

## 2 Waves of international terrorism

### An explanation of the process by which ideas flood the world<sup>1</sup>

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Advancements in sciences come through painstaking observations. Scientists' astute observations of the seemingly chaotic world pave the way for what is known as "knowledge creep," where the boundary of our accumulated knowledge increases by recognizing patterns that were previously indistinguishable. Terrorism research is certainly no exception to this rule. One of David Rapoport's most significant contributions to our advancement of knowledge has been his finding of the four waves of international terrorism. Rapoport defines waves with three characteristics: (1) a cycle of activities characterized by expansion and contraction phases, (2) covering multiple nations, and (3) "driven by a common predominant energy that shapes the participating groups' characteristics and mutual relationships" (2006: 10). By studying the history of terrorism since the 1880s, Professor Rapoport identifies four distinct waves fueled by the common ideological fervor emanating from anarchism, anti-colonialism, socialism, and religious fundamentalism, with the first three waves each lasting for around 40 years.

Although the wave theory has gained a firm footing in the extant literature (Sageman 2008a) on terrorism, to my knowledge, not much effort has gone into the examination of the causes of terrorism and the process by which mega-trends of politically motivated violence saturate nearly every corner of the earth. In contrast, however, research on diffusion ideas and their acceptance by the target population has a rich history going back to mid-twentieth century (Rogers 1962; Brown 1981). Recently, a number of scholars and journalists have made important contributions to the understanding of the process by which ideas spread, and, in the nascent field of terrorism studies, the literature on "radicalization" has simply exploded in volume. By culling research in disparate fields of inquiry this chapter hopes to contribute to the understanding of this process of diffusion of ideas across the globe. I argue that this spread is analogous to the spread of infectious diseases (Youde 2007; Price-Smith 2009), where the path of infection is neither uniform nor random, but follows a specific logic. As examples, I examine the experience of al-Qaeda and Islamic radicalism. Due to space and time constraints, I will touch upon only the salient points and paint an impres-

sionistic picture rather than a detailed analysis. However, before we delve into the question of *how*, let me address the question, *why* do people follow these mega-trends of ideas?

#### The why of mega-trends

If the global spread of radical political ideology seems surprising, we should note how other ideas flow freely and inundate our societies. From fashions to toys – bell-bottom pants to cabbage patch dolls – trends seem to appear suddenly from nowhere. Most young men and women succumb to the craze and, when the fashion ebbs, the photographs of their younger days become a source of amusement to their children a generation later.

In the Western cultural ethos the idea of individualism is pervasive. In our daily affairs the assumption of self-utility maximizing individuals as islands of rational calculation, independent of community, culture, or creed, stands as self-evident truth. In our unquestioned assumption of fundamental human nature, the picture of the me-centric individual, in the words of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1970: xi), becomes a "positive consciousness of knowledge," which he defines as "a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientists and yet is a part of scientific discourse." Despite this conscious and unconscious acceptance of individualism, current advancements in the fields of experimental psychology (Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Haidt 2006), evolutionary biology (de Waal 2006), and cognitive sciences (Damasio 1994; Pinker 2002; Westen 2007) clearly demonstrate the importance of group behavior in our decision-making processes. Even among economists, the primary proponents of the assumption of self-utility maximization, some are becoming cognizant of the importance of group psychology and interdependent utility functions, where one person's behavior is predicated on the actions of others in the associative group (Becker 1996; Lerner 2007; Frank 1998). This diverse body of research clearly demonstrates that as social beings we all crave to belong to groups and, when we do, we derive great satisfaction by adhering to their explicit rules and implicit norms. We are happy being altruistic toward members of our chosen groups and opposing, sometimes violently, the rival groups. In fact, in the Maslovian hierarchy of needs, the need to belong is recognized as second only to the physical needs of keeping our bodies and souls together (Maslow 1968).

Furthermore, some argue that people follow cultural dictates not only because they generate personal utility, but because through "doing" (or "consuming") they "become" somebody (Schuessler 2000). So when we choose to wear a certain article of clothing, buy a certain gadget, or drive a certain car, we not only derive pleasure that the consumed goods generate for us (the instrumental part of our demand), they also help us establish our *identity* (the expressive aspect of our demand) as members of our chosen groups. Similar to these consumers, the participants in a global terrorist movement, beyond satisfying their own personal needs – varying from power, prestige, monetary gains, salvation, or even the 72 virgins in heaven – *become* the person they want to be as

members of the group in which they claim their membership. As a result, when an idea gains momentum, the number of people seeking its affiliation by being part of the community increases.

Therefore, Hoffman (1999) is correct in asserting that when people join dissident organizations and take part in violence which we now commonly attribute as “terrorism,” they act not so much upon their private motivations as out of a broad community concern. In other words, in their own minds all ideological terrorists are altruists. This fundamental difference distinguishes terrorists from common criminals, who are motivated only by their personal gratification (Gupta *et al.* 2009). Our natural proclivity to form groups and work for their collective welfare is biologically imprinted in us, which accounts for the human need to join global trends of all sorts, including waves of international terrorism. Let us now turn our attention to the process by which the ideas spread.

### How do ideas spread?

I present my arguments in Figure 2.1. Simply put, the analysis of the diffusion of ideas can be separated into two broad parts: inspiration and opportunity. I further divide the process of becoming inspired into four components: the messengers, the environment, the message, and the receivers. The idea of taking part in a violent movement can spread, but how does the inspired individual actually join a particular group? Since joining a movement is a matter of inspiration and opportunity, I have divided the process into its sub-parts.

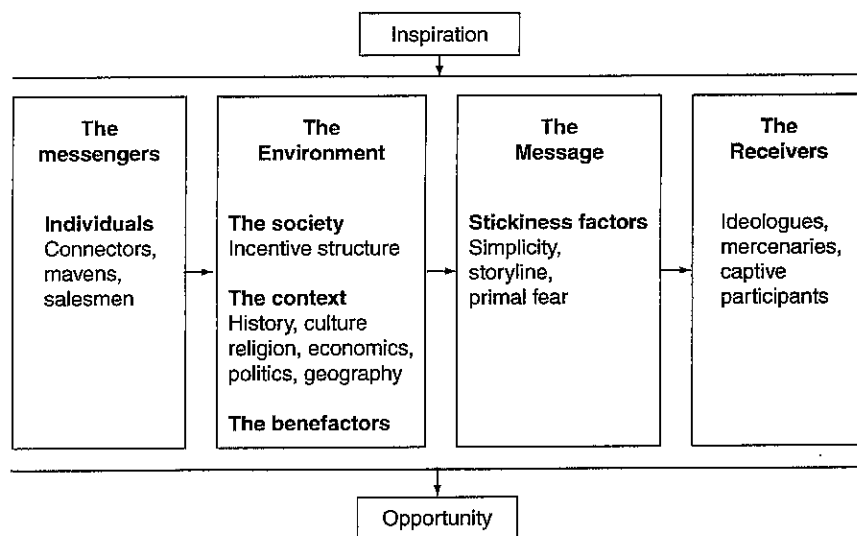


Figure 2.1 An integrated model of the diffusion of ideas.

### The messengers

Journalist Malcolm Gladwell (2002) asks an important question: How do ideas spread? How do we arrive at the tipping point, after which a new idea, a fad, a fashion, or an ideology floods the world? Gladwell studied the success of such “goods” as the popular footwear hush puppies and the children’s show *Sesame Street*. When we examine the process by which a wave of international terrorism spreads throughout the globe, we find that this is the same process by which commercial ideas spread, some of which end up becoming global while others remain localized; some make great impacts, but most others disappear within a very short time. Based on Gladwell’s process by which little things can make a big difference, we find the workings of three broad forces: (1) the messenger(s), (2) the message, and (3) the context.

Social thinkers from the time of antiquity have argued that gross imbalances within the social structure, such as poverty, income inequality, and asymmetry in power lead to political violence. However, when these factors are put to empirical tests they, despite age-old assertion of their salience, produce only ambiguous results or weak correlations. The reason for this puzzling dissonance rests with the fact that the factors of deprivation – absolute or relative – only serve as the necessary conditions for social unrest. For the sufficient reason, we must look into the role that “political entrepreneurs” play to translate grievances into concrete actions by framing the issues in a way which clearly identifies the boundaries of the aggrieved community and its offending group (Gupta 2008).

Gladwell calls political entrepreneurs the *connectors*, the *mavens*, and the *salesmen*. The connectors are the primary nodes of a communication network. These are the people who know a lot of people and are known by a lot of people by dint of who they are (position, power, money, etc.) or by personal attributes. Maven is a Yiddish word meaning the “accumulator of knowledge.” The mavens are the so-called “theoreticians” of a movement, the pundits and gurus, who can provide a cogent explanation of the current crisis based on their knowledge and observations. The salesmen are those who through their power of persuasion can attract groups of followers. Although there are no specific boundaries separating these three groups of key individuals, any analysis of a global movement will clearly identify people with characteristics of all three. Since the number of people who initially get involved is small, Gladwell calls it “the power of the few.” However, an analysis of the spread of ideas indicates that Gladwell’s scheme is incomplete and there are several other important factors behind the start of a mass movement.

A Fourth Wave movement, al-Qaeda, serves to illustrate how ideas are spread globally. However, a look at the other, previous waves reveals that they follow the same pattern.

The grievances of the Muslim community (*ummah*) have been acute for at least a century, since the Ottoman Empire slipped into the pages of history books. After an impressive run of 1,000 years and beginning with the expulsion of the Moors in 1492 by the Spanish monarchy of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Islamic Empires experienced defeat for the first time. The following 500 years

saw a steady decline, completed after World War I, when the Ottoman Empire broke apart. Its defeat did not immediately create violent rebellion along the lines of religious fundamentalism. The collective frustration and anger felt in the Muslim world found its expression mostly through nationalistic yearnings, primarily as a part of the second, Anti-Colonial, wave of international terrorism. The so-called "jihadi" movement took shape slowly through the writings of such mavens as Hasaan al-Bannah and Said Qutb.<sup>2</sup> Although they failed to make much political impact outside of Egypt during their lifetimes, their writings inspired the scion of one of the wealthiest Arab families, Usamah bin Ladin. If we examine bin Ladin's life, we can clearly see why he would be the great "connector." As a student at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, he was greatly influenced by his teachers, Abdullah Azzam, and Muhammad Qutb, the younger brother of the fiery Islamist, Said Qutb. His vast wealth and his connections to the Saudi royal family gave bin Ladin a platform that an ordinary person would not have had. As a result, when the Afghan war started, with his influence and familiarity with the rich and the powerful, he could establish *al-Qaeda*, "the base," which served as the bridge between the mujahidin fighting the Soviet Army in Afghanistan and their families in the Arab countries. Furthermore, he quickly established linkages with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which served as the conduit for the CIA to deliver money and weapons to the Afghan fighters. Apart from his personal wealth, bin Ladin was able to tap into the vast amount of charity money (*zakat*), generated within the Arab world, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations. Through his immense connections and seemingly inexhaustible funds, bin Ladin was able to attract a large number of other connectors and mavens such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abdullah Azzam, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammad who served as the salesmen of his jihadi ideology. Together, the mavens, the connectors, and the salesmen began the foundation of the Fourth Wave of international terrorism.

### The environment

We must address the question of whether messengers, mavens, and salesmen are "made" or "born." Although by 1900 neoclassical economics had become astute in analyzing market demand and supply, a knowledge of market forces did not enhance our understanding of the large forces that cause periodic booms and busts, nor did it provide insight into the evolution of economic development. To explain these larger forces, economist Joseph Schumpeter (1912) introduced the concept of entrepreneurs, those rare individuals who can take innovations and advances in technologies and create large enterprises that move an economy (or the global economy) along. However, he did not ask: Why do these entrepreneurs arrive on the global stage from certain countries at specific periods of time? Economist William Baumol (1990) answered that it is the incentive structure within an economy that creates what he calls "productive," "unproductive" or even "destructive" entrepreneurs. But Baumol does not examine the case of radical political; he argues (1990: 893) that

while the total supply of entrepreneurs varies among societies, the productive contribution of the society's entrepreneurial activities varies much more because of their allocation between productive activities such as innovation and largely unproductive activities such as rent seeking or organized crime.

Using historical examples from Ancient Rome and China, the European Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, Baumol points out that societies which provide incentives for creative activities, which may go against the accepted norms, practices, and ideologies, produce creative entrepreneurs, while those that develop institutional restrictions on free ideas tend to produce unproductive or destructive entrepreneurs. We can extend his logic to see that in the Arab/Islamic nations where the expression of even moderate dissent or frustration can take place only within the confines of religious discourse, the expression of ideas is limited. Thus, these societies have channeled their frustration, anger, and a perception of humiliation through religious fundamentalism. Even in the democratic West, the hysteria created by the 9/11 and other attacks and a prolonged involvement in warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan have helped radicalize their youth, particularly in France and England (Sageman 2008b, and Chapter 5, this volume).

### The context

There may be great messengers, but the "stickiness" of their message depends upon the sociopolitical, historical, and cultural context. Rapoport (2006) points out three historical and cultural factors for the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in his Fourth, or Religious, Wave. He argues that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (i.e., 1400 AH, the beginning of a new Islamic century) and the Afghan War paved the way for it. The success of the Ayatollah Khomeini in bringing fundamental change to Iran by driving out the Shah, the closest U.S. ally in the Islamic world, gave a tremendous impetus to many Muslim radicals who chose the path of jihad of the sword to drive out the infidels and the apostates. Second, a millenarian vision of the arrival of a redeemer (*mahdi*) coincided with the Iranian Revolution, giving the fundamentalists a propitious sign to rise up in the name of Allah. Finally, the *mujahidin* won the Afghan war against the mighty Soviet military. In their victory the religiously inspired fighters totally disregarded the role that the covert U.S. and Pakistani operation played and took it as yet another sign of their inevitable triumph.

Terrorism does not happen in a vacuum. The evolution of a violent movement is the outcome of a prolonged dynamic interaction between the target government and the dissident group. By overemphasizing the actual threat, time and again, governments fall into the trap of overreaction, which only reinforces the terrorist movement (Mueller 2006, and Chapter 8, this volume; Gupta 2008).

### The benefactors

One of David C. Rapoport's most insightful findings (Rapoport 1989) was that although many terrorist groups pop up in the course of history, similar to the small businesses in an open economy, over 90 percent disappear within the first few years of their birth. I have argued (Gupta 2008) that groups that are able to avert this extremely high mortality rate are blessed by a steady source of income. By looking at the list of groups that have survived the tests of time, we see that they were able to secure funding from a number of different sources. Some were successful because they received support from an organized government (e.g., Hizbollah from Iran, Lashkar-e Taiba from the Pakistani government, etc.), some had steady support from prosperous diaspora organizations; some Islamic groups were able to draw upon the religious tradition of *zakat*, which enjoins Muslims to contribute a part of their income for the spread of Islam (e.g., to al-Qaeda or Hamas). There were also groups that could tap into the endless financial gains from illicit drug trade (the FARC in Columbia, the Sendero Luminoso in Peru, the Taliban in Afghanistan, etc.). Groups that failed to receive monetary support or raise money through illicit operations experienced quick death.

### The message

The information age bombards us with innumerable pieces of information every single day. As we see, listen and/or read them, relatively few penetrate our consciousness. We may, for example, see a billboard while driving, a commercial while watching television, or listen to a lecture, yet we may recall nothing about each message moments later. On the other hand, we recall something we have heard, seen, or read many years ago. What causes some messages to stick? The secrets of stickiness have been researched by psychologists, communications specialists, and scholars from diverse disciplines. Heath and Heath (2007), for instance, identify six factors that cause messages to stick, arguing that a memorable message must be *simple, concrete, credible*, and have contents that are *unexpected*, they must appeal to our *emotions*, and should contain a compelling *storyline*.

Simplicity is one of the foremost requirements of a "sticky" message. In the area of political communication, where a leader attempts to inspire a large number of people, sticky messages depend on the simplicity of thought. When we look at the messages of bin Ladin, we can clearly understand that in his vision Islam is under threat from the infidel West, the Jews, and their collaborators in the Muslim world. All his communications, long and short, contain this message (Lawrence 2005).

These messages are not simply a litany of grievances, but are concrete in their action plan: namely, it is the religious duty of every Muslim to join the jihad against those who are putting the followers of the Prophet in peril.

A message is "unexpected" when the leader "connects the dots" for the listeners and explains clearly the confusing world in which they live. To many in the

Arab/Muslim world the message must come as a revelation, where they begin to see how the unbelievers have been undermining their rightful place in history. Through extreme cunning the infidels have not only sapped the energy of the Islamic Empire, but are also plotting to destroy it militarily, politically, financially, and even spiritually. This sudden realization often recruits new believers to the cause.

Coming from the son of one of the wealthiest families, living an ascetic life, waging war against injustice, bin Ladin cuts a messianic image in the minds of many in the Arab/Muslim world. This image, carefully chosen by al-Qaeda, gives his messages an immense and immediate credibility.

As human beings we remember messages that evoke emotions, particularly one that paints the portrait of an impending threat. Fear is most often the primary motivator for collective action. Evolutionary biologists bolster the findings of prospect theory offered by Kahneman and Tversky (1979). Prospect theory simply states that in the process of evaluating benefits and costs of an action, human beings often place a far greater weight on the fear of a loss than the prospect of a gain. Thus Haidt points out:

If you were designing a fish, would you have it respond as strongly to opportunities as to threats? No way. The cost of missing the sign of a nearby predator, however, can be catastrophic. Game over, end of the line of those genes.

(2006: 29)

Therefore, fear moves us in a profound way. It should come as little surprise that the messages of bin Ladin are strewn with dire predictions of a destroyed Islamic world which is sure to pass when the believers fail to act (Olsson 2008).

Finally, memorable messages come with stories. Experimental studies show that when two similar messages are presented to an audience, one with supporting statistics and the other with a suitable story, the latter inevitably sticks more than the former (Pennington and Hastie 1988). Any good public speaker knows the power of a storyline. Thus, when someone invokes the name of the former British prime minister Neville Chamberlain, we immediately understand the folly of trying to appease an implacable enemy. Like all other political communicators, bin Ladin uses stories in his speeches that are full of allusions familiar to his audience – in his case from Islamic history. Thus, when he calls Westerners "the Crusaders," or George W. Bush "Hulagu Khan," he translates their intentions and persona for his intended audience.

Thus, throughout history, the mavens have concocted coherent stories, by borrowing from religion, history, and mythology, with complete sets of heroes and villains, good and evil, allies and enemies that have resonated with the masses. The connectors have spread the message far and wide, and the salesmen have recruited eager volunteers.

## Opportunity

In my explanation of waves I have included the charismatic connectors, the knowledgeable mavens, and the energetic salesmen. Although they explain the spread of ideas, fashions, or ideologies, there is one significant gap in the puzzle with regard to the spread of radicalism. While ideas spread and inspire many who receive the messages, only a few actually join radical groups. The literature shows that regardless of how inspired they are, few people join violent dissident groups as a result of an epiphany; most join slowly over time through friendship and kinship (Horgan 2005; Sageman 2008b). When people are deeply affected by the suffering of their own people or by listening to inspiring speeches, etc., they seek out friends or relatives through whom they get involved in political activism (O'Duffy 2008). Yet, one curious phenomenon has generally escaped the notice of most researchers: there is a significant difference in the rates of actual activism among the various national groups. Thus, while many young men and women from a Pakistani background join these movements, few from the Bangladeshi or Indian community do so. Young men and women from the Maghreb community similar to the Pakistanis find ways also to become active in the movement. This differential rate may be the outcome of opportunity. Let me explain.

Pakistan was created with a deep scar in its collective mind. Apart from the trauma of horrific mass killings that preceded partition from India, it also inherited the persistent problem of Kashmir. Since the inherent logic of the partition, based on religion, might have dictated that Kashmir would join Pakistan, history did not go that way. As a result, Pakistani leaders framed the Kashmir issue as an integral part of its national identity. Facing a much stronger enemy, Pakistan turned to the jihadis and, in effect, outsourced its war of attrition (Swami 2007). Since these terrorist training camps were established and administered with the full support of the Pakistani government and its intelligence service, the ISI (Stern 2003), they operated in the open; those who wanted to join them had full knowledge of their location. Similar training camps, built around extreme versions of Islam, flourished in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas with blessings and resources from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states during the Afghan war against the Soviet military, and they became the ready destination of all the "wannabe" jihadis. These camps provided unprecedented opportunities to the inspired all over the world. By providing opportunities to the inspired, Pakistan quickly became known as the most dangerous place on earth.

Sageman finds that most of the violent activists are not only of Pakistani background; a disproportionate percentage comes from Mirpur district, a small area in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir (2008b: 85). These findings attest to his earlier (2004) "bunch of guys" hypothesis, where a group of (mostly) men join to create a cell, and they stick to their own group norms (Sageman 2004, and Chapter 5, this volume). These men may come together at a mosque, initially for no reason other than finding *halal* food or looking for people of their own language and culture. As they get to know one another many of them find a strong

bond in a common enemy. Slowly they may form an informal group of like-minded individuals. Soon, in their vilification of the enemy they establish a bond among themselves. They seek out information that confirms and reinforces their beliefs from the media and from the internet. In effect, they create their own "echo chamber," where only acceptable voices are heard and opinions reinforced. Those who disagree or have contrary opinions quickly peel off, leaving behind a hardcore group that increasingly becomes more radicalized. They read, listen, or view only materials that buttress their own worldview.

These sorts of groupings are common in all social settings. However, if these radicalized members find a way to act upon their conviction, a terror cell is born. Leaders emerge as the groups form. These cells act as the nodes in a larger network by making contact with other groups or the central core of a movement. As ideas spread, inspiration meets opportunity to produce terrorist attacks. This is why the establishment of strong Taliban and al-Qaeda-dominated regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan pose a serious security threat to the rest of the world (Hoffman 2008; McConnell 2008). Similarly, the failed states of Yemen and Somalia have become the destiny of those who are seeking to join the "jihad" against the infidels, non-believers, and apostates.

## Conclusion

David Rapoport's most important contribution to the study of terrorism has been his recognition of the waves of international terrorism. The problem of violent political dissent is as old as organized society. Yet, the identification of a distinct pattern in the seemingly chaotic data on terrorist activity over more than a century provides us with an important step toward understanding and eventually managing the risks of terrorism.

The discussion of the wave theory inevitably raises two related questions. If we are in the middle of the Fourth Wave of religious extremism, when will it come to an end, and, when it does, what will be the nature of the Fifth Wave? When we examine the evidence, it appears that the past three waves have each lasted for approximately 40 years, almost the lifetime of a generation. However, that by itself should be no guide as to how long the current wave, or for that matter, any single wave may last. The wave theory is only a tool of deeper understanding of the global spread of terrorism, but it is largely devoid of predictive capability. Societal events do not behave with the regular oscillation of a trigonometric function. Furthermore, there is nothing in Rapoport's definition of waves that precludes other ideas from percolating simultaneously. Within the First Wave, the seeds of the second were already germinating. In fact, if one looks carefully at the history of each wave, it is often difficult to separate the nationalists/anti-colonialists of the Second Wave from the anarchists of the First Wave. Similarly, many of the anti-colonial movements were inspired by the Marxist/Leninist ideas of the Third Wave. It is surprising that many atheist ideas of communism coexist comfortably with national and religious ideas in the current radical Islamist wave. Juergensmeyer points out:

In looking at the variety of cases, from the Palestinian Hamas movement to al-Qaeda and the Christian militia, it is clear to me that in most cases there were real grievances: economic and social tensions experienced by large number of people. These grievances were not religious. These were not aimed at religious differences or issues of doctrine and belief. *They were issues of social identity and meaningful participation in public life that in other context[s] were expressed through Marxist and nationalistic identities.*

(Juergensmeyer 2003: 141; emphasis added)

The three categories of collective identity – nationalism, religious affiliation, and economic class – are but jumbled-up constructs of what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities;” the building blocks of our intense desire to form groups and identify shared enemies. Therefore, the Fifth Wave, if it comes as a distinct spread of common ideas, should exhibit a collective consciousness based on ethno-nationalism, religious identity, or economic class. In all probability it would contain elements of all three.

Although nobody can predict the timing or the nature of future waves, one thing is absolutely certain; the destructive capabilities of the dissident groups are likely to significantly increase with time. As Professor Rapoport (1984) has clearly shown, terrorism and violent group uprisings have been part and parcel of human civilization from its recorded birth. However, with increasing technological innovations, what has significantly changed is our ability to inflict pain and suffering on an ever-larger number of those we choose to hate. Our future survival will depend on how well we can manage the destructive power of groups, since group formation has been integral to human nature. We don't know what the next wave is going to be or its exact nature, but in an increasingly interconnected world we can be assured that apart from all other problems, waves exhibiting shared identity will periodically test our resolve. Thus, we are grateful to Professor Rapoport for providing us with the analytical tools to recognize them and find ways to mitigate their destructive capabilities.

## Note

- 1 Parts of this chapter were initially published in *Perspectives on Terrorism*: [www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php?option=com\\_rokzine&view=article&id=66&Itemid=54](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php?option=com_rokzine&view=article&id=66&Itemid=54).
- 2 The word *jihad* has a specific religious connotation. Not all Muslims accept the way the radicals have used the term. By accepting the term to label radical Islam, we may actually give it more legitimacy than it deserves. However, since all other alternatives to the expression, such as “Salafis,” “fundamentalists,” “extremists,” or “literalists” carry their own limitations, I will use the term “jihadi” in this chapter, being mindful of its political and religious limitations.

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