How Social Science Can Reduce Terrorism

By Scott L. Plous and Philip G. Zimbardo

In a press conference several months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said: “I don’t think anybody could have predicted that these people . . . would try to use an airplane as a missile, a hijacked airplane as a missile.”

President Bush expressed similar surprise when he told the press corps on April 13, 2004: “Had I had any inkling whatsoever that the people were going to fly airplanes into buildings, we would have moved heaven and earth to save the country.”

Yet long before September 11, social scientists had warned that an attack might occur. According to an overlooked 1999 report on “The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism,” by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, “Al-Qaida’s expected retaliation for the U.S. cruise missile attack against Al-Qaida’s training facilities in Afghanistan on August 20, 1998, could take several forms of terrorist attack in the nation’s capital.” Among the possibilities listed in the report: Suicide bombers might crash an aircraft into the Pentagon or other buildings.

As that passage illustrates, social scientists have made substantial progress in understanding and predicting terrorism. Moreover, that progress has accelerated since the attacks of September 11. In psychology, for example, a search of the PsycINFO database (the largest psychology database in the world, with entries dating back to the 1880s) reveals that more research on terrorism has been published since 2001 than in all previous years combined.

In this season of political campaigns, commissions, and controversies, the results of social-science research should be part of any educated and informed discussion of the war on terror. From this new research in the social sciences, as well as earlier scholarship in history and political science, several key findings have emerged.

First, studies suggest that, compared with the general public, terrorists do not exhibit unusually high rates of clinical psychopathology, irrationality, or personality disorders. As John Horgan points out in his influential book “Psychopathology, Irrationality, or Personality Disorders—of Terrorists,” terrorists apparently find significant gratification in the expression of generalized rage.

Beyond various sociopolitical, economic, and religious objectives, one of the most common motivations for joining a terrorist organization is the desire for revenge or retribution for a perceived injustice. Many terrorists report that acts of violence committed by police officers, soldiers, or others are what led them to join a terrorist group. Studies by Ariel Merari and others have found, for example, that Palestinian suicide bombers often have at least one relative or close friend who was killed or injured by the other side.

In addition to harboring intense anger over perceived injustice, terrorists differ from the general public in their demographic composition. Although exceptions exist, terrorists are usually males between 15 and 30 years of age—the same population most likely to commit violent crime in general, and the demographic group least likely to be deterred by the threat of physical force.

Perhaps for those reasons, studies suggest that large-scale military responses to terrorism tend to be ineffective or temporarily to increase terrorist activity. To cite just one example, a 1995 time-series analysis by Walter Enders and Todd Sandler in the American Political Science Review, “The Effectiveness of Anti-Terrorism Policies: A VAR-Intervention Analysis,” examined 20 years of terrorist activity and found a significant rise in terrorism following U.S. military reprisals against Libya. For a general review of the effects of military responses to terrorism, see “Retaliating Against Terrorism,” by Silke, who is a United Nations counterterrorism adviser, in Terrorists, Victims and Society.

Although every situation is different, researchers have found that military responses to international terrorism can unwittingly reinforce terrorists’ views of their enemies as aggressive, make it easier for them to recruit new members, and strengthen alliances among terrorist organizations. Following the invasion of Iraq, for example, Al Qaeda’s influence and ideology spread to other extremist groups not previously linked to the movement, according to Congressional testimony by J. Cofer Black, the United Nations counterterrorism adviser, in the American Political Science Review, “The Effectiveness of Anti-Terrorism Policies: A VAR-Intervention Analysis,” examined 20 years of terrorist activity and found a significant rise in terrorism following U.S. military reprisals against Libya. For a general review of the effects of military responses to terrorism, see “Retaliating Against Terrorism,” by Silke, who is a United Nations counterterrorism adviser, in Terrorists, Victims and Society.

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The futility of fighting terrorism with large-scale military strikes is perhaps clearest in the case of Iraq.

Palestinian Authority pledged that they would “ensure that their respective educational systems contribute to the peace between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples—more than triple the number of innocent Americans who died in the September 11 attacks, and a number that grows with each passing day. The time has come to rethink our global strategy on terrorism, apply what we know from social-science research, and find a more effective way to make the world safe.”

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