Rational and irrational thinking in terrorist pronouncements: An REBT analysis

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Rational and irrational thinking in terrorist pronouncements: An REBT analysis

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The objective of this study was to explore the thinking of terrorist groups from a content analysis of terrorist pronouncements obtained from the Web. Five main themes were identified: The explicit aims of the group; Oppression; A noble/holy war; Extreme ingroup-outgroup contrasts; and a higher, greater force. These themes were analysed from an REBT perspective. Although there was evidence of rational thinking especially in the aims of the group, the remaining themes exhibited thinking that emphasised demands, downing and low frustration tolerance.

Terrorist activities such as bombings, murders and kidnappings occur on a daily basis. Approximately 8000 incidents of international terrorism have occurred since 1968. The numbers of acts of terrorism work out at 5 incidents per day with at least two of these involving the death of innocent civilians (Whittaker, 2002). One of the obvious but shocking aspects of terrorist activities is that they are carried out by our fellow human beings. Other people like us. How can people or groups carry out such destructive acts? Surprisingly, terrorism and extremism have not figured prominently in psychological research. An obvious reason for this is the difficulty in directly investigating terrorists or members of terrorist groups. The majority of empirical research on terrorism has dealt with the consequences of terrorist incidents for the victims, bystanders and communities (see Blumberg, 2002; Silke, 2003). What work there is on the psychology of the terrorist consists largely of conjecture and speculation (Silke, 2003).

One of the most influential psychological analyses of terrorists has come from Aaron Beck (1999, 2002). Drawing on his background in cognitive-behaviour theory and therapy, Beck suggests that terrorists who perpetrate acts of destruction are not insane. Rather it is their distorted and irrational thinking that enables them to carry out such violent acts. Unlike the perpetrators of other types of violence such as domestic or street violence, in which rage is the main instigator, terrorists are not so passionate towards their victims. They are cold, calculating and generally indifferent towards them. For the terrorist, the aim is to hurt the enemy, a desire that exceeds any compassion for the victims of their cruelty. For the terrorist, the end justifies the means. Indeed, to some extent, terrorists measure their success by the death toll.

Beck outlined two crucial elements in the psychology of the terrorist. First is an over-riding conviction in their ideology that preoccupies most of what they think and do. This enables them to go to incredible lengths to prepare, plan and execute acts of terror. Second, they hold strong and inflexible perceptions of the victims of their actions. They see themselves as the real victims and their victims as the enemy. For example, Beck (2002) suggests that the terrorists responsible for September 11th held an image of America as a "hostile superpower, armed with weapons of mass destruction….seen as a threat to the Islamic states" (p. 1). He adds that the American entry into Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Wars in Iraq, plus their support for the Israelis in the war over Palestine, greatly aggrieved the group to the point that they thought necessitated revenge.

Beck claims that the 'enemy' is interpreted as encompassing everything abhorrent to the terrorist group (e.g. America symbolises materialism, secularism, feminist liberation) and will therefore be perceived as a threat to their most highly prized virtues. From this perspective, the group will then make negative and paranoid interpretations of why the enemy intervenes, corrupts and oppresses the way it does. This in itself fuels the terrorist mental representation of the enemy and thus their need to take revenge. The targeted group then essentially becomes a backdrop for the terrorist's image of the enemy: barbaric, fraudulent and treacherous. The mental representation has a life of its

own and it is that image at which the anger and hostility is directed. As this image develops, the group's own self perceptions become enhanced: hallowed, fair and admirable. These polarised views of the opposing groups may be represented evocatively: the power of the good vs. the power of the bad; Allah vs. Satan. The solution to their problems then becomes violence toward the enemy. The enemy must be stopped.

Beck highlights several cognitive distortions and biases in terrorist thinking, for example: overgeneralization – the wrongdoings of one member of the 'enemy' group are attributed to the whole population; dichotomous thinking – people are perceived as either totally good or totally bad. Terrorists also demonstrate tunnel vision – once they are engaged on their mission all they can conceive of is reaching their target (i.e. destruction of the enemy). In this respect, Beck likens the terrorist to a robot that is programmed to destroy without concern for the human life they annihilate.

Beck suggests that, regardless of the intentions of the people who plan terrorist attacks, what is important to the individuals who perform them is that they are part of a righteous plan, greater and more important than themselves, while holding a strong and negative image of the enemy. While holding these images, they can then be manipulated by their leaders to perform their deadly acts. Despite Beck's influential analysis, it remains purely theoretical and no one has empirically tested his proposals.

Albert Ellis has yet to propose such a detailed and elaborate account of the thinking underlying terrorist activities and behaviour. Despite this, his extensive writings over the past 40 years have highlighted his general stance towards those who engage in fanatical and violent behaviour. In accordance with his REBT framework, Ellis (1992b) proposes that those who engage in fanatical and violent behaviours hold rigid, dogmatic and absolutistic beliefs. He suggests that fanatical groups believe that their philosophy and practises reflect absolute truth and that they are 100% right and everyone else is 100% wrong. From this perspective they then demand that their sacred beliefs and sacrosanct customs must prevail under all conditions, that they must not be opposed, and that anyone who does is evil and should be treated as such (Ellis, 1986, 1991, 1992a). Ellis explains that these demands, which are irrational because they are illogical and inconsistent with reality, frequently impel fanatics and terrorists into fights, feuds and wars. Their experience of destructive feelings together with their grandiose and monolithic convictions lead them to extreme violence with a determination that they must get their own way whatever the cost. As with Beck's analysis, Ellis' views are essentially theoretical and await empirical validation.

The aim of this study was to develop an understanding of how terrorists think. The first objective was to investigate the themes that underlie the thinking manifested in terrorist pronouncements. The second objective was to examine these themes from an REBT perspective. For the purposes of this study, terrorist groups were defined as those engaged in "the premeditated threat or use of violence by subnational groups or clandestine individuals intended to intimidate and coerce governments, to promote political, religious or ideological outcomes, and to inculcate fear among the public at large" (Whittaker, 2002).

Method

Access to terrorist pronouncements was achieved via the Internet. The search engines Google and Yahoo! were used to search for the following topics: Terrorism, Terrorist group, Jihad, Islam, Manifesto, Fatwa, Muslim, Freedom fighter, and Revolution. Also, all groups listed in the US Department of State's "Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000" were searched for.

Once accessed, a document was only included if it met the following criteria: (1) specifically written by the terrorist group; (2) not translated by the search engine's translator; (3) related specifically to terrorist activity (not e.g. eating, literature, sexual practices, etc); (4) its authenticity could be established through other sources, e.g. "Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000"; (5) not governmental (these were too numerous, too lengthy and too general). The terrorist groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Terrorist Groups
(Principal geographic region shown in parentheses)

Islamic Groups	Marxist-Leninist Groups
Al-Jihad (Egypt)	Communist Party of Peru
Al-Muhajiroun (Palestine)	Devsol/DHKC (Turkey)
Al-Qaeda (Afghanistan)	ELN (Colombia)
Fatah (Palestine)	ETA (Basque Spain)
HAMAS (Palestine)	FARC (Colombia)
Hizbullah (Lebanon)	Hindustan Socialist Republicans (Hindustan/Punjab)
Jihad Groups in Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan	Japanese Red Army (Japan)
Palestine Islamic Jihad (Palestine)	Kurdish Revolutionaries (Kurdistan)
Pagad (South Africa)	PKK (Kurdistan/Turkey)
	Red Army Faction (Germany)
	Tupac Amaru/MRTA (Peru)

The documents were read and re-read in order to develop content themes. No theoretically-driven coding scheme was imposed on the data. To aid recognition of themes and clarify which were most prominent in the documents, a log was kept of the main points identified and any relevant thoughts and impressions produced while reading the documents. Once the main themes had been identified, time was spent reflecting on them and refining them to capture the true essence of what the data seemed to be indicating (c.f. Banister, et al, 1994). A list was then made of the main themes and their components. All the documents were then re-analysed and scored for the presence of these themes so that some quantitative data could be produced to demonstrate counts and frequencies.

Additional coders were employed to check the reliability of the themes and the sub-themes identified from the content analysis. Four coders reviewed eight of the documents included in the study (2 documents were reviewed by each coder). The coders were kept unaware of the research aims and hypotheses to guard against observer bias. Each coder was given simple but clear instructions informing them of what they were required to do. They were asked to familiarise themselves with the documents and scoring sheet. They were then asked to indicate on the scoring sheet which of the proposed themes/sub-themes they thought were evident in each document. Their understanding of the task was checked at this stage and further explanation was given as necessary. There was 95.8% inter-coder agreement for the main themes and 76.6% for the sub-themes.

Results

The themes and sub-themes we identified are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Themes and Sub-themes
(% = percentage of groups mentioning the theme)
1. Explicit Aims of the Group (100%)
   - Ending oppression (95%)
   - Establishing a religion/ideology (75%)
   - Peace (65%)
2. Oppression (100%)
   - Oppression cannot be tolerated (100%)
   - Reality must not be this way (50%)
3. A Noble/Holy War (100%)
   - Violence is justified (90%)
   - Peace does not work (75%)
   - A moral obligation to fight (60%)
   - Glory of martyrs (65%)
4. Extreme Ingroup-Outgroup Contrasts (100%)
   - Outgroup as the enemy (90%)
   - Whole population = enemy (80%)
   - Ingroup is pure (30%)
5. A Higher, Greater Force (55%)
   - The force dictates what to do (35%)

As can be seen, the most common themes identified were: The Explicit Aims of the Group, Oppression, A Noble/Holy War, and Extreme Ingroup-Outgroup Contrasts. All of the reviewed documents included these themes. The theme of a Higher, Greater Force was mentioned in a majority of the documents. The most common sub-themes were: oppression must stop; religion/ideology to rule over the homeland; oppression cannot be tolerated; violence is justified; peace does not work; outgroup as the enemy; and the whole population = the enemy. More details concerning the themes and sub-themes are given below.

1. Explicit Aims of the Group

All of the groups included a clear statement of what they wanted to achieve. This makes sense because manifestos and fatwas are statements of intent.

Ending oppression. The predominant aim was to end oppression. In most cases, this meant an end to the occupation of their homeland by the outgroup:

> *"Inspite we are a small and unpowerful group comparing to Israel and inspite we are unsupported by strong countries, the fruit of our struggle is the liberation of our land by our will and by our struggle"* (Japanese Red Army Faction).

Establishing a religion/ideology. The Islamic groups were concerned that their homeland should be returned to their control so that they could restore their religion:

> *"The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies is in order to liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Allah, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim"* (Usamah bin Laden).

The Marxist groups had a range of goals based on Marxist ideology. Generally, the first goal was the ending of oppression in the form of economic and social injustice and the establishment of a socialist state. Once this goal was reached, the next goal was to help other socialist groups who were experiencing oppression in other parts of the world. Ultimately, the goal was universal socialism:

> *"We are no Colombian nationalists. We are Latin Americans and are striving for the liberation of our whole continent. We have good relations with other revolutionary organizations in our 'great American home' and consider ourselves fighters for world change"* (ELN).

Peace. A majority of groups espoused peace as their goal. They would be happy to live alongside groups of other faiths or ideologies as long as they were not living under oppression:

> *"The Islamic path that Hizbullah follows is one of a message that aims to establish peace and justice to all humanity whatever their race or religion. Hizbullah does not have a problem with anyone but feels responsible towards him or her to clarify the true Islam far away from fanaticism"* (Hizbullah).

2. Oppression

This was the most frequent theme in terms of how often it was referred to in each document. Essentially, freedom for the ingroup had been severely curtailed by the existence and domination of an outgroup. This oppression commonly involved the invasion of the homelands - either physically or ideologically - by the outgroup whose own philosophies and customs were anathema to the ingroup:

> *"Our Islamic nation was inflicted with apostate rulers who took over the Muslim nation. These rulers turned out to be infidels. Muslims have endured all kinds of harm, oppression and torture at their hands"* (Al-Qaeda).

Frequent mention was made of killings, atrocities and violence against the ingroup by the dominant outgroup:

> *"Christian groups have already ignited the fires of hatred in the land of Malaku and they have already killed some 5000 Muslims including men, young women and small children. And they also destroyed some 100 masaajid and 1000 people's homes"* (Jihad Group in Indonesia).

The groups especially the Marxist groups stated that they were oppressed because of a denial of their basic human or democratic rights. In such cases, the groups talked about the lack of fairness in their societies due to economic and social oppression:

> *"Our country lives under the occupation of imperialism with the USA at its head. It is a neo-colonial country that is dominated by a distorted capitalist structure. Under the extreme exploitation of imperialism all roads towards social development are barred and our people are condemned to live under a regime of oppression, terror and poverty"* (Kurdish Revolutionaries).

In their accounts of oppression, the groups emphasized that the oppression cannot be tolerated, their conditions must be different and 'reality must not be this way':

> *"There must be democracy. The people of Basque must have the right to speak. The Spanish should accept the Basque people's choice. It is essential for the Basque country to decide its own future with total freedom"* (ETA).

> *"Hizbullah's ideological ideals see no legitimacy for the existence of Israel, a matter that elevates the contradiction to the level of existence"* (Hizbullah).

3. A Noble/Holy war

This was another prominent theme. Although it was mentioned by all groups, it was most vividly expressed by the Islamic groups who espoused Jihad:

> *"Hamas swears to conduct a holy war over Palestine against the Jews until Allah's victory is achieved" (Hamas).*

In most cases, the groups did not put forward any particular arguments for why the war was noble. This is most clearly expressed by ETA:

> *"To fight for freedom is noble" (ETA).Violence is justified.*

Central to the concept of a noble war is the conviction that terrorism and violence are an acceptable means to noble ends. This is how terrorist groups justify their description as 'freedom fighters'. The groups declare that they have no other choice but to use violent means:

> *"If Israel reserves the right to bomb us with F-16s and helicopter gunships, we reserve the right to protect ourselves, to resist the Israeli occupation of our country and to fight for our freedom"* (Fatah).

Peace doesn't work. A related view is that peaceful activities are not a realistic or successful means by which the group can achieve its aims. Their belief in the effectiveness of violence and the ineffectiveness of peace thus reinforces their conviction that they have no alternative to terrorism:

> *"The confrontation that we are calling for does not know Socratic ideals, Platonic ideals, nor Aristotelian diplomacy. But it knows the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing and destruction and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine gun. Islamic governments have never and will never be established through peaceful solutions and cooperative councils"* (al-Qaeda).

A moral obligation to fight. The groups who endorsed this theme argue that is not a choice for group members to act in the war against terrorism. Rather it is a duty. For the Islamic groups, they are obligated to engage in Jihad against the oppression for Allah's sake:

> *"It is a personal religious commandment for every Muslim to engage in Jihad until the land is redeemed"* (Hamas).

On many occasions the case is put forward for this obligation in terms of a heavenly afterlife:

> *"Allah has traded with his believers their lives and wealth in return for paradise if they fight for the cause of Allah"* (Al-Muhajiroun).

In some cases, punishment is promised for those who do not fulfil their duty:

> *"Almighty God says unless you go forth, He will punish you with a grievous penalty and put others in your place. For God hath power over all things"* (Usamah bin Laden)

For the Marxist groups, the obligation is to engage in a revolutionary struggle against oppression. Being non-religious, there is no promise of an afterlife as a reward. Rather there is the threat of continuing oppression:

> *"Our party recognises that rebelling against exploitation and tyranny is a not merely a right. It is a sacred duty. There is no alternative but to destroy the state which is ruled by fascist terror and armed force"* (Kurdish Revolutionaries).

The glory of martyrs. The view that the war being fought is noble is most dramatically seen in groups who proclaimed the glory of martyrs. The majority of groups both Islamic and Marxist openly praised their martyrs and encouraged others to die for the cause:

> *"The food on which the tender plant of liberty thrives is the blood of the martyr"* (Hindustan socialists).

> *"The revolutionary martyrs, the honourable children of the people, will live on in the hearts of all peoples in the world"* (MRTA).

4. Extreme Ingroup-Outgroup Contrasts

Outgroup as the enemy. All the groups contrasted the ingroup with the outgroup. The outgroup was labelled as the 'Enemy'. Hizbullah refers throughout their document to the Zionist enemy. This serves to emphasize the extremely unpleasant nature of the outgroup:

> *"For over seven years the Enemy (the United States) has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorising its neighbours and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the Muslim people"* (Usamah bin Laden).

For the Marxist groups, the enemy was often defined as the 'bourgeosie":

> *"There is no point in trying to explain the right way to these deceitful people. We don't have to explain our actions to the intellectual prattlers, the pant-shitters, the know-it alls."* (Red Army Faction).

The whole population = the enemy. The extremely undesirable characteristics of individuals, leaders or factions of the outgroup were frequently extended to the whole population of the outgroup:

> *"The Jews control the media and the world financial institutions. By means of revolution and war, organisations such as the Masons, Communists, capitalists, Zionists and the like undermine human society as a whole in order to destroy it. By their evil corruption, they try to gain domination of the world by such institutions as the United Nations"* (Hamas).

The Ingroup is pure. Only a minority of groups evaluated their own group. Those that did emphasized only positive attributes and admirable characteristics:

> *"I present this humble effort to these young Moslem men who are pure, believing and fighting for the cause of Allah"* (Al-Qaeda).

Otherwise, the evaluations simply focused on the oppressed nature of the ingroup. For example, the Marxist groups refer to themselves as the 'proletariat' in contrast to the ruling class, the 'bourgeosie'.

5. A Higher, Greater force

Although the concept of a higher force was not one of the strongest themes, it was mentioned by 11 of the 20 groups. 80% of the Islamic groups mentioned it where it was referred to as God or Allah. 40% of the Marxist groups mentioned it where it was referred to as the Revolution.

The Islamic groups believed that the higher force has powers greater than those of humans and controls conditions in the world. The followers of Allah are his servants and are at his mercy. Most of the Islamic groups claimed that Allah dictated to them what they must do in their daily lives including taking action against their oppressors. Often Allah told them that they had to fight, kill and use terrorist activities to preserve their rights and for the glory of Allah:

"The Islamic decree regarding the occupation of Palestine by the Jews is Jihad for the sake of Allah. And this is compulsory upon the nearest Muslim and a burden upon Muslims worldwide to support and help. This fatwa is a call to fight against Israeli forces, their government, Israeli embassies, military airports, etc.,as they are legitimate targets wherever they may be." (Al-Muhajiroun).

For the Marxist groups, revolution was the means by which the old system was to be replaced by a new system. Thus, the higher force they wrote of is the means by which they could take control of their existence, overthrow the government and consequently lift their oppression:

> *"Revolution is a phenomenon which nature loves and without which there can be no progress either in nature or in human affairs. There is no concord, sympathy or rhythm without revolution. Revolution is Law, Revolution is Order, and Revolution is the Truth (Hindustan Socialists).*

Discussion

An REBT Interpretation of the Themes

In this section, the themes and sub-themes identified from the content analysis will be discussed from an REBT perspective with particular emphasis on Ellis' viewpoint.

Explicit aims of the group. The general principles and philosophy of REBT would support a number of the aims of the terrorist groups such as ending oppression and working towards peace. These demonstrate a problem solving approach to a difficult situation that is a characteristic principle of REBT. By identifying and working towards changing factors in their existence about which the groups are unhappy, they can empower themselves to create a better environment to live in. This is of course true as long as the aims are held as strong preferences, i.e. they have a great desire for their conditions to be better but they acknowledge that reality does not have to be this way.

However, the violent means by which the groups are prepared to reach their goals shows that the aims are not held as preferences but as demands. REBT would therefore suggest that the beliefs that underlie these aims are irrational and largely responsible for the destructive actions of the groups. This type of thinking is likely to lead the groups to do virtually anything to reach their goals. The stronger the aims are demanded ('oppression must stop'), the greater the lengths to which the groups will be prepared to go to achieve their aims (Ellis, 1986).

The self-defeating nature of the violent actions performed by terrorist groups is dramatically shown by those groups whose avowed aim is peace. The road the terrorists take to reach the admirable

destination of peace is frequently paved with death, destruction and violence. It is illogical to expect violent means to lead to a peaceful end.

With respect to the aim of establishing a universal religion/ideology, REBT views this as unrealistic for several reasons (Ellis, 1992a). It clearly indicates a lack of acceptance of the diversity between people, groups and societies and essentially denies other people the right to think differently. If this view is rigidly held it will certainly lead to emotional and behavioural disturbance. REBT espouses self and other acceptance and urges us all to accept and appreciate the great diversity of human nature.

Oppression. REBT acknowledges that oppression does occur. Each of the terrorist groups described unpleasant and obnoxious conditions that they have suffered. These groups should therefore be shown compassion for the difficult and challenging situations they face. However, in accordance with one of the central tenets of REBT, emotional responsibility (Dryden, 1995), an emphasis should be placed on the role that the group members' thinking about oppression plays in creating their emotional and behavioural reactions (in this case rage and violence). The principle of responsibility argues that human misery is not ultimately caused or forced on us by outside agencies, but is largely caused by the view that we take of unfortunate conditions. We have control over our emotions and behaviors.

The claim by the terrorist groups that 'reality must not be this way' is consistent with Ellis' views on fanaticism. According to Ellis (1992a), people often make themselves enraged at what they consider to be unacceptable, unfair or unpleasant conditions or events by harshly condemning their circumstances and insisting that they absolutely must not exist (even when they undeniably do). They believe there is not point trying to lead a happy life under these conditions. People with this philosophy are then likely to experience self-defeating and unhealthy emotions (such as rage, panic or anxiety) and engage in destructive and maladaptive behaviours that interfere with their ultimate goals.

The belief that the oppression 'absolutely must not exist' can be defined as irrational for several reasons. First, it is inconsistent with reality. There is no law that says that oppression cannot exist. Therefore, since the oppression has occurred, however regrettable that is, the belief has no basis in reality. Second, the belief is not logical. It does not make sense that, because the group members demand that they should not experience oppression, it absolutely must not occur. Third, the belief is likely to lead to poor cognitive, emotional and behavioural outcomes. When people who hold this belief encounter oppression, they will feel anxiety, anger or despair and will tend to think and act in self-defeating ways.

A noble/holy war. Ellis (1986) proposes that wars and violence stem from beliefs that certain conditions absolutely must prevail. This type of thinking is likely to lead to unhealthy anger and rage and destructive behaviour when these conditions are not met. This in turn is less likely to produce cooperation and compromise making it difficult to reach a peaceful solution to problems. It is not violence and war per se that prevents terrorists from reaching their goals. Rather, it is their thinking and emotions that preclude them from adequately exploring peaceful means.

By leading people to believe that they have a moral obligation to fight in a noble/holy war, it can be seen how followers engage in acts of violence and terrorism. They believe that what they are doing is morally right. This obligation deters individual members of the group from exercising their freedom of choice and making their own decisions about how best to respond to oppression. The moral obligation to fight confirms their faith in their religion and also imposes a sense of order on the world. Strict rules and obligations are typical of religions and are at the heart of their dysfunctional beliefs. The obligations can have very powerful effects and lead people to do things they would not otherwise do. Thus, REBT rejects the notion that war is noble or holy. War and violence are the irrational, destructive and self-defeating consequences of rigid, absolutistic and dogmatic thinking.

Extreme ingroup-outgroup contrasts. As a result of their absolutist and compartmentalized thinking, terrorists dichotomize the world into 'us' and 'them'. The outgroup is seen as all bad. Not only is the outgroup the enemy but everyone in the outgroup is the enemy (but surely not everyone in the outgroup can be bad). The terrorist does not distinguish between military and civilians. This is self-categorisation theory (Tajfel, 1981) writ large. Differences between groups are accentuated; differences within groups are minimized. In addition, there is *positive ingroup bias*: "Not only are we different from them. We are good and they are bad." Everyone in the ingroup is good or "pure" (but surely not everyone in the ingroup can be good). Interestingly, reference to the ingroup as good was not as frequent (30%) as might be expected given the frequency of ingroup-outgroup contrasts (100%). But then REBT would argue that irrational beliefs are likely to elicit negative thoughts and

emotions and an unhealthy obsession with the enemy at the expense of healthy positive thoughts about members of the ingroup.

Essentially, REBT disputes that global evaluations are valid. It is argued that human beings are simply too complex to be evaluated in this way. Also, since people are changeable creatures, any evaluation would need to take account of this inherent human variability. REBT suggests that people try to avoid evaluating themselves and others. Rather, REBT emphasises the importance of unconditional self and other acceptance. This principle encourages people to accept themselves and others unconditionally because they are human not conditionally because of the worth of their acts or deeds. Ellis (1986) states that if unconditional self acceptance were commonplace in society then murder, genocide and war would rarely occur. By accepting oneself unconditionally, it is possible to more effectively identify shortcomings, overcome our limitations and solve problems constructively. Similarly, by accepting other people with their faults and flaws, we are more likely to win their respect and influence them to change their behaviour.

A higher, greater force. The concept of a higher, greater force more powerful than humans runs counter to many of the central assumptions of REBT. Ellis (1980) believes that there is no higher supreme being either of a godly or secular nature. He believes this mainly because there is no valid evidence supporting the existence of such a being or force. He argues that most religions and ideologies are based on assumptions that are not only untestable but also very unlikely (for example, the Christian belief that the world was created by God in seven days). Ellis (1997) takes a scientific approach to the likelihood of there being a higher force more powerful than humans.

Ellis suggests there are various reasons why people believe in a higher force despite the lack of any empirical evidence for its existence. He suggests it meets a need in many people to have an object of devotion or something greater than themselves on which to rely. Religion gives meaning to the lives of many people. However, Ellis argues that this meaning is not real as the universe has no supreme spiritual force. There are no supreme beings or forces and the universe is essentially indifferent to your existence. People create religions and ideologies to avoid facing this unpleasant reality.

A summary of the themes and sub-themes associated with REBT irrational beliefs is shown in Table 3.

Table 3   Summary of Irrational Beliefs
  1. Demands
      - *Oppression must stop*
      - *Reality must not be this way*
      - *Followers must obey strict rules*
  2. Downing
      - *Outgroup as the enemy*
      - *Rule breakers punished & sent to hell*
  3. Low Frustration Tolerance
      - *Oppression cannot be tolerated*
      - *Rule breaking cannot be tolerated*

Limitations of the research
As is to be expected with any type of research especially exploratory work there are a number of limitations to the study.

There were difficulties obtaining relevant documents from terrorist groups. Many of the web sites holding such information were not accessible. There are no clear reasons why this was the case. Only British and American search engines were employed and this probably influenced the range of web sites available. To be included in the study a document had to be referred to as a manifesto or *fatwa*. Documents serving the same purpose and encompassing the same information as a manifesto or *fatwa* were not necessarily recognised as such if they were not described using these terms and were not therefore included in the study. As a consequence, the documents accessed may not have been representative of the population of terrorist groups. There may be important differences between groups whose documents could be accessed and those whose documents could not. For example, better organised groups would be more likely to have their own web site than less organised groups

The analysis of the documents relied on the assumption that the information is typical of the group's thinking. Although it seems plausible to assume this is so, there was evidence that this was not

always the case. For example, the highly religious Islamic fundamentalist group Hizbullah did not mention God or Allah in their manifesto. There is also the question as to who wrote the documents. Were they produced by people who held views typical of the group in question? Perhaps most important is that the documents were probably not produced by the group members who actually carried out terrorist attacks. Those who produced the documents were probably at the top of the group hierarchy whereas those who carried out terrorist attacks were probably at the middle-to-bottom of the hierarchy. Finally, it could be that the statements reflect not how the terrorists in reality think, but how they want other people to think. Since, according to Ellis, people have a strong tendency to think irrationally, it seems logical to appeal to this tendency in public pronouncements if your goal is to achieve political power. Here, there is a danger of confusing different senses of 'rationality' according to whose viewpoint is taken.

As is typical of qualitative research in which the researchers immerse themselves in the source material in order to make sense of it, there is the issue that the individual researcher cannot be separated from the process of analysis. The present researchers are from a developed Western culture whereas the source material comes predominantly from developing and/or Eastern cultures. Thus, the interpretations imposed on the material by the researchers (from a different culture) may well be different from the interpretations that members from the same culture would impose. Included in this bias is the fact that REBT was developed in North America and applies mainly to North American and European cultures.

Sometimes the themes and sub-themes were not explicitly expressed in the documents but were only alluded to. Themes and sub-themes were only included in the analysis if they were explicitly stated. Therefore, the analysis would tend to have underestimated the frequency of themes and sub-themes. In some cases, themes and sub-themes may have been omitted from the analysis altogether because they were never explicitly expressed or at least recognised by the researchers. Two sub-themes that were implicit in the documents but not explicitly expressed were: the belief that God favours the ingroup over the outgroup (a potential component of the "Higher, greater force" and the "Extreme ingroup-outgroup contrasts" themes); and the conviction that the oppression they experienced 'caused' the terrorist response (a potential component of the "Oppression" theme).

The study provides preliminary support for Ellis's perspectives on the thinking underlying terrorist activities and behaviours. It also provides a reasonable framework by which further research in this area can be conducted. However, it does not inform us about how a terrorist group's thinking is different from other groups who engage in violent activities. The distinctiveness of terrorist thinking, presumed to be at the heart of terrorist activities, has not been identified. Yet this study offers a way that this can be achieved: By comparing terrorist groups with groups who engage in violent activities for political means but who are not defined as a terrorist group, such as government-sponsored groups. Comparisons could also be made with extreme religious and ideological groups who do not engage in violent behaviour.

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