Of the three themes addressed in the volumes of this publication—recruit-
ment, training, and root causes—the latter term is perhaps the least well-
known or understood. Clearly, terrorism has complex historical, political, 
social, and economic roots, and thus evades any simplistic sort of cause-
effect analysis. And yet, the term “root causes” has often been used in 
prominent policy statements and speeches, calling on us all to “address the 
root causes of terrorism” without really explaining what this term means. 

On 22 September 2003, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan convened a 
one-day conference, “Fighting Terrorism for Humanity,” in New York City. 
In his opening address, Annan declared,

Terrorism will only be defeated if we act to solve the political disputes or 
long-standing conflicts that generate support for it. . . . If we do not, we 
should find ourselves acting as recruiting sergeants for the very terrorists we 
seek to suppress. . . . To fight terrorism, we must not only fight terrorists. We 
have to win hearts and minds.¹

Among this gathering of terrorism experts and national leaders were eigh-
teen heads of state, including French President Jacques Chirac, Italian Prime 
Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, and 
Afghan President Hamid Karzai. If one might find an official definition of 
root causes, this should be the place.

Participants at this conference discussed the report of an international 
panel of terrorism experts, convened in Oslo, Norway, in June 2003, 
which sought to debunk certain myths about terrorism.² The experts 
agreed that there was only a weak and indirect relationship between
poverty and terrorism and that state sponsorship is not a “root cause” of terrorism. However, as Tore Bjørø of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (the convener of the Oslo meeting) acknowledged in his introductory remarks to the report, there are complex definitional problems inherent in using the term “root causes” to describe factors that lead to terrorism.

One problem is that the more deep-rooted a cause is (for example, “poverty” or “modernization”), the more general it becomes, and the less directly is it related to terrorism. On the opposite extreme are “trigger causes”—those immediate circumstances and events that provoke people to take recourse to terrorist action. A “root cause” perspective should also be supplemented by an actor-oriented approach to understand the dynamics of the terrorist process.3

This multidimensional perspective of terrorism is an important one: As described later in this chapter, the synthesis of environment and actors—in framing both deep-rooted and trigger causes—is a key focus of this third volume of The Making of a Terrorist.

The Oslo report proceeds to cite a lack of democracy, civil liberties, and rule of law as a precondition for many forms of domestic terrorism, along with extremist secular or religious ideologies, and the presence of charismatic, ideological leaders.4 “Increased repression and coercion are likely to feed terrorism, rather than reducing it,” the report notes, adding that “extremist ideologies that promote hatred and terrorism should be confronted on ideological grounds by investing more effort into challenging them politically, and not only by the use of coercive force.”5

The ideas and suggestions contained in the Oslo report provide a useful starting point for exploring the so-called “root causes” of terrorism more fully. Thus far in this publication we have examined the lure of terror groups, including how and where recruitment takes place, as well as various developmental processes and places that help transform the new recruit into a competent terrorist. This third and final volume of the Making of a Terrorist series explores some of the underlying causes that lead to the formation of terror groups in the first place. The volume naturally cannot address all known or potential causes, nor can this brief introductory essay. Rather, the intention here is to reflect upon and illuminate the diversity of perspectives that inform our understanding of the wellsprings from which terrorism flows. This introductory chapter of Volume III: Root Causes describes in general terms what the existing research literature suggests about some of the root causes of terrorism, providing some conceptual background for the remaining chapters of this volume.
A Simplistic View of Root Causes

When explaining the phenomenon of global terrorism to my students at West Point, I typically draw on some version of the following formula: 1) Terrorism is a tactic, chosen and used by an individual or group; and 2) it is chosen because they seek some type of objective—often of a political, social, criminal, economic, and/or religious nature—and believe terrorism to be the most effective means by which they can achieve that objective. This admittedly simplistic view of terrorism implies a much broader and more important basic issue: The choice to engage in terrorism is driven by a belief that the present is inadequate, and something must be done in order to ensure a better future. Thus, from political revolutionaries to religious militants, the results are similar in terms of their adoption of politically violent tactics as a means to achieve their objectives. Dissatisfaction with the status quo has led to terrorist group formation in Ireland, Italy, Egypt, Germany, Sri Lanka, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, the United States, and many other nations. Moreover, terrorism has proven effective in bringing about change, from the perspective of some observers. For example, terrorism drove the powerful United States (and later Israel) out of Lebanon and convinced the French to pull out of Algeria.

In many cases, acts of terrorism are carried out by individuals consumed by hatred towards others, along with a willingness and ability to kill without remorse or regard for those who may die from their terrorist act. A good deal of this animosity—particularly in the developing world—may stem from a perception that they have been victimized by corrupt governments, backed by powerful nations and multinational corporations that have little concern for their lives, needs, or suffering. This results in what psychologist John Mack describes as “a reservoir of misery, hurt, helplessness, and rage from which the foot soldiers of terrorism can be recruited.” However, it can also be said that hatred in the soul of the terrorist is a symptom of something deeper, a central dissatisfaction with one’s place in this world vis-à-vis others, and it is this dynamic aspect to human relations that leads to the following suggestion: A central element found within many root causes of terrorism is the pursuit of power.

Terrorism and the Pursuit of Power

The ongoing discussion about root causes of terrorism has many flavors, but a common theme, if there is one, appears to be related to the unequal distribution of power on local, national, or global levels. The unequal distribution of power feeds a perception of “us versus them,” a perception found in all ideologies associated with politically violent groups and movements. From Bill Gale’s rabid white-supremacy radio shows in the United
States to the firebrand imams in the mosques of Riyadh or Finsbury Park, London, the hardships and challenges “we” face can be framed in terms of what “they” are or (more likely) what “they” have done to us. As noted scholar Bernard Lewis recently observed, “‘Who did this to us?’ is of course a common human response when things are going badly, and many in the Middle East, past and present, have asked this question.”7 In this light, “we” desire a redistribution of power in order to have more control over our destiny, and one could argue that many terrorist groups use violence as the way to bring this about.

A cursory look at the stated objectives of some of the world’s more notorious terrorist groups exemplifies this view. Ethnic separatist groups like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, in Sri Lanka), the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG, in the Philippines), and the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Batasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom, or ETA, in Spain) all want the power to form their own recognized, sovereign entity, carved out of an existing nation-state. Groups engaged in the Middle East intifada—like the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Palestine Liberation Front—want the power to establish an Islamic Palestinian state. Other groups want the power to establish an Islamic state in their own region, including Ansar al-Islam (in Iraq), the Armed Islamic Group (in Algeria), al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya (in Egypt), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (in Central Asia), Jemaah Islamiyah (in Southeast Asia), and al Qaeda. In all cases, these groups seek power to change the status quo, to forge a future that they do not believe will come about naturally, and are thus determined to use terrorism to achieve their objectives.

Political repression is clearly an important reflection of this unequal distribution of power. When a government exhibits outright hostility and commits open violence against members of its citizenry, this represents a form of the powerful subjugating the relatively powerless. States that engage in such behavior range from rogue states like Iraq to allies of the democratic West, like Egypt. In the case of the former, Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons to subdue the Kurdish populations in the north of Iraq is a well-known extreme example of state terrorism. Meanwhile, as researcher Jack Beatty recently noted,

A glance at the Human Rights Watch report on Egypt for last year reveals a political tourniquet: suspects arrested and held without being charged, dissidents tried by military courts, parties outlawed, opposition candidates from Islamic parties jailed on security charges just before elections and thus kept from winning office, torture used to extract confessions, and political prisoners dying while in custody. The United States gives Egypt $1.2 billion in military aid every year, and doubtless Egypt uses a considerable amount of that to keep the tourniquet tight.8
This Egyptian representation of the unequal distribution of power is particularly salient given the *fatwas* issued by Osama bin Laden and his colleagues (like Ayyman al-Zawahiri, a former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad) as well as other ideological statements supporting the global jihad movement.9

Another dimension to viewing terrorism as the pursuit of power comes in the form of opposition to political corruption. When a government fails to adhere to the conventional social contract between governor and the governed, its citizens become disenfranchised and seek the power to force change, launching a variety of revolutionary movements throughout history.10 Corrupt governments seek to maintain and increase their power over others (and over resources) by any means necessary, while the powerless see the corruption and look for ways to combat it—even through violent acts of terrorism, as that may be perceived as their only form of recourse. By extension, U.S. foreign policies that are seen to prop up corrupt regimes, or constrain the potential for achieving a group’s objectives, lead the members of that group to focus on the United States as a target of terrorist activity in the hopes of compelling a change in those policies.

Power (and the desire for it) is also seen in the relationship between weak or failed states and terrorist activity. In weak states, the absence of rule of law or peaceful ways to resolve conflict can lead those seeking power to use violent means to achieve their objectives. In these kinds of impoverished states, where security can be readily purchased by the highest bidder, the powerful do what they want, while the powerless are made to do their bidding. Further, a full-fledged failed state can be seen as both a facilitator for terrorism and a root cause, in that the power vacuum inherent in a failed state leads groups (either from within or from outside its borders) to adopt violence as a means to seek power and control over the future direction of that state, while the absence of a functioning state government allows the country to serve as a safe haven for terrorist organizations and activities.

From this perspective, recent events in Nepal are particularly worrisome. For nine years, the people of this country have suffered through a civil war that has raged between government forces and Maoist guerillas seeking to impose a communist state.11 Around 11,000 have been killed, and the government has abandoned much of the country to the guerrillas since the uprising began. According to one account, “As Nepal descends towards becoming a failed state, its conflict threatens to spill over into neighboring countries, spreading unrest and perhaps even terror across parts of South Asia.”12 Meanwhile, on 1 February 2005, Nepal’s King Gyanendra announced that he was declaring a state of emergency, sacking the government and assuming direct rule for three years. Political leaders, including the former prime minister, were placed under house arrest, local news media were censored (with soldiers posted in newsrooms in the capital,
Katmandu, to enforce a ban on criticizing the king’s move), and across the country local and international phone lines, mobile networks, and internet services were suspended. Here, a seemingly repressive governmental reaction to an ongoing insurgency (itself a sign of dissatisfaction with the status quo, particularly given that the guerrillas are calling for an elected assembly to draft a new constitution), while much of the country remains in chaos, represents a fairly robust collection of potential root causes for terrorist activity.

A similar case is found on the African continent, where the oil-rich country of Sudan has seen four decades of civil war between the Arab Muslims of the North and the African-Animist-Christian South. The roots of this conflict lie in the government-led Arabization and Islamization of the North (where the country’s capital, Khartoum, is located) and the resistance to those forces in the South. The imposition of Islamic law by the country’s leaders triggered the formation of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its military wing, the SPL Army, whose declared objective is the creation of a new, secular, democratic, pluralistic Sudan. According to historian Frances Deng, an “acute crisis of national identity is at the core of this conflict, which is exacerbated by conflict-related famine, a collapsing economy, and insecurity brought on by a disintegrating political situation.” As this country increasingly raises the specter of a potentially failing state—particularly given events in the Darfur region over the last few years—its recent history as a safe haven for Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda cronies is cause for increasing concern for U.S. counterterrorism professionals.

Another possible root cause of terrorism, related to the pursuit of power, is seen in the form of relatively powerless groups or individuals seeking the ability to extract revenge for injustices (real or perceived) against a far more powerful adversary. As discussed by psychologist Raymond Hamden in Volume 1 of this publication, any group of people who have been victimized by another feel justified in striking back by any means necessary. In the case of Iraq, for example, Hussein’s use of chemical weapons against the Iranians during the 1980s and the Kurds during the 1990s engendered a natural desire among both populations to “get back” at Hussein, explaining somewhat their delight at his recent removal from power by the United States and its allies.

However, closer scrutiny reveals stark differences between these two examples of WMD usage and the desire for revenge they produced. In the first case, Iraq used WMD against Iranian forces in the context of a war, and it is widely known that atrocities are all too common in most any kind of war. However, in the second case, the government of Iraq slaughtered unarmed Kurdish men, women and children, wiping out entire villages not as part of a war but rather in an attempt to terrorize other Kurdish villages and keep them from causing more trouble for the regime. Thus, Ira-
nians may feel justified in seeking revenge for wartime atrocities, and can do so within the context of interstate relations, while in contrast, the Kurds seek retribution for murderous injustices, but they have no state mechanisms with which to seek justice. From this perspective, one might expect the Kurds to feel that terrorist attacks and assassination attempts are their only recourse.

In another dimension of root causes, the finite limits of the world’s resources create a condition of relative scarcity for various groups of people, leading to conflict and potential violence between individuals and groups who seek to control the use of those resources. In seeking the power to decide what to do with a country’s natural endowment, such as land, oil, diamonds, and water, some have resorted to terrorism as a tactic for compelling others into reluctant agreement with their preferred agenda. This dimension of unequal power distribution is likely to become worse in the decades ahead, for many reasons. Droughts have increased in frequency and intensity in parts of Africa and Asia over the past four decades, and degraded soils have lowered global agricultural yields by 13 percent since 1945 while the world’s population is growing at a rate of 77 million per year. Energy resources like oil and natural gas are in high demand around the world, but their supplies are limited in quantity and quality; as demand increases, we may expect to see increasing conflict over the power to control the use of these resources.

Land is a particularly important finite resource and source of conflict; indeed, a relatively tiny strip of land plays a key role in the deadly Middle East conflict. Both Palestinians and Jews focus on the “occupation” of “our land” by the other. Zionists wail about the “evil forces who have become stronger in our Holy Land,” while Palestinians focus on a history of Israeli forces entering villages and driving entire populations out into what became the refugee settlements in Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, an Orthodox student, because of his plan to evacuate a small settler enclave in Hebron as part of the Oslo Accords he signed with Yassir Arafat in 1993. Throughout its history, terrorism has been used (by both Muslims and Jewish extremists) to disrupt the Middle East peace process. Those conducting the terrorist acts are not the decision makers in this process, but instead are the relatively powerless, seeking ways to shape the course of future events that concern them, especially when these events concern a bit of highly coveted land.

Further, the crisis in the Middle East can also be seen as a struggle over the power of the Palestinian people to govern themselves within territorial boundaries defined by them, and the power of the Israelis to enjoy security and prosperity within territorial borders they define for themselves. Curiously, as scholar Michael Oren recently observed, much of the land acquired by the Israelis was actually accidental:
Israel’s original plan during the 1967 war was to destroy Egypt’s air force and knock out the Egyptian army’s first line of defense. But the IDF moved so quickly and encountered such weak resistance that the goal kept changing. . . . The territorial conquests were not planned—the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Jerusalem’s old city. . . . It was these unplanned conquests, which tripled Israel’s size and left 1.2 million Palestinian homeless and under Israel’s control, that created the conditions for the standoff in today’s Middle East.18

The intersection between terrorism and the pursuit of power can also be found among criminal organizations and drug cartels. From Afghanistan and Burma to Colombia and Peru, violence has been used around the world to terrorize local populations into acquiescing to—even facilitating—the drug trade and other criminal activities. Powerful gangs and drug lords in Los Angeles and New York City regularly use terror to expand their territory, protect their profitable activities from potential rivals, and convince the citizens of their neighborhood not to cooperate with the authorities.

In sum, terrorism can be seen from one point of view as a tactic used in the pursuit of power to achieve some form of political, social, criminal, economic, religious, or other objective. At a most basic level, those with a comparatively greater position of power over others and over their own futures typically have relatively little incentive to use terrorism to achieve their goals. When one has power, one’s goals can be achieved through other means. But the relatively powerless, engaged in a struggle with the powerful over resources and the shape of their future, may resort to terrorism as a primary way by which to influence the evolution of history. From this perspective, it is intuitive to suggest that only through the global spread of democracy—in which all groups, large and small, have equal opportunity to influence the course of future events—will we ever find a way to bring about the decline of terrorism. However, democracies require compromise, and it is here that the argument hits a stumbling block: In true democracies, small groups, particularly those with relatively unpopular social, political, or religious agendas, are often unable to achieve their objectives, and a willingness to compromise may not be among their core values in the first place. This is a particularly worrisome factor in today’s era of sacred terror, where terrorism is being used as a tactic for achieving an ideologically absolutist agenda without regard for the niceties of diplomatic negotiation or democratic compromise.

The Pursuit of Power in the Age of Sacred Terror

In most cases, religious-oriented terrorism seeks to bring about changes that are aligned with the values and doctrines of a particular religion—or, as in the case of Aum Shinrikyō, a religious cult. Because these changes are not
seen as attainable through nonviolent means, groups like al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, and the Moro Islamic Front have adopted terrorist activity in pursuit of the power to achieve their ideological goals. Religious ideologies can be a powerful motivator for human action because religion, as psychologist John Mack and others have noted,

deals with spiritual or ultimate human concerns, such as life or death, our highest values and selves, the roots of evil, the existence of God, the nature of divinity and goodness, whether there is some sort of life after the body has died, the idea of the infinite and the eternal, defining the boundaries of reality itself, and the possibility of a human community governed by universal love. Religious assumptions shape our minds from childhood, and for this reason religious systems and institutions have had, and continue to have, extraordinary power to affect the course of human history.19

As catalyst for change (or attempts to bring about change), few belief systems can match the power of religious ideologies. As British researcher J. P. Larsson has observed, there are several unique aspects to religion which help explain how and why violence may be condoned and necessary to achieve ideologically-related goals. First, these ideologies are often theologically supremacist,20 meaning that all believers assume superiority over nonbelievers, who are not privy to the truth of the religion. Second, most are exclusivist—believers are a chosen people, or their territory is a holy land. Third, many are absolutist—it is not possible to be a half-hearted believer, and you are either totally within the system or totally without it. Further, only the true believers are guaranteed salvation and victory, whereas the enemies and the unbelievers—as well as those who have taken no stance whatsoever—are condemned to some sort of eternal punishment or damnation, as well as death. Overall, religious ideologies help foster polarizing values in terms of right and wrong, good and evil, light and dark—values which can be co-opted by terrorist organizations to convert a devout believer into a lethal killer.

The most worrisome representation of these polarizing values is seen among today’s religious extremists. From the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in Egypt in 1928 and responsible for numerous terror attacks and assassinations) to American anti-abortion extremist Paul Hill (convicted of terrorizing and killing members of the medical profession), religious ideals have led to violent acts that are perpetrated by individuals who believe their actions are sanctioned by a higher power. Indeed, most extremist movements and groups have an additionally powerful element in their belief systems—the conviction that God requires them to commit violent acts for the sake of all humankind. Thus, with the righteousness that comes from believing that God on your side, what need or incentive is there for negotiation or compromise?

In one of the most eloquent descriptions to date of religious terrorism,
Harvard researcher Jessica Stern describes how her interviews with extremist Christians, Jews, and Muslims revealed a sort of “spiritual intoxication,” a spiritual high or addiction derived from the fulfillment of God’s will (or the individual’s interpretation thereof). For these individuals, religion has helped them simplify an otherwise complex life, and becoming part of a radical movement has given them support, a sense of purpose, an outlet in which to express their grievances (sometimes related to personal or social humiliation), and “new identities as martyrs on behalf of a purported spiritual cause.” In a unique form of transcendental experience, the religious extremist seems to enter into a kind of trance, where the world is divided neatly between good and evil, victim and oppressor. Uncertainty and ambiguity, always painful to experience, are banished. There is no room for the other person’s point of view. Because they believe their cause is just, and because the population they hope to protect is purportedly so deprived, abused and helpless, they persuade themselves that any action—even a heinous crime—is justified. They believe that God is on their side.

Radical militant Islam warrants particular attention because of the intersection of modern-day geopolitical concerns and ideological goals, the achievement of which, the extremists argue, requires violence, even suicidal violence, through which an individual can earn his or her way into paradise while in the service of restoring the Caliphate. As religion expert Olivier Roy notes, today’s radical Islamic movements are very conservative...[members are] struggling for the total implementation of shari‘ah, and do not care for social and economic issues as did the Islamists. They are closer to Saudi Wahhabism than to the left-influenced revolutionary Islam of Khomeini. Their only strategic agenda is to wage jihad in order to reconstitute the “Muslim community” (ummah) beyond the national and ethnic divides. Hence, their support for various jihads at the periphery of the Muslim world: Kashmir, the Philippines, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Bosnia, and so forth. In this sense, they are truly global. ...[Further], they recruit among uprooted cosmopolitans, de-territorialized militants, themselves a sociological product of globalization; many migrated in order to find employment or education opportunities; they easily travel and change their citizenship; in their use of English, computers, satellite phones, and other technology, they are the authentic product of the modern, globalized world. Their battlefield is the whole world, from New Jersey to the Philippines.

Today, many nations of the once-mighty Islamic world are struggling economically, socially, and politically. Indeed, members of the global Islamic jihad often see themselves as oppressed and threatened defenders of
Islam, more than seeking the spread of Islam. The relationship between modern-day geopolitical realities of the Islamic world and religious ideological goals is an important component of al Qaeda’s view of the world, as reflected in the 12 October 1996 fatwa issued by Osama bin Laden: “The people of Islam have suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed by the Zionist-crusader alliance and their collaborators.”

Following a litany of grievances and perceived injustices, this document calls upon all Muslims “to express our anger and hate . . . [as] a very important moral gesture” and requests support for the mujahideen “by supplying them with the necessary information, materials and arms. Security men are especially asked to cover up for the mujahideen and to assist them as much as possible against the occupying enemy; and to spread rumors, fear and discouragement among the members of the enemy forces.”

Finally, bin Laden notes how Muslim “youths believe in what has been told by Allah and His messenger . . . about the greatness of the reward for the mujahideen and Martyrs . . . He will guide them and improve their condition and cause them to enter the garden—paradise—which He has made known to them.”

The intersection of Muslim ideology and the strategic goals of al Qaeda (and its affiliated groups) has spawned what terrorism researcher Marc Sageman calls the Global Salafi Jihad. Salafists, he notes, “advocate a strict interpretation of the Quran” and believe that because the leaders of modern-day Muslim societies “refuse to impose Sharia, the strict Quranic law and true Islamic way of life . . . [they] are accused of being apostates, deserving death.” Members of the Global Salafi Jihad believe that to overthrow these corrupt regimes and “reinstate the fallen Caliphate and regain its lost glory,” they must first recognize that “the United States would never allow this to happen, [thus] the global jihad must defeat this country . . . [and needs to] inflict the maximum casualties against this opponent.”

What makes the Global Salafi Jihad so important is that ideology coupled with what some have called the “strategic logic” of suicide bombing creates a force that seeks an absolute, uncompromising vision of the future, and is willing to use smart weapons (human bombs) as a means to change policy and behavior. As Sageman notes, members of this radical movement are encouraged to “concentrate on the method of martyrdom operations as the most efficient in terms of damages and least costly to the jihad.”

Further, in the process of conducting suicide attacks, these individuals are demonstrating their view of what devout Muslims should be willing to do in the service of God. In sum, terrorist attacks from New York to Bali to Madrid to Casablanca can all be seen as representations of devout faith combined with the use of lethal tactics in the pursuit of power to secure a future aligned with that faith. When the power to achieve their goals has been attained, this logic argues, the Global Salafi Jihad will cease its terror attacks and begin the task of governing the Islamic state and organizing a
new world order more to their liking. Thus, in the realm of religious extremism, death (both martyrdom and the murder of others) is seen as but a means to an end, and the uncompromising nature of terrorist groups who embrace this view accounts for some of the most deadly forms of terrorism in the world today.

Conclusion

To sum up, dissatisfaction with the conditions of the present, combined with an inability (or perceived inability) to shape a future more to their liking, contributes to the formation of groups who seek violence as a means for gaining the power necessary to achieve their objectives. When these groups are infused with a sense of religious purpose, the results can be all the more uncompromising and lethal. While the basic texts of every major monotheistic faith emphasize peaceful tolerance and good works, religious ideologies can be (and all too often have been) used to justify the worst instances of terrorist violence. Also, it is important to note that in the global war on terror, perceptions matter. Perceptions of political, social, economic, or religious oppression are often as powerful a motivator for terrorist activity as the real existence of such oppression.

Of course, in a comparatively few cases, individuals may use terrorism for completely unfathomable reasons, like perhaps some warped sense of satisfaction or morbid joy at the suffering of others. During the thirteenth century, as terrorism expert David Rapoport has noted, a group known as the Thugs intended for their victims to experience terror and to express it visibly for the pleasure of Kali, the Hindu Goddess of terror and destruction. . . . Murder was the Thugs’ main objective, [and] they believed that death actually benefited the victim, who would surely enter paradise, whereas Thugs who failed to comply with Kali’s commands would become impotent, and their families would become either extinct or experience many misfortunes.33

Here, while terrorism was conducted without any overarching political goals, the perpetrators of these violent acts felt the need to do so because they believed that such actions were required in order to secure a particular vision of the future for themselves and their victims.

In more modern times in the United States, a similarly warped sense of satisfaction was sought by such individuals as the Tylenol killer, who laced capsules with arsenic in the fall of 1982 (terrorizing the American public and drug industry in the process) but was never apprehended,34 and Ted Kaczynski (a.k.a., the Unabomber), whose infamy stems from his deadly campaign of mailing homemade bombs that killed three people and
wounded twenty-three others in sixteen separate incidents from 1978 to 1995. In cases such as these, the terrorist may be reflecting what psychologist Jerrold Post describes as a consequence of psychological forces in which a polarizing and absolutist “us versus them” rhetoric reflects an underlying view of “the establishment” as the source of all evil, and provides a psychologically satisfying explanation for what has gone wrong in their lives. The fixed logical conclusion of the terrorist—that the establishment must be destroyed—is driven by the terrorist’s search for identity, Post argues, and as he strikes out against the establishment he is attempting to destroy the enemy within. This, one could argue, is the pursuit of power in a different form and yet is closely related to the terrorist group motivations discussed earlier in this chapter in the sense that here, too, the individual is seeking the power to achieve a certain vision of his or her future, based on an inherent dissatisfaction with their present.

It must be reemphasized here that the pursuit of power is not the root cause of terrorism—indeed, there is no one discrete root cause—but it is one important dimension of many root causes and thus worth consideration. As most experts agree, a complex, multilayered stack of root causes has contributed to the rise of terrorism worldwide. Poverty and social disadvantage alone will not typically lead to violence, nor will religious indoctrination or the absence of a strong state. But it is the combination of root causes to which we must focus our attention.

Returning to the United Nations conference and the Oslo report described at the beginning of this chapter, one theme stands out through much of the debate over what to do about root causes of terrorism: Political and economic reforms are needed. Jitka Malecková (of Charles University, Prague), one of the experts cited in the report, noted that “terrorists are more likely to come from countries that lack civil liberties, suggesting that freedom of expression may provide an alternative to terrorism.”35 This sentiment is echoed by the U.S. government’s 9/11 Commission Report, which notes that there is clearly a need for economic and political reform throughout much of the Middle East and Central Asia:

Economic openness is essential. Terrorism is not caused by poverty. Indeed, many terrorists come from relatively well-off families. Yet when people lose hope, when societies break down, when countries fragment, the breeding grounds for terrorism are created. Backward economic policies and repressive political regimes slip into societies that are without hope, where ambitions and passions have no constructive outlet.36

Finding, fixing, and preventing these “breeding grounds for terrorists” is surely the most daunting task of the global war on terrorism. Clearly, no single nation can meet the challenges represented in this volume on its own. Failure to ensure a globally coordinated, integrated, and long-term response
to the root causes of terrorism could very well ensure that our children and grandchildren live in a world under constant threat of terror attacks close to home. Let us try hard not to endow them with such a future. It is to this objective that the chapters of this volume now contribute.

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