Handout 3. Causes of Terrorism

Introduction
The causes of terrorism appear to be varied. There does not appear to be one lone factor that leads people to engage in acts of terror. Scholars have categorized motivations for terrorism to include psychological, ideological, and strategic.

Psychological Perspective
Those who engage in terrorism may do so for purely personal reasons, based on their own psychological state of mind. Their motivation may be nothing more than hate or the desire for power. For example, in 1893 Auguste Vaillant bombed the French Chamber of Deputies. Prior to his conviction and subsequent execution Vaillant explained his motivation in terms of hate for the middle classes. Vaillant wanted to spoil the sense of economic and social success, by tainting it with his violence. In many respects this terrorist is interested in getting attention from others for his or her act, rather than some grand ideological or strategic goal.

Ideological Perspective
Ideology is defined as the beliefs, values, and/or principles by which a group identifies its particular aims and goals. Ideology may encompass religion or political philosophies and programs. Examples of terrorist groups motivated by ideology include the Irish Republican Army (IRA), in Sri Lanka the Liberation Tigers of Tamal Eelam (LTTE), and the Bader Meinhoff in Germany. The IRA is motivated by a political program to oust the United Kingdom from Ireland and unite Ireland under one flag. Similarly the LTTE seek to establish a separate state for their people, the Tamals in Sri Lanka. Finally, the Bader Meinhoff was a terrorist group made up of middle-class adults who opposed capitalism and sought to destroy capitalist infrastructure in Germany.

Strategic Perspective
Terrorism is sometimes seen as a logical extension of the failure of politics. When people seek redress of their grievances through government, but fail to win government's attention to their plight, they may resort to violence. From this viewpoint, terrorism is the result of a logical analysis of the goals and objectives of a group, and their estimate of the likelihood of gaining victory. If victory seems unlikely using more traditional means of opposition, then one might calculate that terrorism is a better option. For example, in South Africa the African National Congress only turned to the use of terrorism after political avenues were explored and failed. Of course, not just individuals may feel let down by the political process. States may use terrorists in the pursuit of their own strategic interests. States may sponsor terrorist groups, especially when the objectives of the state and the terrorist group are similar. For example, Libya used terrorists to explode a bomb aboard Pan Am 103 flying from London to New York in 1988, allegedly in response to U.S. and British bombing of Libya.

Conclusion

It is impossible to say for sure what causes terrorism. A person's psychological make-up certainly will play a role, but to what extent is unclear. Some may come to terrorism, not out of any love for violence, but rather to further their ideological goals. Others may be motivated to use terror simply because it appears to be a useful strategic alternative, or may further the state's objectives. Indeed, terrorism may occur for psychological, ideological, and strategic grounds all at once. An individual may decide terrorism fits his or her own view of the world—that it makes sense. A group may come to use terrorism because it furthers and is supported by their ideology. Finally, groups or persons may use terrorism because it fits with their strategic objectives and goals.