STATIC AND INTERACTIVE FRAMES OF TERRORISM ANALYSIS

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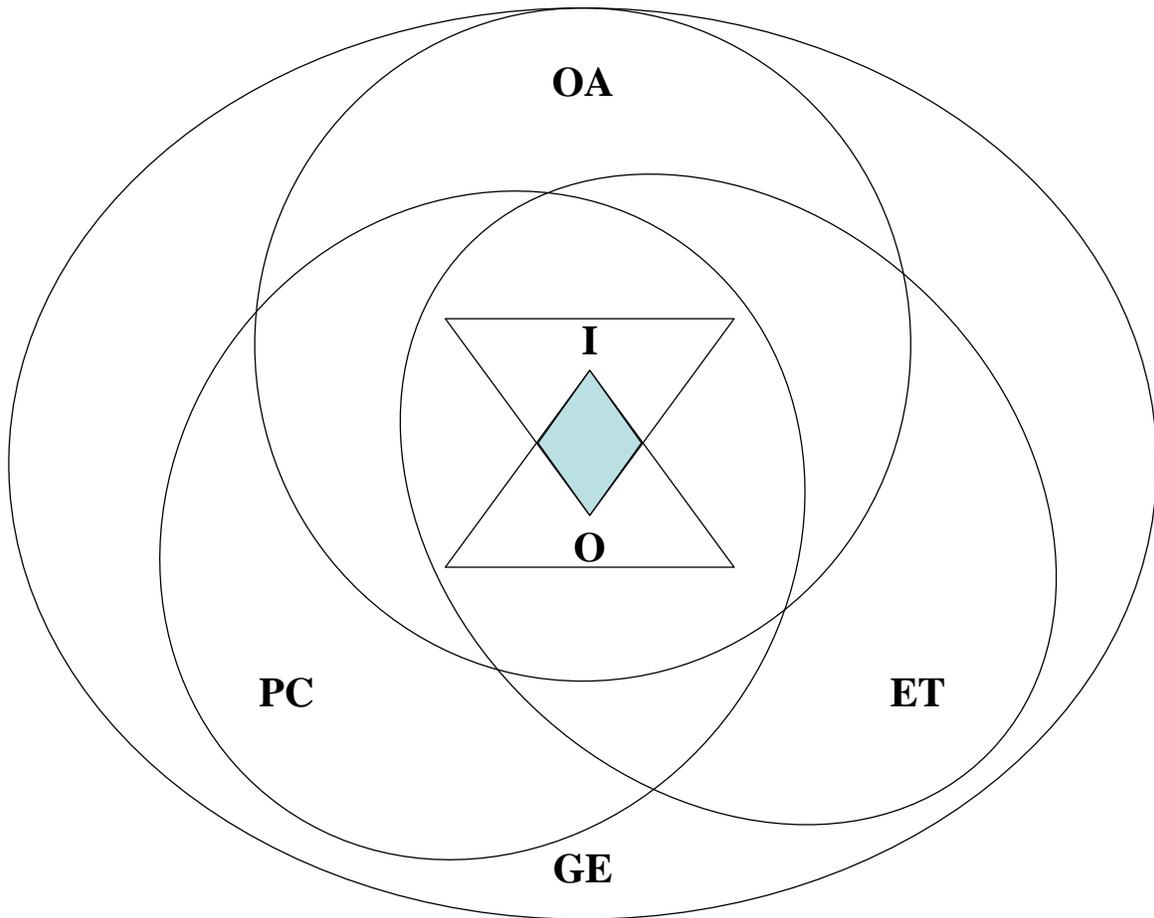**Combating Terrorism Center at West Point**

Abstract

The essay prepared for this conference offers two frames of analysis for considering the motivations that animate terrorists. The first draws from decades of research on the characteristics of individuals and organizations that engage in terrorism, environmental conditions that produce grievances among members of a population, and environmental conditions that provide opportunities for individuals and organizations to sustain violent activity (see Figure 1). This "static frame" of analysis indicates the need to address enabling contexts—including grievances that help an ideology of violence find resonance among members of a particular community, and the environmental conditions that facilitate opportunities to conduct violence (including weapons trafficking, porous borders, etc.)—while continuing to target a terrorist organization's members and capabilities through a globally coordinated human intelligence effort.

The second frame of analysis draws from recent scholarship on radicalization processes and emphasizes how the interactions between individuals, organizations and environments are framed by interpretive influencers (peers, family, educational and religious leaders, etc.) and how these interactions and interpretations impact the choices individuals make about terrorist activity (see Figure 2). This "dynamic interactions" approach suggests that understanding the processes of action and reaction—structurally framed by relationships (political, socioeconomic, ethnic, etc.)—between individuals and organizations within a particular environment is a necessary first step toward identifying situational, contextually relevant counterterrorism strategies.
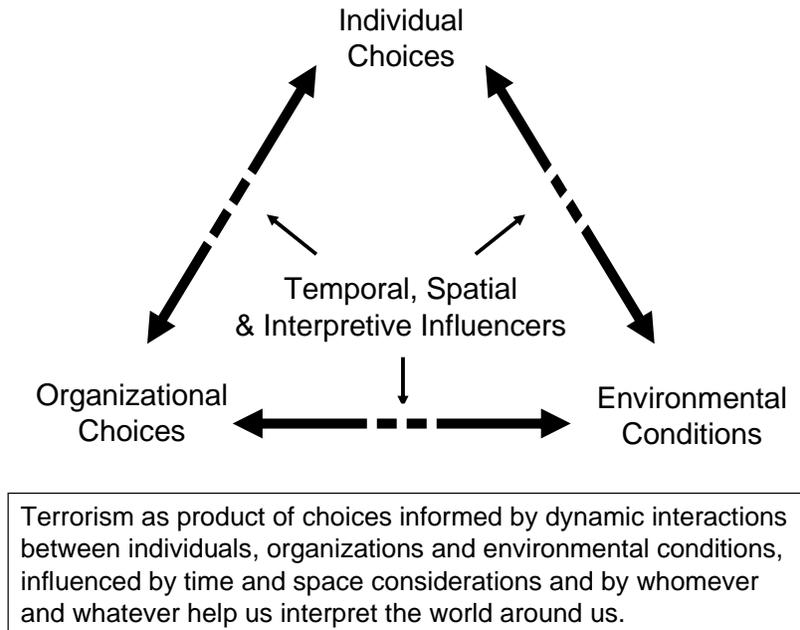
Combining the two frames of analysis highlights the need to understand the mechanisms and tools (including ideologies, myths, symbols, social networks and the Internet) that frame the relationships between the individual, organization and environment, and emphasizes the importance of strategic communication, public diplomacy and counterideology as critical components of a robust counterterrorism strategy. The essay then concludes by offering some implications for consideration by a new presidential administration, with particular focus on how the U.S. might improve our effectiveness at influencing street level perceptions and interpretations of policies and conditions which terrorist groups have used to justify their violent actions.

Figure 1. The Static Frame: Observations of Characteristics and Conditions that Contribute to the Risk of Terrorist Activity (♦)

	CODES	*Includes items such as:*
I	Individual characteristics	Personal motivations for action, including psychological influences, kinship, belief system, grievances (like revenge, perceptions of injustice), etc.
O	Organizational characteristics	Leadership, membership, history, an ideology that articulates seemingly legitimate grievances, along with strategies to mitigate them, etc.
PC	Precipitant Conditions	Structural reasons why an ideology resonates; socioeconomic, political and other conditions which generate (or give legitimacy to) grievances
ET	Environmental Triggers	Specific actions, policies, and events that enhance the perceived need for action (very dynamic and time-relevant) within a particular environment
OA	Opportunities to Act	Facilitators like access to weapons; freedom of movement; funding; safe haven/state sponsorship; weak governments; porous borders, etc.
GE	Global Environment	Interdependent economies, inter-state conflicts, diaspora, transnational criminal networks, Internet, etc. that influence local conditions and opportunities

Figure 2. The Dynamic Interactions Frame: Temporal, Spatial and Interpretive Influencers

Individual
Choices

Temporal, Spatial
& Interpretive Influencers

Organizational
Choices

Environmental
Conditions

Terrorism as product of choices informed by dynamic interactions
between individuals, organizations and environmental conditions,
influenced by time and space considerations and by whomever
and whatever help us interpret the world around us.

7 Propositions from a Dual-Frame Analysis of Terrorism:

1. **Individual choice (even if reluctant or coerced) is the primary "cause" of terrorist activity.** Some individuals choose direct involvement in actions that kill, while others choose to engage in support activities like providing funding, safe haven or ideological support.

2. An individual's decision to engage in (or disengage from) terrorist activity is influenced by characteristics (like psychological traits, gender, age, socioeconomic status, religiosity, etc.) as well as by their perceptions toward and interactions with specific organizations and environmental conditions. These characteristics, perceptions and interactions change over time.

3. An individual's perceptions toward and interactions with organizations and environmental conditions are influenced by their family, peers and personal role models, educators, religious leaders and others who help interpret and contextualize local and global conditions.

4. The members of terrorist organizations influence an individual's decisions about terrorist activity by providing ideological justification for violence, along with training and expertise, material support, connections with others, etc.

5. Individual decisions (within and outside the organization) shape the choices and trajectory of an organization and the kinds of terrorist activity they may conduct. The organization swims in a sea of people; without individuals, there is no organization.

6. The motivations and opportunities for individuals to engage in terrorism are framed by their views toward environmental conditions and policies (domestic and foreign), some of which are used to legitimate the grievances articulated in an organization's ideology.

7. And, of course, the actions of individuals and the organizations they comprise produce a wide range of effects that impact their surrounding environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR A NEW COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

This analysis suggests that the new administration's counterterrorism strategy should focus on at least three target sets: organizations, environmental conditions, and perceptions. While continuing to attack and degrade the capabilities of terrorist organizations, the U.S. should encourage and reward governments that mitigate socio-political conditions which have historically been used by terrorist organizations to justify their use of violence. Perhaps the greatest need for action involves addressing perceptions and interpretations of conditions, opportunities and organizations. We have no USIA or robust infrastructure to influence street level perceptions, we have competing opinions over what should be done and by whom, and we have not yet begun to exploit the power of the Internet effectively. Most of our efforts to influence foreign audiences involves official speeches, documents, policy statements, etc. with some support from media and state-to-state diplomatic relationships. We need a new commitment to listening to and learning from others in places where U.S. influence is low or nonexistent, coupled with a commitment to becoming a more effective and culturally relevant influencer of street perceptions about terrorism and U.S. policy goals. We also need a new information and public diplomacy infrastructure that incorporates the role of the Internet. The overall focus here should be on themes that resonate locally on the street and online. And our counterterrorism strategy should incorporate an information operations effort that exacerbates the challenges faced by terrorists, while providing money, diplomatic support and covert assistance to any entity or activity that poses a threat to the unity and perceived legitimacy of a terrorist organization.

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