

Patterns of Thinking in Militant Extremism

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Abstract

Recurrent features of the thinking pattern (or mindset) of violent militant extremists are delineated, discussed, and related to previous research and theory. Extremist groups were selected from a diverse range of continents, cultures, and political and religious orientations. Statements by (and to some degree statements about) these groups were compared, leading to the formulation of 16 themes common to the militant-extremist mindset. Among these themes are perceptions of a crisis involving violations of posited sacred values, along with justifications for violence to remediate such problems. There are indications that such themes are not infrequent in the general population. For example, research participants failed to strongly disassociate themselves from the sentiments and framings found in the fanatical items, which undercuts the notion that militant-extremist thinking represents bizarre ideation. Militant-extremist thinking appears to represent a major, aggressive form of fanaticism affected by both dispositional and situational factors. Key themes in this thinking pattern might be fit together to construct a potentially compelling narrative, which may be a key part of the ideological appeal of salient militant-extremist groups.

“Though they seem to be at opposite poles, fanatics of all kinds are actually crowded together at one end. It is the fanatic and the moderate who are poles apart and never meet. The fanatics of various hues eye each other with suspicion and are ready to fly at each other’s throat. But they are neighbors and almost of one family. They hate each other with the hatred of brothers.” (Hoffer, 1951, p. 86)

Violence in the contemporary world is a major source of societal instability as well as individual stress and trauma. It also imposes economic costs. Much of the violence is, of course, conventionally criminal and is based on personal and instrumental motives. But sometimes violence is based on what are held to be sacred values, and involves a significant ideological (i.e., political and/or religious) basis. Ideology-inspired violence, prominently including that carried out by militant-extremist individuals and groups, has psychological dimensions.

Most people find extremist behavior and thinking is difficult to comprehend – as exemplified in the bewilderment felt by Americans on and after September 11, 2001 when trying to make sense of the motivations of those who carried out attacks on targets in New York and Washington. Understanding of the militant-extremist mindset will help increase our understanding of the thinking and motivation of known militant-extremist groups. It will facilitate prediction of which groups are most likely to be violence-prone, by enabling one to gauge their fit to the prototypical tendencies of militant extremism. We may learn something about why populations sometimes condone militant extremists, because they may share in part the same mindset. And it can contribute to broader psychological theory regarding ideology and ideology-driven aggression.

Militant extremism can be defined as zealous adherence to a set of beliefs and values, with a combination of two key features: (a) advocacy of measures beyond the norm (i.e., extremism), and (b) intention and willingness to resort to violence (i.e., militancy). Of most interest, of course, is *violent militant extremism*, which includes not just intended but actual violence, violence that arguably (without sufficient long-term redeeming value) violates human moral codes in multiple ways by imposing harm, violating human rights, causing chaos, and stimulating a reaction of shock and disgust.

Our focus here is on the most dangerous forms of militant extremism, those most prone to violence. However, we omit adjectives like “dangerous” or “violent” from this point on, and refer to these dangerous/violent variants by the shorter “militant extremism.”

We note that individuals and groups who carry out terrorist actions are an important subset of the larger class of militant extremists. Terrorism itself, however, differs from militant extremism in being not a broad behavior pattern but rather a method or tactic: the induction of terror (i.e., intentionally creating or exploiting fear through violence, threatened or real, on unarmed civilian persons so as to achieve political objectives, in ways that subvert or ignore the requirements of law [cf., Goldstick, 2002, p. 20; Hoffman, 1998, p. 43; O’Sullivan, 1986, p. 5]). Although there is some overlap between militant extremism and terrorism, there are instances representing one but not the other. Cases in point: extremists who damage buildings or property but intentionally avoid hurting any unarmed person (arguably not terrorists), and leaders holding political power who abrogate laws and violently terrorize their own people (arguably not militant extremists). Some aspects of the militant-extremist mindset may be characteristic of persons responsible for state terrorism, which is carried out from the center rather than the periphery of societal power structures, but the degree to which this is true is an empirical question beyond the

scope of this particular article. We focus here on militant extremists operating from the periphery of society.

A common conclusion from previous research is that terrorist acts are not the product of mental illness (Atran, 2003; McCauley, 2002). Thus, experts can make statements like “Terrorists are made, they are not born. Terrorism arises from societal conditions, not individual characteristics” (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 45). Not seeking the “extremist personality,” our approach does not assume militant extremism to be a trait disposition, but rather a mentality or mindset, that is, a pattern of thinking and motivation that tends to be affectively mobilized and to have major effects on behavior. Our starting assumption is that, under facilitating conditions, anyone is capable of adopting components of this mindset because it draws on certain natural human tendencies. Thus, we expect strong effects of context on the degree to which the mindset is present.

However, holding the context constant, some individuals may be more prone than others to take on this mindset, which would be a dispositional component. A widely studied ideology-related disposition is authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996), and one might wonder if the militant-extremist mindset resembles an authoritarian mindset. Altemeyer identifies three attitudinal clusters making up authoritarianism – conventionalism, authoritarian submission, and authoritarian aggression. Although the first two seem obviously uncharacteristic of militant extremists, there may still be a partial relation through some kind of ideologically driven aggression that characterizes both extremists and authoritarians.

One reasonable premise is that militant extremists are unusually dogmatic – asserting their beliefs stubbornly and with excessive force. Whereas the construct of authoritarianism has been found associated mainly with the political right, Rokeach (1956) developed a dogmatism

scale, intended to measure tendencies to be an authoritarian “ideologue” uncorrelated with preference for the political left or right. Undercutting validity, studies (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996) indicated substantial confound between dogmatism (D) and conservatism, and dogmatism is now only a rare target for investigation. Nonetheless, to identify the tendency toward being an ideologue in a way independent of specific ideology is a useful idea.

Hoffer (1951) seems to provide a better starting point for developing this useful idea. Based on a scholarly observer’s intuition rather than on scientific research, Hoffer offered an early set of formulations about fanatics -- individuals who become immersed in violent mass movements. Whereas contemporaneous work on fascism and authoritarianism (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Arendt, 1951) was focused largely on the example of the Nazi movement in Germany, Hoffer took a broader view: The fanatics of interest were not only Nazis but also Bolsheviks, anarchists, and others, whom Hoffer saw (in certain ways) as being all of the same stripe. According to Hoffer, these are individuals who respond to chronic frustrations by finding their identity and destiny through, and therefore derive great energy from, single-minded dedication to a cause they regard as sacred. They have an impatient and deprecating attitude toward mundane family life and the pursuit of enjoyable recreation. They are at war with the present, being far more interested in a utopian future. Because they see the world as poised to turn an important corner, they believe that changing the world will not be impossibly difficult. Unfortunately, Hoffer’s model was never translated into a model or measure amenable to scientific study.

More recent work includes several explications of the mindset of extremists. Cordes (1987) studied some eight European left-wing ‘anarchic-ideologue’ groups. Following Ferracuti (1982), Cordes observes that these groups identify (or construct) a crisis, build an opposition organization with an enemy portrayed as sinister and threatening, and build up a “maniacal

feeling of increasing power and invulnerability” (p. 324).

Hoffman (1998), focusing on extremist terrorists, identified a sequence of five key objectives: getting attention focused on their cause, next obtaining acknowledgment of (or even sympathy for) it, then obtaining acceptance that their cause is justified, then achieving authority to effect the changes they advocate, and finally consolidating control over a people, homeland, or state. This is a valuable synopsis of the overt motivations of an extremist political campaign; it encapsulates the stages an extremist group must go through in order to get themselves heard, and then have their viewpoint considered and finally later adopted. However, some extremist groups may not have the goal of taking authority eventually as a government, being focused rather on making dramatic, symbolic statements that might encourage other, broader elements of society toward change or revolution. Moreover, Hoffman’s account does not address many psychological aspects of militant extremism.

Moghaddam (2005, 2006) focused on the developmental sequence found especially in members of Islamic terrorist groups, examining how the self is transformed to arrive at a meaningful identity as being part of a terrorist group. The sequence includes levels differentiated by the individual’s increasing degrees of commitment and involvement with the group’s ideology and goals. This framework is one kind of “psychology of the slippery slope” (McCauley, 2002, p. 15), and constitutes a useful theory addressing the development of commitment to an organized militant-extremist cause. Moghaddam’s description indicates a mindset including the following 11 features (roughly in order by where they are identified in the sequence, from beginning to end): (a) perceived deprivation, (b) a broader dissatisfaction with the world, (c) refusal to become merely a good copy of some externally imposed (e.g., Western) model of personhood, (d) feelings of being treated unfairly and a subjective sense of injustice, (e)

a perception that one has no voice in decisions, no way to improve the deprived, dissatisfying, and unjust situation, (f) an aggressive attitude toward an external enemy (in Moghaddam's view, displaced aggression) with the belief that a certain external enemy is the source of all big problems, (g) the ends justify the means, doing anything to destroy or weaken the enemy, with even killing of civilians being justified in reaching the goal, (h) "we must kill or we will be killed" thinking and, related to it, "us versus them" thinking, (i) belief that the cause is all that is worth living for, (j) a felt obligation to conform to all norms set by one's group/cause, and (k) a conviction that one heroic act will improve the world. Thus, although on its face Moghaddam's account emphasizes a process of social-identity formation, it can be cast as well as an account of how the separate pieces of a violence-prone mindset assemble into a coherent whole. The mindset elements in this account are interestingly compared with authoritarianism. The early stages include social and political alienation and focus on injustice -- not characteristic of authoritarians. Later-stage developments appear to share more with authoritarianism, but the conformity is to a specific group and not to social norms having a wider consensus.

#### Developing a Model of the Militant-Extremist Mindset

We began, as in Hoffer's approach, by attempting to unconfound the phenomenon of militant extremism from any specific kind of ideology, movement, or culture. That is, we made the assumption that, until proven otherwise, militant extremism is a pancultural phenomenon, not being endemic to a select group of nations or societies, or that if indeed there are especially "terrorist producing cultures" (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 86), they can arise in very diverse conditions and locales. Based on this assumption, obtaining a "sufficient range of sources" for making generalizations about the militant-extremist mindset means examining materials arising from a diverse range of regions, religions, and political orientations. Without such heterogeneity,



investigators are prone to develop culturally biased models that do not generalize widely, and even unwittingly and erroneously to incorporate in their model aspects of thinking endemic to one region, religion, or political orientation. For example, if one studies only Muslim militant extremists, cultural features associated with Islam may inadvertently and erroneously become part of a purportedly scientific model of militant extremism. This would lead to erroneous overdiagnosis of Islamic groups as militant extremist, and erroneous underdiagnosis of non-Islamic groups. Analogously, an analysis that focused only on left-wing extremists (e.g., Cordes, 1987) would lead similarly to a biased model. Although applied research might justifiably focus on groups of a particular provenance, a more general model of the phenomenon is needed.

Based on an exploratory study, we developed an inductively based working model of the major components of the militant-extremist mindset. The model includes a wide range of variables. These variables are derived from sources so *wide* in their range that it might justifiably be considered a *sufficient* degree of heterogeneity.

Militant-extremism has arisen from varied sources in a wide variety of locations around the world. Accordingly, our aim was to develop a model of the militant-extremist thinking pattern by intensive study of groups from diverse backgrounds. To assure diversity of sampling, we first divided the world into seven major regions: Europe, Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Latin America, and North America. We sought to identify at least one militant-extremist group from each region. To qualify, a group had to have been active within the last 150 years, had to fit the definition of militant extremism, and also had to have had a record of actual violence involving the death of multiple persons outside the group. A qualifying group also had to have sufficient written documentary evidence (i.e., original statements) that would clearly indicate its mindset.

If we were able to identify multiple qualifying groups within a region, we included also a second group, if that second group was very distinct from the first with respect to religion or political orientation. For all regions except Africa and Latin America we were able to identify a diversity-enhancing second group within the region.

The groups we examined were the following:

Europe - Baader-Meinhof (Red Army Faction; leftist) and Irish Republican Army  
(ethnonationalist)

Middle East – Sayyid Qutb’s movement (including the Muslim Brotherhood; Egypt; Muslim)  
and Meir Kahane and associates (Palestine and Israel, Jewish)

Africa - Lord’s Resistance Army/Holy Spirit Movement (Joseph Kony, Alice Lakwena; Uganda;  
religious cult)

South Asia - Tamil Tigers (Sri Lanka; leftist ethnonationalist) and Babbar Khalsa and other Sikh  
independence groups (Sikhs; religious ethnonationalist)

East Asia - Taipin Rebellion (China; religious ethnonationalist, 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Aum Shinrikyo  
(Japan; religious cult associated with sarin attack in Tokyo subways)

Latin America - Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path, Peru; leftist/communist)

North America - Theodore Kaczynski (Unabomber; anarchist), Timothy McVeigh (Oklahoma  
City Bomber; orientation sharing much with American militia movements), Eric  
Rudolph (Olympic Park Bomber; Christian, anti-gay, anti-abortion orientation)

For North America, in lieu of a militant extremist group we selected the most dramatic recent examples of homegrown militant extremism. These happened to be three individual militant extremists who had relatively little in common ideologically but might be collectively labeled “individualistic homegrown American violent extremists of the 1990s.”

Excluding these North American extremists, the 10 remaining groups include three that are secular leftist, two that are secular ethnonationalist, and six that have a strong religious basis. Of those six, two are religious cults (i.e., are small and eccentric religious groups), two spring from Abrahamic religions (i.e., Judaism, Islam), and two others are religious ethnonationalist, these being associated with non-Abrahamic religion (large movements, thus not characterizable as cults) from southern and eastern Asia. No religion is represented twice in this sampling of groups. Islamic militant extremists have recently attracted great amounts of attention, and only one Islamic group is included here; however, the group selected (that associated with Sayyid Qutb) was a crucial one in popularizing the concept of pro-Islamic violent revolution against what are portrayed as illegitimate governments, and served as the foundation of the more recent al Qaeda (Sageman, 2004). The effect of our wide sampling of militant extremists is beneficial from a scientific standpoint: What three or more groups have in common cannot be characterized as specific to only one region or religion.

We reviewed documentary evidence that would indicate the characteristic thinking and motivation of each group. Documentary evidence was drawn from books (and sometimes other printed material such as pamphlets and periodical articles) and from Internet websites. In some of this evidence, the individual or group was explaining the point of its activities in order to further its causes or justify actions, whereas other evidence involved interviews with group participants or observations at a distance. We sought first Internet material, then turned to printed material afterwards. In some cases (e.g., the Middle Eastern groups, Rudolph) the most useful material was found posted on the Internet. In most cases, however, relatively more evidence was found in printed material. For the most part we relied on direct statements clearly attributable to militant extremist individuals or groups, but in a few cases (Baader-Meinhof, Lord's Resistance

Army, Aum Shinrikyu) the dearth of such direct indicators led us to rely relatively more on reports and on observations at a distance (by journalists and other writers). It should be noted that contemporary militant extremists clearly differ in their use of media: Some (perhaps those interested in worldwide recruitment) are associated with a substantial Internet presence, while others (including those focused on a more local ethnonationalist cause) have little Internet presence and may shun the media almost entirely. A study of extremist sources examining only Internet material or only printed material would base itself on an unrepresentative sample.

We extracted statements that stood out as revealing thinking and motivation, especially if in a dramatic and distinctive way. We were especially attentive to statements that pertained to the advocacy of measures outside the norm, and statements pertaining to violence and justifications for it, since these are types of contents integrally related to the definition of militant extremism. After the corpus of statements had been extracted, the first author scanned the collected statements in search of key unifying themes, based partly on suggestions from the second and third authors. Such a theme was taken to be present in multiple statements when, in the first author's judgment, a reasonable person hearing the set of statements would acknowledge them to be making the same essential point.

Our strategy was to rely as much as possible on *explicit* statements by group members, and thereby to minimize guesswork about what kind of thinking was involved. As a result, we may have systematically underestimated how widely the identified themes are distributed: That is, militant extremists might agree with a wider range of the statements of the nature presented here, even if they have never thought to make them spontaneously and without prompting.

A total of 16 themes were identified based on fairly obvious correspondences that emerged in repeated reviews of the extracted statements. Each of these 16 themes was found to

occur in three or more groups. Some of these 16 were syntheses of related themes from among the initial 43 candidates. Table 1 tabulates the provenance of the 16 themes, and the next section describes the content of each of the themes.

### Key Themes Characterizing a Militant-Extremist Mindset

1. *The necessity of unconventional and extreme measures.* The theme here is that one cannot work through the system; instead one must resort to tactics that might seem unconventional and extreme. The theme is reflected in the Revolutionary Tactics subscale from the New Left Ideology Scale of Gold, Christie, and Friedman (1976), but this theme is not confined to the left; Paxton (2003) identified as one of the mobilizing passions of fascism the notion that traditional solutions will not be adequate in the present crisis. The perceived necessity of unconventional and extreme measures is integrally related to part of the definition of militant extremism -- advocacy of measures beyond the norm. Because norms might curb violent behavior, and this theme sets up exceptions to typical normative standards, this theme could be violence-promoting. Characteristic statements include “peaceful change does not work” (Sendero Luminoso; Guzman, 1990), “only extreme measures can restore virtue and righteousness” (Lifton’s (1999) paraphrase of Aum Shinrikyo ideology), using reform to address problems means “you set up only better means of discipline, better methods of intimidation, better methods of exploitation” (Rote Armee Fraktion, 1970), and “revolution is easier than reform” (Unabomber manifesto; Kaczynski, 1996). One could also mention a statement attributed to Mao Ze Dong (and that we found quoted by Abimael Guzman, leader of Sendero Luminoso, in celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chinese communist revolution): “only through great storms can the world be changed.”

2. *Use of tactics that function to absolve one of responsibility for the bad consequences of*

*the violence one is advocating or carrying out.* Militant extremists may argue that violence is needed to assure that they are taken seriously (i.e., to get attention, or to demonstrate formidableness), or that they were forced to resort to violence for some reason, or that someone else is in fact to blame for it. The classic anarchist concept of “propaganda by the deed,” according to which a single act of violence (e.g., an assassination) is justified because of the expectation that it will have dramatic beneficial consequences (e.g., initiating a massive uprising or revolution) represents such a tactic. O’Sullivan (1986) suggests that these arguments become possible because over the last 200 years or so a new ideological style of politics has incrementally destroyed old conventions about when and how violence is used, and “there is no conceivable act which our modern ideologies cannot present as morally defensible” (p. 10). However, Beck (1999) points out that many justifications for violence can be seen as cognitive distortions. Examples of statements that demonstrate a search for responsibility-absolving explanations include “in order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we’ve had to kill people” (Unabomber manifesto; Kaczynski, 1996), “armed struggle was not our choice, it was forced on us” (Bhai Dhanna Singh, Sikh militant leader, quoted in Mahmood [1996], p. 148), and “our movement is a symptom of violence and not its cause” (paraphrase of statements by Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams in his autobiography *Before the Dawn*, [1996]).

3. *Prominent mixtures of military terminology into areas of discourse where it is ordinarily rarely found.* Ferracuti (1982) observed that the typical terrorist is “like a soldier outside of time and space living in a reality of war that exists only in his or her fantasy” (p. 136), actively trying to persuade others that a state of war already exists – so aggression is permitted. In militant extremism, one finds that military concepts are mixed with religious ones, or political

ones, or one's mundane personal (and civilian) life is discussed in military terms. Often the mixing occurs in very salient ways, as in the names of organizations (e.g., the Lord's Resistance Army [Uganda], the Army of God [which had some associations with Eric Rudolph]), or in the term "holy war." Another example: After discharge from the military and return to civilian life, Timothy McVeigh essentially perseverated in soldierhood, plotting military responses to objectionable actions of U.S. government agents. It would be highly unusual for military personnel to effectively "militarize" all aspects of their life and persist with use of military tactics in their civilian life, as McVeigh did. In the American context, military language is often used metaphorically (e.g., "onward Christian soldiers, marching *as* to war"); thus for example, the Salvation Army is not a Christian militia. In contrast, radical groups use military language in a more literal way. Hoffman (1998, p. 33) noted that terrorists "deliberately cloak themselves in the terminology of military jargon." For this theme, characteristic statements include "armed struggle is the highest expression of political practice" (Anton Balasingham [1983] speaking for the Tamil Tigers), "a war to establish righteousness is coming" (paraphrase based on statements by Timothy McVeigh; Serrano, 1998), "we are living life as if we're in a battlefield" (statement of a Sikh militant's wife; Mahmood [1996] p.127), "I have chosen you to lead God's army" (attributed to Shoko Asahara of Aum Shinrikyo by Kaplan and Marshall, 1997, p. 12), and "we raise the army of righteousness in order to wreak the vengeance of God on high" (Taipin Rebellion proclamation; Cheng [1963] p.78).

4. *Perception that "the ability of our group to reach its rightful position is being tragically obstructed."* As Khan (1987) noted, one typically finds an "aggrieved group" associated with terrorism. Gurr (1970) has suggested that feelings of deprivation (of one's group relative to other groups) arise when group members perceive their path to a desired and deserved

goal is blocked. O'Sullivan (1986) suggests that in the ideological style of politics that began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (cf., Bracher, 1984), there is ever potential for a "crusading mentality" that identifies "an 'out group' which could be held responsible for everything amiss with the existing social order" (p. 8), and major targets have been foreign powers or minority groups perceived as exploitative, which (in this way of thinking) ought to be expelled or eliminated. Pape (2003, 2005) focused on common features of the sociological and political contexts in which extremist groups turn to suicide terrorism, finding that it occurs primarily in places where there is an occupation by a military force controlled by a democratic power (a nation that holds democratic elections). Political violence tends to combine rational and irrational framings of a situation. Knutson (1981) points to the substantial role of victimization – personally experienced injustice – in the genesis of political violence. On the other hand, Beck's (1999) analysis suggests that such a mentality is a common part of the cognitive distortions associated with hate, hostility, and violence. Characteristic statements include "armed resistance to alien rule is not unlawful" (Nadesan Satyendra [2001], advocate for Tamil Tigers), "we cannot tolerate being slaves to a country that doesn't respect us, our religion, our culture, our language" (a Sikh militant conversing with Mahmood, 1996, p.127), "[we] are morally justified in carrying out a campaign of resistance against foreign occupation forces and domestic collaborators" (IRA volunteer handbook called *The Green Book* [date unknown]), and simply that they [in this case the Manchus] "stole our territory" (Taipin Rebellion proclamation; Cheng [1963], p.72).

5. *Glorifying the past, in reference to one's group.* If one's group is currently frustrated from reaching its potential (as in theme 4), the present might provide too little evidence for the special importance of the group. The best claim for special importance might then be found in a glorious past, and a theme that a "former golden age of our people should be restored" is found



frequently among militant extremists. This is a prominent sentiment among ethnonationalist movements in general (Smith, 2001). When one identifies one's people as chosen or as superior because of its heritage, this implies an attitude of cultural imperialism (Said, 1993). Examples include "Ours is a language of antiquity and magnificence...a superior culture and a true and good tradition" (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, 1980) and "we want to recover the lost glory of the golden period of our people" (paraphrase based on statements by Firdous Sayed, retired Kashmiri militant quoted in Stern, 2003).

6. *Utopianizing*. There is frequently reference to concepts of a future paradise, or at least "the promise of a long and glorious future" (McCauley, 2002, p. 12); Rapoport called such beliefs "messianic" (1987, p. 74). From a psychological standpoint, such ideas build up for group members an anticipation of future reward. Thus, this theme is a way of harnessing the pleasure principle – the near-inevitable tendency for individuals to seek maximization of pleasure – into the service of the cause. Whether the utopia/paradise is located in this world or in the afterlife, this theme can function as a motivator. Moreover, O'Sullivan (1986) argues that utopian thinking, with an assumption that it lays within the power of people to remake society and refashion human nature, is foundational to the ideological style of politics within which militant extremism operates. Examples include beliefs that the leader "will create a new basis for civilization, a new paradise" (Lifton's (1999) characterization of Aum Shinrikyo), that "those who obey heaven shall be amply rewarded" (proclamation from Taipin Rebellion; Cheng [1963] p.72), that it is important "to create a new world on the foundation of submission to the creator" (Sayed Qutb, chapter 10 of *Milestones*, 1964 ), and seeking "the society of 'great harmony', the radical and definitive new society towards which 15,000 million years" of past history has been moving (a key idea in Sendero Luminoso, as described by Degregori, 1991, p, 249). In some

versions, it is thought that arrival at the paradise/utopia will be preceded by calamities, as in the next theme.

7. *Catastrophizing*. There is a perception that great calamities either have occurred, are occurring, or will occur. McCauley (2002) identifies something similar as a “psychology of crisis” and a “ten minutes to midnight feeling” (p. 14). Among militant extremists, there may be an obsession with events perceived as catastrophic, and with portraying situations as desperate. From a psychological standpoint, such ideas build up for group members an anticipation of punishments that will occur, especially to those who do not follow the cause. Moreover, they create a sense of crisis, perhaps using an individual’s neurological alarm system to galvanize him or her in the cause. They stimulate individuals’ “sensitivity to punishment,” associated with the tendency for individuals to seek minimization of pain, though they may also involve a gratifying anticipatory *schadenfreude* (enjoying the calamities that will befall others). The catastrophic calamity could be located in this world or in the afterlife, but in either case this theme can function as a strong motivator. In conjunction with a glorified past and utopian thinking, the present-day calamities might appear as a profane and tragic interregnum, replete with impurity and injustice. Characteristic statements range from the mildly phrased “Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice” (Qutb in *Milestones*, 1964) to more dramatic statements like “everything’s heading straight for destruction and there’s no turning back” (Murakami’s [2000] quotation of statement by Kano, Aum Shinrikyo member) and “incorrectness eventually takes one to hell” (Taipin Rebellion Edict; Cheng [1963] p.75), as well as the portrayal of political disagreements as a leader holding “an entire country hostage” with its people “driven to desperation” (Binyamin Zev Kahane, 1995). “Catastrophizing” is, in modern cognitive therapies, a prime thinking error that leads to psychological disorders like depression and anxiety (Ellis & Harper, 1975).

8. *Anticipation of supernatural intervention: Miraculous powers attributed to one's side, miraculous events coming to help one's side, or commands coming from supernatural entities.*

Militant extremists are idealists. For them to fight against the powerful institutions and entities they oppose, bravery against great odds is sometimes required. To muster such bravery, there is an advantage for groups to expect a *deus ex machina*, believing that miraculous powers will aid them in crucial situations. Most typically, these beliefs have to do with supernatural help (or at the least, amazing good luck interpreted as a blessing from on high) coming when group members initiate aggressive actions; in a limited way, then, this is another way of mixing military and religious content (theme 3). This theme may be related to the common tendency for people to believe that “God is on our side” in any conflict. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the statement that “although there be a million select troops [against us], in an instant they will turn to dust” (patriotic poem from Taiping Rebellion; Cheng [1963] p.68); other examples include the belief that the leader can never be caught because his higher state of enlightenment enables him to anticipate where the police will look for him (attributed to Aum Shinrikyo leader by Kaplan and Marshall [1997, p. 278), and the belief that the leader can never be killed or that after a ritual (purifying them of all sin) those fighting for him cannot be wounded or killed (associated with Joseph Kony of Lord’s Resistance Army; Behrend, 1998). The other, related form of supernatural intervention is found in reports of commands from transcendent entities.

Expectations of such mysterious, counterintuitive happenings may advantageously increase the memorability of a narrative (Norenzayan et al., 2006). Characteristic examples are Alice Auma’s possession by a spirit called Lakwena who ordered her to create a (militant-extremist) group in order to build up a new and purified world (the origin of the Lord’s Resistance Army later led by Kony; Behrend, 1998), the command by the supernatural that is implicit in “devote yourself to

God's battle" (Meir Kahane; date unknown-b), and explicit in "we...are commanded by heaven... to establish an army for the Heavenly King" (Taipin Rebellion joint proclamation; Cheng [1963] p.64).

9. *A felt imperative to annihilate (exterminate, crush, destroy) evil and/or purify the world entirely from evil.* A proverb states that "he who has killed the wicked ends by exterminating the good" (cited in French by Chrétien, 1995, p. 201). In something of the same spirit, the Christian Gospels feature Jesus saying that God makes the rain fall on both the just and the unjust. These are attitudes of acceptance and resignation not characteristic of a militant extremist, who not only perceives but is obsessed by evils in the world, and who seeks to rid the world of these evils or otherwise to cleanse or purify the world in drastic ways. That evil exists and that we should try to reduce evil influences in the world are common sentiments. The militant extremist differs by being unusually impatient and in a rush, seeking to accomplish this goal quickly and dramatically. Many would think it unlikely that evil could ever be entirely eliminated, or that purification could ever be complete. In this respect, the militant extremist is an idealist, and prefers to think in terms of absolutes, not being satisfied with merely incremental reductions in evil. Violence may be more attractive for those seeking a quick and total elimination of any perceived problem. O'Sullivan (1986) pointed out that the assumption involved, that evil is not eternal but can be eliminated by the proper social changes, only became common some 200 years ago with the onset of an ideological style of politics. Stern (2003, p. 281) observed that apocalyptic violence to cleanse the world of impurities creates a state of spiritual intoxication. Characteristic statements include "we are commanded by heaven to exterminate the demons" (paraphrase of a proclamation from the Taipin Rebellion movement (Cheng [1963] p.64), where "demons" referred to the agents of the Manchu dynasty), "the world

should be purified of sin” (sentiment attributed to Alice Lakwena of the Holy Spirit Movement, precursor of the Lord’s Resistance Army; Behrend, 1998), “the earth should be cleansed of corruption, by force if necessary” (paraphrase of sentiments expressed by Sayed Qutb in his *Milestones* manifesto of political Islam, 1964), and describing Passover as “the holiday that decrees the death and destruction of wickedness and not coexistence with it” (Meir Kahane; date unknown-a).

10. *Glorification of dying for the cause.* Militant extremists are prone to distinguish between relatively meaningful and meaningless deaths. A meaningful death is one that occurs as a direct result of heroic actions promoting the cause. There is a tendency to associate immortality with dying for the cause, this immortality achieved either within a theological system (e.g., in heaven) or through lasting fame and repute. Normally, the possibility of injury or death to oneself tends to put a brake on violent impulses, but glorification of dying for the cause takes the brake off, indicating that (at least in some ways) one will be better off by taking the risk and engaging in violent action. Such “readiness for sacrifice” is recognized as a sub-theme in the fanaticism scale of Knežević and Radović (2005). Characteristic statements include “those who have given their lives for our cause are still living and fighting within us” (paraphrase of statement by a Sendero Luminoso member in Rosenberg [1990]), “everybody has to die, but those who die for honor never die, for they are immortal” (Sikh mother; Mahmood [1996] p.105), and “both the perpetrators and their victims...merged into an all-encompassing immortalization” (Lifton [1999], summarizing Aum Shinrikyo’s ideology of killing).

11. *Duty and obligation to kill, or to make offensive war.* The previous theme involved putting a high value on dying for the cause, whereas this theme concerns killing others for that cause. Groups that engage only in defensive violence are obviously less dangerous. Therefore,

movements that advocate a duty to defend, but stop short of citing an obligation to attack, can be justifiably considered to have a lower grade of militancy. Purely defensive movements by implication acknowledge a right for their opponents to live; more dangerous groups, espousing a duty to kill, may disregard any such right. Characteristic examples of the duty to kill range from the rather reluctant “it may or may not be right to kill, but sometimes it is necessary” (Adams, 1996), to the situation in Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army: “in general spirit possession in his movement involved the duty to kill” (Behrend, 1998, pp. 114-115). Another example is the duty to engage in holy war, especially when coupled with insistence that this means war for offensive and not just defensive purposes (as for Qutb). As another example, the Unabomber manifesto (Kaczynski, 1996) includes the sentiment (paraphrasing) that “in some situations, the weak must kill the strong while they have the chance” -- the imperative “must” suggesting a duty.

12. *Machiavellianism in service of the “sacred.”* The belief is that those with the right (i.e., the true) beliefs and values are entitled to use immoral ends if necessary to assure the success of their cause. A very similar theme appears in items for a “sacral Machiavellianism” subscale of fanaticism developed by Knežević and Radović (2005). The confluence of Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970) with ‘sacred’ is a bit jarring: By definition, Machiavellians are more devoted to self-interest than to religion, and tend to be amoral, whereas we associate “service of the sacred” with morality. There might be individuals who are Machiavellian in one sphere of their life (e.g., their business) but devoutly religious in another, -- that would involve compartmentalization. “Machiavellianism in service of the sacred,” in contrast, does not compartmentalize, but instead directly justifies amoral or immoral behavior on behalf of something sacred, which may or may not be overtly religious in nature). The protection of objects and entities that are venerated and considered sacred carries strong motivational

potential, and the combination of this motivational potential with self-exemption from moral standards might generate high violence potential. Characteristic statements include “sometimes we have to use force to accelerate salvation” (statement by an Aum Shinrikyo follower, in Lifton, 1999, p. 80), “every effort, including violence if necessary, must be exerted to reach a sacred objective” (paraphrase of sentiments of Eric Rudolph; National Public Radio, 2005), and “a sincere believer can do no wrong” (from a Sikh militant; Mahmood [1996] p.208).

13. *An elevation of intolerance, vengeance, and warlikeness into virtues (or nearly so), including in some cases the ascribing of such militant dispositions to supernatural entities.* It is not so much that the behavior pattern of militant extremists is distinctly intolerant, vengeful, and warlike (although it may be), but rather that their value priorities, interpretable from the statements they make, elevate these attributes in unusual ways. Generally, intolerance, vengeance, and warlikeness are distinctly unfavorable attributes. But, among members of the militant-extremist in-group, they come to be judged as favorable and necessary. Moreover, although a supreme supernatural being is usually seen as benevolent, and according to some strands in the Abrahamic religious tradition vengeance belongs to God (not to be carried out by people), militant extremists may ascribe intolerance, vengeance, and warlikeness to God. Once this is done, it is not difficult to see oneself as an agent of an ill-tempered divine being; having the blessing of the mightiest force there is provides a powerful justification and promotion of violence. Characteristic statements include “if somebody interferes with our peace, we will not tolerate it” (from a statement of a militant Sikh; Mahmood [1996] p.127), “God is angry, and loathes the turbulence of evil and sufferings” (from a Taipin Rebellion proclamation; Cheng [1963] p.68), and “he who gives up peace and tranquility in the name of God’s battle and God’s vengeance merits eternal reward” (paraphrase of sentiments expressed by Meir Kahane [date

unknown-b]). As an example of this theme in a non-religious group: “those who are unwilling to take violent action on behalf of strong beliefs are cowards” (paraphrase of Baader-Meinhof; Rote Armee Fraction [1970]),

14. *Dehumanizing or demonizing of opponents.* When one’s opponents are portrayed as spirits that are purely evil (as devils or demons), or as not fully human, it facilitates a disregard for their point of view and removes inhibitions against attacking them. Tendencies to dehumanize have been discussed by other psychologists (e.g, Bandura, 1990; Gamson, 1995; Kernberg, 2003). Demonization is likely to be more common among religious extremists (whose theology often affords the concepts of “demon” or “devil”), whereas secular extremists are more likely to confine themselves to dehumanizing. Dehumanization and demonization are more likely to occur in colloquial than in formal statements, as is true of dehumanizing type-nouns (Saucier, 2003). Because of this, methodologies (like ours) that scan printed and web-posted material are likely to underestimate the frequency of occurrence of the phenomenon. Because violence against non-human entities is far less proscribed than that against humans, dehumanizing and demonizing function as one tactic for absolving one of responsibility for the consequences of one’s violence. Dehumanizing enemies may help facilitate “hero-izing” of those who attack these enemies (Cordes, 1982; Kaplan, 1978). Characteristic statements include “the [Manchu] demons are different from men” (Taipin Rebellion joint proclamation; Cheng [1963] p.64), “incorrect men are not human beings” (Taipin Rebellion Edict; Cheng [1963] p.75), “the Sinhalese racist demons slowly take over our ancient land” (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1994, p. 67), and characterization of police forces as “pigs” (Baader-Meinhof and other leftists of their era; Rote Armee Fraktion [1970]).

15. *The modern world as a disaster.* Among militant extremists, there is commonly a



perception that modernity, including the consumer society and even instances of successful economic progress, is actually a disaster for humanity. This might be regarded as catastrophizing directed specifically at a very broad target: Modernization and Westernization, especially in their materialistic aspects, are seen as a relatively unmitigated calamity. It also might involve glorifying the past, in that it tends to imply that something in the past is better than what is modern. Of course, it is not unusual to find individuals advocating voluntary simplicity or at least questioning whether their lifestyle has become too materialistic. This theme, however, represents something more extreme, more catastrophizing, and more purely negative about modernity. Characteristic examples include the Red Army Faction's view that economic progress has only brought new forms of oppression (Wright, 1991, p. 39), the statement that "the Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race" (Unabomber manifesto; Kaczynski, 1996), and "Western civilization is unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind" (Qutb, *Milestones* introduction, 1964).

16. *Civil government as illegitimate.* Over the last centuries, it has become common to assume that power is legitimate only when conferred or consented to by the people. Defining who the (true) "people" are is open to interpretation, and militant extremists generally make a claim to be operating on behalf of the people. They tend to arrive at the conclusion that the sources of authority that they oppose are in fact illegitimate, although different extremists arrive at this conclusion based on different rationales. For the Red Army Faction, it is because these governments (and the legislative systems on which they are based) are essentially oppressive. For McVeigh, big government is inherently evil. Rudolph sees opposition to the government as a way of punishing for infractions: The authorities have overstepped moral bounds and forfeited their right to rule. For Qutb, civil governments are illegitimate because they involve decisions

made by people, not by God; that is, they are not based on strictly on God's authority as found in the Islamic scriptures. From the standpoint of civil political order, these positions might be labeled as anarchism; they certainly reflect and convey a high degree of political alienation and distrustful cynicism about governments. They are convenient for the extremist, however, because this way of thinking excuses him/her from feeling guilt about breaking the law or flouting established authority because, after all, that authority is illegitimate.

#### Relating Themes to Specific Militant-Extremist Groups

The distribution of the 16 themes across the 10 groups (as well as the heterogeneous grouping of American extremists) is displayed in Table 1. This is based on a compendium relating quotes to groups, available from the first author. Each of the 16 themes is identified in multiple (three to eight) groups and at least five (and as many as eleven) themes are identified in each group. However, the distribution presented in the table is presented only as an initial approximation. Because the number of themes identified as present in a group is somewhat confounded with the volume of documentary evidence, and because we cannot be sure yet whether some themes are more dangerous than others, the number of themes identified for each group should not be taken as an absolutely reliable estimate of how militant or extremist a group is, or of how dangerous it is.

As is evident in the descriptions of the 16 themes, there are points of contact and possible overlap between some themes. However, in Table 1 no two themes share the identical distribution across groups, or even nearly so. The themes are not posited as independent in their distribution across groups (or individuals), but only posited as non-redundant.

These 16 do not exhaust the recurrent themes that may be present in this selection of groups. Possible additional themes, found in explicit statements from two groups included strict

puritanical legalism, a belief that the world itself is evil, an emphasis on the restoration of dignity and honor in response to a perceived humiliation, a perceived “chosenness” of one’s group, a desire to essentially “initiate Armageddon,” a belief that it is best to use power or violence before the other side has a chance to, belief that one must take destiny into one’s own hands, and a sharp division of people into us and them (good and bad groups; cf. Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Fabick, 2002). The last of these is reflective of a broad, diffuse, cognitively simplifying theme of dualistic thinking that seems to resonate with the apparent mindset of many groups, though not directly reflected in many specific statements. Additional evidence may lead to one or more of these eight additional themes being added to the model.

Each of the 16 themes can be regarded as a response to a situation perceived as unfavorable. Life may commonly present situations where one of these responses could be largely justified. And life may occasionally present situations where a large number of these responses are justified at the same time. Such situations may arise in so-called “failed states” (Rotberg, 2002), where modernity really does appear disastrous, government illegitimate, and catastrophes real, and where one’s group really is tragically obstructed. On the other hand, many aspects of the militant-extremist mindset involve self-deceptive thinking: for example: supernatural forces will intervene, big changes will come easy, evil will be eliminated, a utopia will arrive, and our heroes will live forever.

#### The Seductive Narrative in Militant-Extremist Thinking

As this list of common themes indicates, militant extremism represents not just one, but an orchestra of responses working in concert. These responses may be not abnormal, but rather reactions to which the human cognitive-affective-motivational system is especially prone. Why?

Humans are moved and persuaded by powerful narratives (Brockmeier & Harre, 2001).

And one might fit the 16 themes together to form a composite narrative of the following form.

We (i.e., our group, however defined) have a glorious past, but modernity has been disastrous, bringing on a great catastrophe in which we are tragically obstructed from reaching our rightful place, obstructed by an illegitimate civil government and/or by an enemy so evil that it does not even deserve to be called human. This intolerable situation calls for vengeance. Extreme measures are required; indeed for realizing our sacred end any means will be justified. We must think in military terms, annihilating this evil and purifying the world of it. It is a duty – we must kill the perpetrators of evil, and we cannot be blamed that we had to carry out this violence. Those who sacrifice themselves in our cause will attain glory, and in this struggle supernatural powers should come to our aid. In the end, we will bring our people to a world that is a paradise.

This prototype composite story-line may seem like a dramatic comic-book plot, in which a superhero is called to action to struggle against a subhuman source of tragic evil. But comic books (and many movies) may routinely have such plots because, for psychological reasons, the plot sells. Such a plot is highly attention-engaging and may be profoundly motivating to many individuals, although it has deadly real-life consequences. Peterson (in press) notes that the “great rituals, dramas and religions of mankind – our most profound narratives and proto-narratives – are erected upon the (meta)story of *paradise, encounter with chaos, fall and redemption.*” The composite militant-extremist narrative described here has all of these features.

A key component of the story-line implied within the militant-extremist mindset is sacred values. Sacred values are abstract, trans-situational goals associated with moral ideals, typically oriented to protecting something revered from violation or defamation. Sacred values motivate actions that would make little sense if analyzed only in terms of rational/economic cost/benefit to the individual. Tetlock (2003) states that sacred values are “those values that a moral community

treats as possessing transcendental significance that precludes [makes taboo] comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any mingling with secular values” (p. 320). According to Atran (2008), sacred values “comprise the core of cultural morality and social identity,” and they “differ from material or instrumental values by incorporating moral beliefs that drive action in ways dissociated from prospects for success.” Maintaining and defending some sacred values is certainly normal and probably healthy. But what about a defense of sacred values that involves unnecessary violence and is unmitigated by faithfulness to reality? It makes sense to label this as “fanatical,” based on the meaning of the original Latin term *fanaticus* – belonging to a sanctuary or temple. Thus, the militant-extremist thinking pattern can be called a kind of fanatical thinking pattern.

#### Ways of Thinking That May Be Antithetical to Militant Extremism

The 16 themes represent ways of framing or interpreting events and, for any individual, alternative and contrasting framings are possible. It may be useful to consider the pattern of thinking that would constitute the extreme low end of fanatical thinking pattern as defined by these themes. Such an “antithesis” pattern of thought would include the following: (a) moderation and working through the system, without resort to extreme measures; (b) taking responsibility for the consequences of all of one’s actions; (c) an avoidance of military terminology outside of narrow military contexts; (d) no perception that’s one group is being obstructed in an important way; (e) a recognition that the past was far from ideal; (f) no seeking of a utopia or paradise in the future; (g) refraining from framing events in terms of catastrophes and calamities; (h) no expectation of supernatural intervention or commands; (i) no requisite to annihilate evil or purify the world; (j) no particular glory seen in dying for a cause; (k) killing and attacking not seen as a duty, but more a source of shame; (l) adhering to moral and ethical rules even in the service of sacred things; (m) intolerance, vengeance, and warlikeness vilified;

(n) never dehumanizing or demonizing another person; (o) modernity being seen as having at least some good points; and (p) the civil political order being seen as being at least partially legitimate. Such a pattern of thought in some points resembles the rationalist viewpoint of existential psychology; in other points it resembles a quietist, acceptance-oriented philosophy (like that found in Taoism, Jainism, Sufism, or Buddhism, or among the Quakers), and in yet other points it reflects political moderation. If social norms more strongly corresponded to this “antithesis” pattern, they might be expected to inhibit the development of militant extremist movements. Thus, facilitating or reinforcing the antithesis pattern could be a key part of a recipe for reducing the rate of fanatical thinking and preventing destructive militant extremism. Promulgating the antithesis pattern would simultaneously serve to challenge self-deceptions involved in militant-extremist thinking.

An interesting question is whether this pattern of thinking antithetical to militant extremism, may be often insufficiently appealing on a psychological level. Humans might have a certain attraction to and taste (whether acquired or innate) for the extreme, the ideal, the supernatural, the comfort of avoiding responsibility, and the delight felt in breaking with convention. Moreover, humans might be drawn to interpretations that are dramatic and that identify (or even invent) threats to one’s group. Militant extremism caters to these tastes, so that militant-extremist viewpoints have some allure.

#### Is the Militant-Extremist Thinking Pattern Bizarre?

If militant extremism caters to what many people find psychologically attractive, then aspects of militant-extremist thinking (i.e., a fanatical thinking pattern) should be at least modestly manifest even in normal-range populations. This hypothesis runs against the common-sense assumption that militant extremists are completely different from normals, holding bizarre

and incomprehensible views.

Accordingly, it is worth examining the degree to which thinking patterns consonant with the 16 themes are found in normal-range populations. The common-sense view would be that, because militant extremism is rare in such populations, the associated fanatical thinking pattern will also be quite rare in such populations.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of a measure representing the 16 themes (described in Saucier et al., 2008) in two samples. One sample was 215 American undergraduates (61% female, average age 20). The other sample, provided by the fourth author, consisted of 297 advanced high-school students (42% female, average age 18) from Serbia. The measure (from Saucier, Stankov, & Knezevic, 2008) includes 32 questionnaire items, two for each of the 16 themes, with 13 of the items being reverse-keyed – worded so that *disagreement* would reflect the militant-extremist thinking pattern. Table 2 provides examples of some of the positive-keyed items. Internal consistency was reasonably high for this measure – .80 in the American and .75 in the Serbian sample. Items were originally created in English, and were translated for use in the Serbian sample: The fourth author and two colleagues each translated all items into Serbian, then compared their translations and settled on those exact translations that the team agreed upon.

Under the common-sense assumption that militant-extremist thinking is unusual, we expected to find a positive-skewed distribution for these aggregate scores. However, in both samples the skew was observed to be negative. For the American sample the skewness (an index that is zero in a normal distribution) was -.14, which was less than the standard error (.17) of the statistic and thus not significantly different from perfect symmetry. For the Serbian sample the negative skew was more pronounced, with a skewness of -.60, well outside the standard error (.14) and therefore significantly non-symmetrical. Similarly, as one would expect from the skew

statistics, the means (2.5 in the American sample, 2.95 in the Serbian) were reasonably close to the midpoint of a Likert-type 1-to-5 scale. The between-nation mean difference may be due to the comparison of a university with a high-school-student population rather than to culture.

Milgram's (1974) classic studies of authoritarian obedience indicate that most people are capable, at least under strong situational pressure, of becoming an instrument of aggression against innocent people. The message from the present research may be analogous. When presented with statements that are in fact extracts of militant-extremist thinking, the typical response was somewhere in the range between "moderately disagree" and "not sure." No one responded as one would expect from the most prototypical militant extremist – strongly agreeing with all indicator items. But respondents generally failed to strongly disassociate themselves from the sentiments found in these items. Thus, the base rate of fanatical thinking patterns in the population does not appear to be low.

The indications that fanatical thinking patterns are somewhat common are consonant with the view of Sageman (2004) that terrorists are generally normal people whose radicalization has a lot to do with their social affiliations. It is also consonant with a view that "the motivation for terrorism and atrocity is something central to the human condition, and must be understood as such (rather than as a mere aberration)" (Peterson, in press).

This may reveal something important about militant extremist movements. Although militant-extremist leaders no doubt play a key role, it is probably not necessary for participants in militant-extremist movements to be brainwashed or severely indoctrinated. All that may be required is an intensification and an orchestration of sentiments and of "framings" to which many people are already sympathetic, at least at a moderate level. We might think of ideology is an *explicit* cultural model, better organized than the various components of tradition and culture



(Swidler, 1986). That is, individuals may have an initially unsystematic *array* of sentiments (such as unconnected views about how bad is the current situation, how useful violence can be, and what constitutes a value held as sacred) but, by way of some ideology that provides a unitary frame and a compelling story-line, this array is transformed into a more coherent *system*. The system may be held together more by this compelling narrative than by the ideology's internal logic. In the composite narrative identified here, a tragic crisis has arisen due to violations of sacred values by an evil and inhuman enemy; a glorious mission that includes resort to violence is a way to redeem and rectify the situation. On the basis of this model for understanding militant extremism, the strength of the fanatical thinking-pattern should erode to the extent that the degree of the crisis is shown to be exaggerated, as is the sacredness of the mission or the violations of sacred values, and the argument for violence being efficacious is undercut.

#### Convergence and Divergence from Previous Constructs

To examine concurrent validity, we examined also a parallel measure of militant-extremist thinking (Saucier et al., 2008). A 'True Believer' scale was constructed by the first author based on descriptions of fanatics in Hoffer's (1951) classic book; it has 8 items based on quotations or paraphrases from that book's text. As expected, without any overlapping items, responses to this brief and only modestly reliable "True Believer" scale correlated substantially (.50 to .55) with the measure representing the 16 themes in either sample.

We have found (Saucier et al., 2008) both of these preliminary measures of militant-extremist thinking to be moderately associated with measures of both dogmatism (Troidahl & Powell, 1965) and authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996). Neither of these previous constructs, however, accounted for more than about half of the reliable variance in either of the militant-extremist thinking measures. These findings give preliminary support to a conceptual model in

which militant extremist thinking overlaps with previous concepts of dogmatism and authoritarianism, but includes a roughly equally large amount of unique content.

The partial overlap with authoritarianism is evident among many of the 16 themes we have identified. By Altemeyer's (1996) definition, revealed both in conceptual discussion and items selected to operationalize the construct, authoritarianism includes identification of a catastrophic crisis that demands the evil be crushed by annihilating enemies, enemies sometimes characterized in dehumanizing terms (e.g., as 'rotten apples'). Moreover, the authoritarian reverence for traditional values implies some glorification of the past, and submission to higher authorities is implied in the belief that supernatural forces will intervene on behalf of one's cause. Many of these authoritarian features are shared with fundamentalism (Almond, Sivan, & Appleby, 1995) and Altemeyer (1996) reports high correlations between measures of these constructs. So any overlap of militant-extremist thinking with authoritarianism may simultaneously be an overlap with fundamentalism.

However, other aspects of militant-extremist thinking appear clearly independent of authoritarianism. Most strikingly, authoritarian thinking is conventionalistic, not involving radical anti-modernism or a future utopia. Where authoritarians call for extreme measures, these are not necessarily unconventional or anti-constitutional. In contrast, militant-extremist thinking operates from a position of political alienation and often of opposition to constitutional government or to the contemporary capitalistic economic system. Finally, unlike authoritarian thinking, the endorsement of violence is key to, and explicit in, militant-extremist thinking. The take-home message from these contrasts: One can be fanatical without being authoritarian.

Fanatics, conceived broadly, are aggressive and potentially violent ideologues. Bracher (1984) traced the pattern of "ideologization" in modern politics, and in so doing provided an

incisive description of the ideologue. Obviously, an ideologue would be someone with a high degree of commitment to an ideology, which Bracher defines as “an action-oriented system of beliefs capable of explaining the world and of justifying decisions, of limiting and identifying alternatives and of creating the most all-embracing and intensive social solidarity possible” (1984, pp. 3-4). A highly ideologized actor (a fanatic or ideologue) pursues an extreme ideal goal, reducing complex reality by an overly simplifying formula that is nonetheless persuasive because it is dramatizing and emotionally mobilizing. The formula is likely to include a claim to possession of ultimate truth and redemptive power, stark dichotomies (good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, friend vs. foe) that facilitate scapegoating stereotyping of enemies, and a willingness to disregard constitutional structures. Such ideologizing is especially likely to arise during a period of rapid social and technological change, such as what has occurred since the era of the French Revolution. These characterizations by Bracher have some conceptual fit with the empirically derived model of militant-extremist thinking described in this article.

Fanaticism – the tendency toward being a fanatical ideologue, is thus clearly a response to a situation. The situation responded to may be not specific to one place and one time only, but rather a pervasive situation affecting many aspects of modern life – the interrelated challenges posed by rapid technological development, by undermining and questioning of traditional cultural values and practices, and by potentially threatening (though also stimulating) influences arising from exposure to alternative viewpoints and cultural models in an increasingly globalized, interconnected world. This challenging situation is pervasive enough that responses to it can appear trait-like – a common generalized attitude disposition informing behavior across a range of situations. Work on attitudinal dispositions (e.g., Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007) gives no reason to suggest that their stability is below that for personality dispositions. However,

scores on measures of personality ‘traits’ are far from perfectly stable across time: In adulthood, retest correlations indexing the rank-order consistency of personality measures usually fall in the .50 to .75 range, varying according to the mean age of the sample and the time interval (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). There may be cohort and historical effects differentiating populations on militant-extremist thinking, to the extent that the pervasive situational challenge identified is more salient in some times and places, and less so in others.

The notion of generalized attitude dispositions is not new (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Saucier, 2000). What is new is the notion that fanaticism is one of them. Previous research has focused on specific expressions of fanatical thinking, such as authoritarianism. The present model conceptualizes what fanatical ideologues of the militant-extremist variety have in common.

#### Integration with Previous Work

The militant-extremist thinking pattern is a major form of fanaticism characterized by multiple themes (we have set out 16). The combination of these themes can be understood as forming a persuasive narrative shared by extremist ideologues of many stripes. Such a framework develops the approach initiated by Hoffer (1951) that was never extended into systematic research work. But it also affords a useful perspective on and integration of recent work by other theorists.

Moghaddam’s (2005, 2006) work -- addressing how an individual develops progressively greater commitment and involvement with the ideology and goals of a terrorist group – may be a template model for the development of fanatical-ideologue tendencies in general. In this model, various forms of dissatisfaction with how one and one’s group are treated, based on specific grievances within the broader context of the challenging situation of global technological and social change. Moreover, as indicated by recent international surveys (e.g., Pew Research Center,

2005), countries differ substantially in the base rate of their sympathy for the actions of extremist groups, and this may reflect higher levels of grievance and dissatisfaction within the countries that have higher rates of sympathy. Dissatisfaction sets the stage for focus on an external enemy (an evil foe identified with what is wrong in the world) and the justification of extreme (often Machiavellian) measures in service of the sacred goal of undermining or defeating that enemy. Coupled with political alienation (which makes authoritarian submission to the existing order unattractive), the focus on an enemy facilitates a militarized attitude in which there is a duty to kill and/or die for a particular cause, outside of conventional military institutions. This process may naturally culminate in an act framed as heroic from a within-the-group perspective but interpretable as violent fanaticism from an outside-the-group perspective.

Eidelson and Eidelson (2003) identified five core group-level beliefs that fuel conflict between groups: perceived group superiority, group helplessness, group vulnerability, perceived unjust treatment of one's group, and distrust of one or more other groups. Such beliefs might conceivably arise in the context of intergroup contact in any time and place. On the other hand, in the context of rapid technological and social change and massive intergroup contact as in the contemporary world, they can become part of an ideology and thus a component of violent fanaticism. A catastrophizing thinking style may be facilitated by perceived group helplessness and vulnerability, and unjust treatment. Belief that one's group is tragically obstructed may be facilitated by perceived group superiority, helplessness, vulnerability, and unjust treatment. Dehumanizing is facilitated when one distrusts another group and sees that group as a source of unjust treatment. Thus, specific dangerous group-level beliefs probably increase the likelihood and intensity of militant-extremist thinking; where these beliefs in aggregate are particularly intense one should see a higher population level of fanatical thinking. However, rather than

individuals in the population being homogeneous in this reaction, we should expect that dispositional individual differences will still be evident.

Models of fanatical thinking need integration with recent theory on ethnonationalism. Ethnonationalism is advocacy for and loyalty to a nation based on common ancestry, heritage, language, culture, and religion (Connor, 1994; Smith, 2001). Although by a narrow definition the “ethno-” refers to a group of people who have shared biological ancestry, the same dynamics can work with the group defined almost entirely in terms of religion, thus having a more deterritorialized identity (as in “neofundamentalism”; Roy, 2004). Ethnonationalism is not necessarily violent, but it builds from an affectively charged perception that one’s people has been tragically obstructed from reaching its rightful position, and often includes conceptions of a glorified group past. These themes are also common in militant extremism.

#### Limitations and Future Directions

This account of the mindset of militant extremism has important advantages. It is based on a comparative study of groups from a wide provenance geographically, politically, and religiously. The themes identified serve to integrate much of the incomplete previous work on themes in militant-extremist thinking. Of course, some important themes may be as yet undetected, perhaps because they were found in only two groups here, or because they are more characteristic of covert than of overt thinking patterns. Moreover, some of the themes delineated in this article may eventually be shown to be less important than others. So as to be most informative, future research should compare representative national samples with respect to fanatical thinking patterns.

The mindset of militant extremism is unlikely to provide a comprehensive explanation of the behavior of militant extremists. A mindset account is relevant to ideological aspects, but for a

full understanding one must also take into account social frames -- group psychology and collective sociopolitical factors. As McCauley (2002) observed regarding terrorists, they “kill for cause and comrades, that is, with a combination of ideology and intense small-group dynamics” (p. 12).

An important complement to the study of militant extremism is the study of lawless violence carried out from the centers of power in a society. As fearsome as the consequences of extremist violence, state terrorism clearly killed far more people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than did militant-extremist terrorism (McCauley, 2002; Rummel, 1996). And extremist and state terrorism may feed into one another; O’Sullivan argues that “far from being weakened by [extremist] terrorism, the modern state is more likely to be strengthened by it” (1986, p. 22). The elevation of militant extremism into the central threat to a state entity may have the function of justifying “emergency powers” and also distracting attention away from the violence (e.g., “state terrorism”) promoted by the state entity itself. Moreover, as pointed out by the authoritarian philosopher Carl Schmitt (1927/1996), the identification of an external enemy functions as one way to unite a whole society (not just a militant-extremist group) and provide meaning to life. Conversely, counter-terrorism measures may sometimes strengthen militant-extremist groups, by giving them attention and recognition, thereby in effect dignifying their struggle and rewarding their persistence (Jackson, 2005). Militant extremism and state terrorism are both expressions of “ideological style of politics” (per O’Sullivan, 1986) that, once linked to lawlessness and violence, can inflict considerable damage on individuals and societies. Jackson (2005) has proposed that processes in genocide can resemble those in counter-terrorism, involving essentially four of the 16 themes identified in our research: an exceptional and venerated grievance, dehumanization of an enemy, manufacture of a catastrophic threat needing a forceful

response, and legitimization of a violent response. Consequently, it would be wise (cf., Crelinsten, 1987) to study the phenomena of militant extremism, state terror, and genocide in a linked way, examining their distinctness, their overlap, and their interactive relations. It is quite possible that violent totalitarian elites share some major features of the militant-extremist thinking pattern. This should not be surprising, since there are prominent examples (Stalin, Mao, Hitler) of violent totalitarians who began their careers on the political periphery as revolutionaries or militant extremists, for whom ideologically driven aggression was a constant whether they were in power or not.

### Conclusion

The model here conceptualizes militant extremism as an aggressive form of fanaticism from the political periphery, affected by both dispositional and situational factors. It delineates relatively recurrent features of the mindset of violent militant extremists. Statements associated with extremist groups from a very diverse range of continents, cultures, and political and religious orientations were compared, and 16 themes were found. The key themes could be assembled to form a coherent and potentially compelling narrative, and this narrative may be the source of much of the appeal that salient militant-extremist groups generate. Stated briefly, this narrative includes perceptions that there is a crisis stemming from outrageous violations of what are taken to be sacred values, in conjunction with an argument that violence is an efficacious part of a glorious mission to right the wrong. It will be useful to study other sources of ideological violence, such as genocide, so as to determine how much this mindset, and this kind of narrative, helps account for sociopolitical violence more generally.



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Table 1

Distribution of 16 Themes as Detected in Statements from Militant-Extremist Groups

Theme	Militant Extremists										
	B-M	IRA	SQ	MKA	LRA	TT	SME	TR	AS	SL	AIEs
Extreme measures	X	X		X		X	X		x	X	all three
Tactics absolving responsibility	X	X				X	X			X	Kaczynski, McVeigh
Extending military terminology		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		Rudolph, McVeigh
Perception one’s group obstructed	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	
Glorified past		X	X	X		X	X				
Utopianizing	x		X	X	x		X	X	x	X	Kaczynski
Catastrophizing			X	X				X	X		Kaczynski
Supernatural intervention				X	x			X	X		
Annihilate and purify			X	X	x			X	X	X	
Killing or offensive war a duty		X	X		x				x	X	Kaczynski, Rudolph
Glorify dying for cause		X	X			X	X		x	X	
Machiavellianism serving sacred						X	X		X		Rudolph
Valuing intolerance and vengeance	X			X		X	X	X			Rudolph
Dehumanization	X					X		X	X		
Modernity disastrous	x		X								Kaczynski
Civil government illegitimate	x		X							x	Rudolph, McVeigh
<i>Number of themes identified</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>10 in aggregate</i>

Note. B-M - Baader-Meinhof (Red Army faction), IRA - Irish Republican Army, SQ – Sayyed Qutb, MKA - Meir Kahane and associates, LRA - Lord’s Resistance Army, TT - Tamil Tigers, SME - Sikh militant extremists, TR - Taipin Rebellion, AS - Aum Shinrikyo, SL - Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), AIEs - American individualistic extremists. X (caps) indicates primary source, x (no cap) indicates secondary source.

Table 2

Examples of Items from a Scale for the Militant-Extremist Thinking Pattern

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Our enemies are more like animals than like humans.

We have a duty to attack and kill the enemies of our people.

If you are protecting what is sacred and holy, anything you do is moral and justifiable.

Government is illegitimate unless based strictly on God's authority as found in the holy book.

Foreigners have stolen land from our people and they are now trying to steal more.

If necessary, we should use force to cleanse the world of corruption.

Going to war can sometimes be sacred and righteous.

We should become warriors in the army of righteousness.

The best way to die is defending your beliefs.

Extreme measures are needed now to restore virtue and righteousness in this world.

Figures

Figure 1. Histograms for Fanatical Thinking Pattern scale scores in two samples.

