

# Diverse Theories of Terrorism

Terror research is rich in description but analytically impoverished. Researchers must explain “what, when & how” terror acts occur. Goal is to develop **social theories** about origins of terrorist organizations, their participants, & the outcomes of terrorist actions.



Core elements of a social theory:

**Scope:** limits on what theory seeks to explain

**Unit:** level of analysis (persons; orgs; states)

**Concept:** abstract idea (variable)

**Proposition:** statement linking two concepts

Good theory consists of a set of interlocking, **falsifiable** statements: a proposition's claim to be a true description of reality is subject to **empirical testing** by collecting information and making observations, applying methods for sampling, measuring, and analyzing data.

What should you look for as we examine the diverse theories of terrorism proposed by scholars from many disciplines?

# Types of Terror Theories

Weekly topics classify theories by their core concepts / variables:

**Rational choice:** economic cost-benefit calculations

**Psychological:** motives, drives, self- and group-identities

**Cultural:** values & norms of ethnic groups and societies

**Religious:** beliefs about the Supreme Being and the afterlife

**Political:** power ideologies of nationalism, class struggle, ...

**Criminological:** use of illegitimate means to obtain goals

**Sociological:** social structures & actions, orgs & institutions

**Social Networks:** social relations among persons & groups

**Other:** International Relations; Biological; ...

- How to determine which theories offer the “best” explanation?
- Can theories be synthesized into more comprehensive accounts?
- Are such outcomes desirable, possible, futile? Why / why not?

# Listing All Possible Factors

Ambitious efforts to identify all possible “factors” that may contribute to terrorism often read like an unsorted laundry- or shopping-list.

International experts, meeting in Oslo, listed these **pre-conditions for terrorism**:



- Lack of democracy, civil liberties, & the rule of law
  - Failed/weak states unable to control territory & monopoly of violence
  - Rapid modernization, in the form of high economic growth
  - Extremist ideologies of a secular or religious nature
  - Experience of social justice
  - Hegemony and inequality of power
  - Illegitimate or corrupt governments
  - Presence of charismatic ideological leaders
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- Powerful external actors upholding illegitimate governments
  - Repression by foreign occupation or by colonial powers
  - Experience of discrimination on the basis of ethnic or religious origin
  - Failure/unwillingness of states to integrate dissident groups or emerging social classes
  - Triggering events are the direct precipitators of terrorist acts
  - Historical antecedents - political violence, civil war, dictatorship, revolution, occupation - may lower threshold for acceptance of political violence

What feasible research design could sort out their relative importance?

# Integrated Risk of Terrorism Framework

Post et al.'s (2002) integrated framework has 32 “critical variables” in four categories that “increase risk of escalation toward political violence,” based on “systematic expert knowledge acquisition” from six analysts.

*The Radical Group in Context: 1*

77

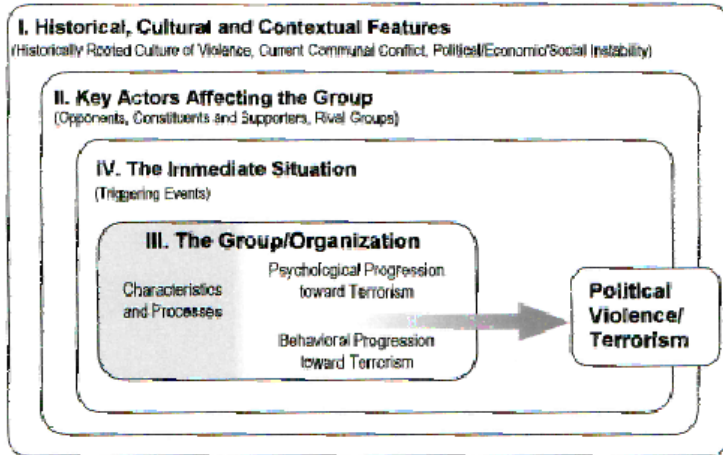


Figure 1. The radical group/organization's risk for terrorism in context.



Indicators combined into **Terrorism Potential Index** for at-risk groups.

Authors compared five types of terrorist groups to find best predictors.

- ✓ Is this framework theoretically coherent or a hodge-podge of concepts?
- ✓ Do you think that “the number of indicators is so large, some may well object, as to render the framework impractical and unwieldy”?
- ✓ What alternative theoretical approach(es) might be more useful?

# Root Cause Explanations

**Root cause:** “certain conditions provide a social environment and widespread grievances that, when combined with certain precipitant factors, result in the emergence of terrorist orgs and terrorist acts.”  
(Newman 2006:750; emphases added)

“X causes Y” postulates that the occurrence of Y depends on the occurrence of X, where X (the independent variable) precedes Y (the dependent variable) in time.

In physical laws, causation is deterministic  
In social causation, the relation is probabilistic

“Poverty causes terrorism” asserts that, in areas where poverty is greater, the probability of terror acts is higher.

A **causal mechanism** may be necessary to reveal the spatial contacts or a connected chain-of-events linking a cause to its effect.

The **precipitant factors** are intervening variables (“catalysts”)

What might be some causal mechanisms & precipitants that generate high levels of terrorism in very impoverished areas?

# ***Root Causes of Terrorism***

Edward Newman's root cause model (next slide) distinguishes among:

**Permissive Structural Factors:** “enabling environment that, alone, is of no explanatory value” – poverty, demography, urbanization necessary to dispose actors towards terrorism but are not sufficient to trigger it



**Direct Root Causes:** conditions create “underlying grievances” that “represent tangible political issues,” such as humiliation, disenfranchisement, foreign occupation, state repression of minorities

**Intervening (Precipitant) Variables:** sufficient factors, providing political agenda and opportunity, that move an aggrieved population to take action: leadership, funding, state sponsorship

- What are implications of Newman's model for counterterror policy?
- Would alleviating enabling environmental conditions be sufficient?
- Would attacking the precipitants suffice to block the root causes?

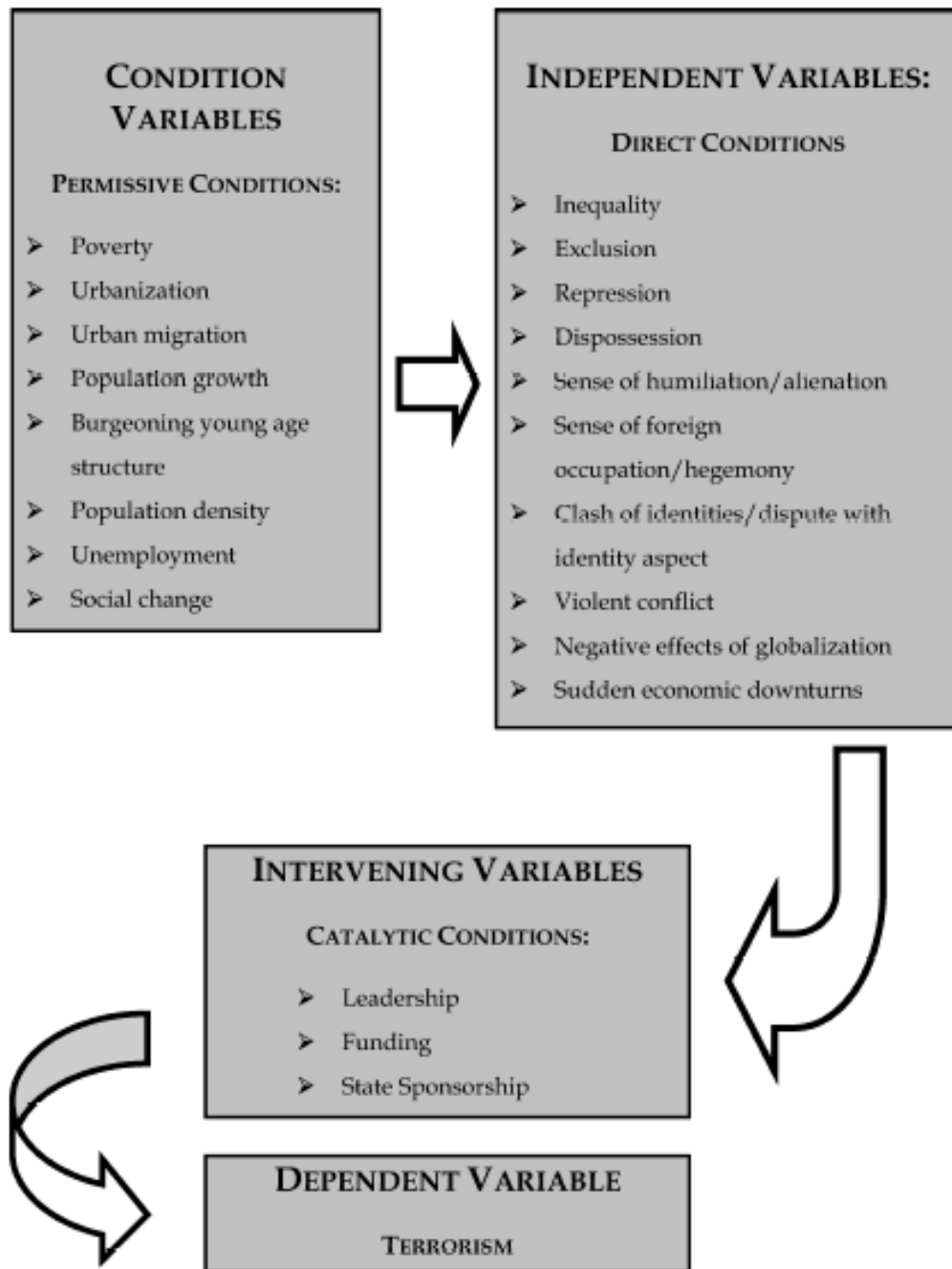


Figure 8. Interaction among “root” and direct causes.

How did Newman try to test the truth-value of his root cause model?

Is any evidence consistent with the idea that root causes are generalized features in societies where terrorism has emerged? Are these causal factors too broad to be of much explanatory value?

Did the model explain certain types of terrorism & terror orgs? Which ones?

Is lack of statistical support for this theory sufficient reason to abandon it?

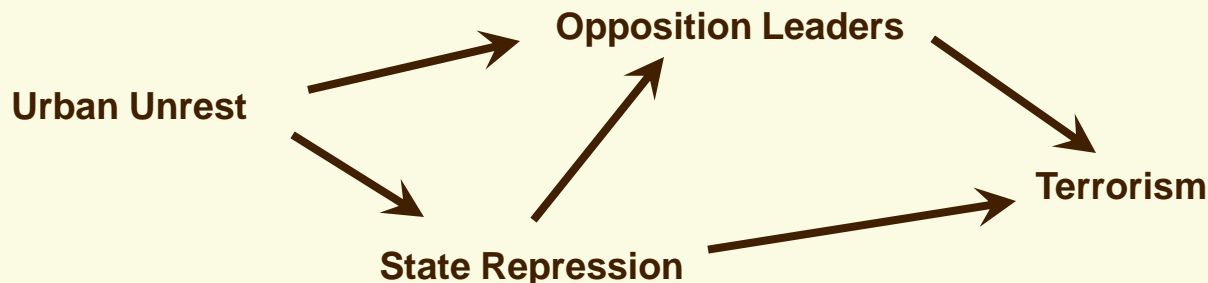
Or can it be modified? What, if any, alternatives are available?

# Developing Theoretical Propositions

Newman's "root causes" classification offers possibilities for creating numerous propositions about factors that may lead to terrorism.

**Small groups select one variable from each block in Figure 8 (or your group may come up with some new variables of your own).**

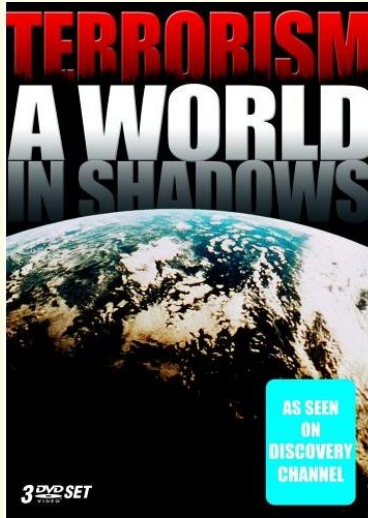
- ✓ Decide on a few causal propositions (3-to-6), using any combination of pairs of variables that seem plausible
- ✓ Write each proposition in sentence form, such as: "If X, then Y" or "the greater X, the higher Y"
- ✓ Draw a diagram in which propositions' variables are connected by arrows from causes to effects; **see below**
- ✓ Does any evidence support your mini-theory?





# What Explains the Red Brigades?

Watch the Red Brigades clip from *Terrorism: A World in Shadows*.



The Marxist *Brigate Rosse* tried to create a revolutionary state in 1970s Italy. In 1978, the Second BR kidnapped and murdered former Prime Minister Aldo Moro, a popular politician who was negotiating a “historic compromise” between the Communist Party & the right-wing Christian Democratic Party.

What social theories could explain the Red Brigades’ revolt?

Can rational choice, psychology, sociology, ..., help us better understand Second BR’s seemingly counter-productive action?

Was the Italian police force’s use of incentives to defect an effective counterterror strategy for breaking up the RB by the 1980s? What theory of terrorism is implied in using that strategy?