) PIRA admitted involvement. In a statement the PIRA said:

> Our investigations have now established that individual volunteers were party to what happened in Adare. We wish to make our position clear. The shootings at Adare were in direct contravention of IRA orders. Such shootings were not–nor can not be–sanctioned by the IRA leadership. Those who carried out these shootings did so to the detriment of the republican cause (BBC News, 2004).

In 2005, Gerry Adams added to this initial statement “The IRA leadership did not authorize the operation which led to his death. But at a lower rank, an authorized person authorized that” (Kehoe, 2006). Despite this distancing, later Sinn Fein tried to lobby for release of the men convicted for this attack under Good Friday Agreement terms, an attempt that was rejected. However, all those convicted of the death of Garda McCabe are now released. Sinn Fein remained in contact with the ASU whilst they were in prison, and at one point a photograph was taken in the prison of four Sinn Fein TDs (members of the Irish Parliament) with the ASU.

5.2.2. Social network analysis

The groundwork for the use of Social Network analysis in criminal analysis was presented by Sparrow (1991), and authors such as Krebs (2002) have extended that analysis to terrorist networks (in this case the 9/11 attacks). Krebs makes the important point that terrorist networks do not work like other kinds of social networks: “Conspirators don’t form many new ties outside of the network and often minimize the activation of existing ties inside the network. Strong ties, which were frequently formed years ago in school and training camps, keep the cells interconnected.” (p.49). Krebs emphasizes the role of these early contacts as significant elements in group cohesion and structure, even though such contacts are rarely identified or activated. Krebs illustrates this with reference to the 9/11 conspirators, but it probably is a point that extends beyond the 9/11 attacks.

Krebs identifies four subsidiary networks that characterize the 9/11 attack; Trust, Task, Money and Resources, Strategies and Goals. This is a further important point to make, for not all linkages or connections that appear in network analyses are equally significant, and what significance they have relates largely to operational function (something which network analyses tend to emphasize).

Analyses in these terms may be of greater significance in coming years, as the relationship between terrorism and war changes. Lind et al. (1998) coined the term fourth generation warfare to refer to...
the loss of monopoly by the state over warfare. Canales Miralles (2009) extends this analysis into a more general analysis of jihadi networks, again emphasizing the functional qualities of the network structures. Canales describes his work in terms of discovering and describing in terms familiar to the physical sciences the social space of jihad. However, does this essentially generalist account constitute a sufficient account of how the particular behaviors we are concerned with and are controlled? The answer seems to be no. The nature of the networks involved, both in the case of Beheshti and in the case of the killers of Garda McCabe offers little by way of an account of the conditions in which these particular behaviors occurred.

6. Suicide terrorism

Suicide terrorism seems, at least on first analysis, something that defies logical explanation let alone explanation in terms of something so mundane and apparently ubiquitous as group phenomena. Most observers reject explanations of suicide terrorism in terms of pathology (Atran, 2003; Moghaddam, 2003; Taylor, 1988), and many authors whilst rejecting notions of psychopathology describe suicide terrorism in terms of organizational phenomena. Moghaddam (2003), for example, places emphasis on three levels of analysis to understand suicide terrorism: the individual, the social, and the organizational. In social terms, Moghaddam emphasizes notions of changed identity, related to establishing a new social reality, group cohesion and polarization, and stereotyping of others through delegitimation and dehumanization. Of particular significance are notions related to ideology and leadership and public commitment.

Leadership and authority are particularly important in guiding and directing the suicide recruit, and the idea of public commitment creates what Merari (1990) describes as a “point of no return”. Associated with this are not only public declarations of involvement, but also writing and video creation of wills and last letters to family. Ideology, rather than religious identity, seems appropriate to stress, for until recently most examples of suicide terrorism were Tamil members of LTTE (an avowedly secular organization). The ideological formation is typically conducted within an intense period of training isolated from normal social interaction, emphasizing at least within an Islamic context, notions about martyrdom and notions of living martyrdom (al Shahid al hai). But even within the intense and focused context this requires, individual suicide terrorists are select by their organization from those who show a “willingness” to die. Recruits are selected, and coercion in any commonly understood sense does not characterize the recruitment and formation of suicide terrorists.

However it is important to stress that suicide terrorism is above all an instrumental act and gains its political meaning not from the sacrifice of the individual, but the political context to the attack. We as observers are shocked by the act, but the organization behind it does not share that horror. The leadership of the organization controls and directs both the incidence and targeting, and frequently shows a polarization, and stereotyping of others through delegitimation and dehumanization. Of particular significance are notions related to ideology and leadership and public commitment.

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7. Conclusions

Is Terrorism a group phenomenon? The thrust of this paper is that the answer depends in part on how we define terrorism, and more specifically what we focus on, and if we are concerned with solutions and responses, rather than a general sense of understanding. The position taken here is that terrorism should be narrowly defined in terms of the behaviors associated with violent politically instrumental acts, as identified by the FBI definition (cited in Carlile, 2007 p. 3); “The use of serious violence against persons or property, or threat to use such violence, to intimidate or coerce a government, the public or any section of the public, in order to promote political, social or ideological objectives.”

If this is an acceptable definition, then the answer to our question is “probably”. On the basis of the evidence presented here, terrorism is not yet properly understood as a group phenomenon. Drawing on the Rational Choice distinction between “involvement” issues and “event” issues, group factors clearly seem to relate to involvement, but have relatively little to say about precise events — the “use of serious violence” referred to in the above definition. It seems much more likely that opportunity and the immediate situational context are of greater significance in understanding violence associated with terrorism.

One of the great challenges in understanding terrorism is why so few people actually engage in terrorism, given the extensive pool of political dissident activity. If we take for granted the fact that there are large pools of people who are exposed to violent ideologies, and given that the array of group process we typically identify in everyday life are presumably active within these movements, why do we see so few actual terrorists? It is worth noting again Lichbach’s (1998) caution: “Individuals more or less purposefully make history, society, conditions, and rules, yet history, society, conditions, and rules
make individuals. We are both autonomous creators and dependent creatures, innovators and prisoners” (p. 403) Within that calculus, we have little information about the autonomous and innovative qualities of terrorism.

The greatest problem we face in conducting any analyses of terrorist behavior, however, is the lack of empirical evidence on which we can base an assessment of causal factors, related to group phenomena or other kinds of constructs. Given the amount of resources devoted to the analysis of terrorism, we might at the very least for example expect to see a functional analysis (see Skinner, 1953) of terrorist behavior. In Skinner’s terms, we might seek for example as a starting point to identify the variables that go towards determining and influencing the “behaving system’. Other problematic behaviors have been subjected to such analyses, and regardless of theoretical perspectives, the behavioral baselines such analyses might yield would at the very least contribute to a systematic contextual description, and perhaps even a common language, of what happens in terrorist incidents. From this, more complex analyses might progress towards identifying unique or idiosyncratic process features, for example, or commonalities and generalities. In the absence of such fundamental descriptive accounts, however, we lack the basic building blocks of analysis.

To conclude, is terrorism a group phenomena? Perhaps as noted earlier, the full answer to that question lies in the level of analysis undertaken, the focus of problem specification and the definitional qualities of terrorism you as the reader wish to focus on. The argument presented here suggests that it may well be a necessary element in the story of terrorism, but it does not seem to offer a sufficient account.

References