

Core Motivations and Characteristics of Terrorism: A Threat Assessment Perspective

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Richardson's six characteristics of terrorism provide a structured analytical framework that enables threat analysts to assess intent, evaluate capability, interpret target selection, and anticipate the strategic effects of terrorist activity. Rather than viewing terrorism as random violence, this framework positions it as a deliberate, communicative, and politically driven strategy. From a threat assessment standpoint, these characteristics function as practical indicators that support both analytical rigor and predictive insight, bridging conceptual understanding with real-world application. Integrating these characteristics into a threat assessment lens, analysts are better equipped to move beyond reactive interpretation and toward proactive, intelligence-driven decision-making.

Background

Richardson (2013) characterizes terrorism as ideologically rooted in political grievance, religious extremism, social identity, and strategic communication. Across the literature, these drivers are consistently identified as foundational to how terrorist behavior develops and persists. Political environments, for example, can normalize violence over time, as demonstrated in Northern Ireland, where generational exposure reinforced the use of force as a legitimate political tool (Alderdice, 2007). This suggests that political motivation is not solely strategic but often socially embedded, complicating assessments of intent. Religious ideology further intensifies this dynamic by reframing conflict in existential terms. Tomasiewicz (2022) emphasizes the enduring role of religion in modern terrorism, while Bruce Hoffman anticipated the increasing severity of religiously motivated violence, describing it as more absolutist and apocalyptic in nature (as cited in Tomasiewicz, 2022). At the same time, the relationship

between religiosity and support for terrorism is not uniform, with evidence suggesting that beliefs can produce both reinforcing and moderating effects depending on context (Cubukcu et al., 2023). Social identity operates alongside these drivers, shaping individual participation through group affiliation and collective purpose. Post (2010) emphasizes that terrorist behavior is frequently rooted in group dynamics rather than individual pathology, highlighting the importance of identity and belonging in mobilization. The “quest for significance” framework further explains individual-level motivations, suggesting that participation in extremist activity can serve as a means of restoring identity, purpose, and personal meaning (Kruglanski et al., 2019). Communication structures reinforce this cohesion. Borum (2004) notes that leadership within terrorist organizations tightly controls messaging to maintain unity, authority, and operational discipline. Taken together, these ideological and organizational drivers establish the conditions under which terrorism translates from belief into action, providing a foundation for assessing intent, capability, and targeting within a threat assessment framework.

Analysis

Terrorism is fundamentally political, reflecting a goal-oriented pursuit of influence over governance, policy, and social order. Richardson (2013) emphasizes that terrorism is rooted in political grievance, while Hoffman (2006) notes it seeks to change or maintain power structures. From a threat assessment standpoint, this aligns directly with intent analysis, requiring evaluation of ideology, grievances, and objectives. However, in practice, motivations are rarely uniform. Katzman (2005) establishes that al-Qaeda blends religious, political, and anti-Western aims, which complicate how analysts prioritize targets and timelines. McDowell (2009) similarly stresses that this type of ambiguity requires continuous reassessment through iterative

intelligence cycles. Taken together, this suggests that intent should be treated as dynamic rather than fixed—something that evolves over time. That evolution, importantly, shapes how violence is selected and applied. Building on this, violence serves as the central mechanism through which terrorism exerts influence, functioning as both a tactical tool and psychological weapon. As Richardson (2006) notes, terrorism often reflects the strategic use of asymmetric methods by weaker actors who lack the capability to engage in conventional conflict. Terrorism generates fear well beyond immediate victims, amplifying its overall impact (Hoffman, 2006).

In threat assessment, the method, scale, and escalation of violence provide key indicators of capability. From an analytical perspective, these indicators are often evaluated within an indicators and warnings framework, where observable behaviors and escalation patterns are assessed against baseline activity to identify credible threats. At the same time, variations in lethality require careful interpretation. Katzman (2005) demonstrates that al-Qaeda has conducted both high-casualty and lower-level attacks, suggesting adaptive calibration rather than operational variation. McDowell (2009) reinforces the notion that analysts must contextualize these variations within broader patterns to avoid misinterpretation. Recent behavioral threat assessment research further suggests that pre-incident indicators can signal escalation toward violence, improving the ability to distinguish between intent and capability (Bastiaens et al., 2025). In many cases, this relationship between violence and impact becomes even clearer when considering target acquisition methodology. Accordingly, terrorism is also symbolic, with targets chosen for their representational value rather than physical significance alone. Richardson (2013) notes that targets often embody political, economic, or cultural meaning, while Hoffman (2006) highlights their role in creating dramatic impact. This symbolic dimension amplifies second- and third-order effects, extending influence far beyond the immediate incident. Katzman (2005)

observes that al-Qaeda's focus on U.S. economic and military symbols reflects a deliberate effort to maximize psychological impact. The September 11 attacks illustrate this clearly, as the targeting of the World Trade Center and Pentagon represented economic and military power, generating global psychological shock far beyond the immediate casualties. McDowell (2009) adds that analysts must account for differences in adversary perception, since symbolic value is not universally defined. Symbolism ultimately depends on perception and therefore naturally feeds into terrorism's communicative function. Terrorism functions as communication through violence, where the act itself conveys a message to multiple audiences. Richardson (2013) frames terrorism as messaging, and Hoffman (2006) describes it as "violence for effect." From a practical standpoint, analysts must evaluate not only the attack itself but also the narrative, propaganda value, and media amplification surrounding it, as these effects are often deliberately engineered to maximize visibility, psychological impact, and recruitment potential. The September 11 attacks again provide a useful example, demonstrating how a single operation can be amplified through global media, transforming a tactical act into a strategic communication event. Katzman (2005) shows how al-Qaeda leverages media to extend operational impact, while McDowell (2009) emphasizes that strategic intelligence must account for the information environment, including perception management. This, in many ways, explains why the intended audience often differs from the immediate victims. Consequently, a critical feature of terrorism is the distinction between victims and the intended audience, combined with deliberate target selection. Victims are often instrumental, serving to influence a broader population or decision-making body. Hoffman (2006) emphasizes that terrorism targets a wider audience than those directly affected, shifting analytical focus to the true objective of influence. Katzman (2005) illustrates this dynamic in al-Qaeda's attacks, which were designed to shape U.S. policy and

global perception. Simultaneously, deliberate targeting reflects premeditation, reconnaissance, and ideological alignment (Hoffman, 2006). Terrorist organizations also deliberately provoke disproportionate responses from adversaries, reinforcing their narrative and sustaining recruitment cycles. In practice, this stage often involves prioritization within a threat matrix, where potential targets are assessed based on vulnerability, consequence, and adversary intent. While these patterns support predictive analysis, McDowell (2009) cautions against pattern fixation, noting that adversaries can and do adapt to exploit expectations. Behavioral threat assessment research reinforces this point, suggesting that identifiable patterns of planning and escalation can support earlier intervention (Bastiaens et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Richardson's characteristics, reinforced by Hoffman, Katzman, and McDowell, demonstrate terrorism's calculated, adaptive system of violence that is designed to achieve strategic impact beyond the immediate act. When considered through a threat assessment lens, the characteristics serve to enhance the ability to identify intent, evaluate capability, interpret targeting behavior, and anticipate broader impacts and residuals. Essentially, this approach highlights the criticality of continuous, intelligence-driven analysis in addressing evolving terrorist threats, improving predictive accuracy and operational readiness.

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