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# Can psychology find a path to peace?

As the UK's Parliament voted to allow bombing in Syria, we asked – are there evidence-based ways to resolve this conflict?

The attacks in Paris, Beirut and more. The vote to extend UK bombing to Syria. Events of huge, worldwide significance. They demand a response, and our discipline of psychology should be well placed to provide one.

But what? In the acres of coverage during November and December, there did not seem to be a lot of psychology. Perhaps the odd piece on psychological debriefing, on the effects on children of their homes being bombed. But surely psychology can be more than the ambulance chaser? Are we really resigned to remaining quiet as the bombs fall, only emerging later to mop up the mess?

Can we turn to 'peace psychology' for ways out of a seemingly intractable war? Or is it ill-equipped to deal with the modern world, where many people characterise those we are fighting as 'extremists', who cannot be reasoned with?

Does the solution rest with the next generation? Can psychology understand 'violent extremism' (see [tinyurl.com/digestextrem](http://tinyurl.com/digestextrem)), and is it a useful tool in cutting off the problem at source?

We sought contributions online, and we publish a selection here. Hopefully this is just the beginning in our search for evidence-based, practical contributions from psychology in finding a path to peace.

## Must suffering beget suffering?

Social psychology's short answer is: No! Human behaviour is driven by goals. Our goals reflect our desires. As such, they represent our social and moral character to the outside world. Conflicts arise when our goals clash against someone else's goals. The massacres in Beirut and Paris were interpreted as representing the barbaric essence of ISIS. They could also be understood as the tragic traps set by ISIS to prove its image of the West and to assert its narrative of the conflict as an intergroup conflict between Muslims and the West.

How is one to respond to being wronged without proving the enemy's image of oneself right?

Psychological research has established that a basic psychological need of victim groups is to restore their autonomy and sense of control (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008). This

is reflected in our impulse to desire revenge following exposure to victimisation. But these impulses may be managed and even suppressed when questioning the goals and unintended consequences of such vengefulness. Bombing Syria will be received as an act of revenge for the Paris attack, even though Western governments may not have intended it as such. Its goal to prevent Western citizens from future similar attacks is doubtful. In fact, the bombing may reveal the West's moral inconsistencies (e.g. business

relationships are maintained with countries such as Saudi Arabia and China which have a high record of beheadings and other human rights violations) and its ethnocentric biases toward valuing ingroup versus outgroup lives differentially (e.g. bombing Northern Ireland was – thankfully – never considered as a strategy to eliminate the terror threats posed by the Irish Republican Army; see also Pratto & Glasford, 2008). And staying closer to psychology, would we have had this special feature in *The Psychologist* had ISIS not attacked Paris?

All of the above does mostly one thing, namely, to feed into the ISIS narrative of victimhood. Recent social psychological insights have uncovered that victimhood is best considered as a psychological resource over which conflicting groups may compete (Noor et al., 2012). It is referred to as competitive victimhood and has catastrophic consequences for conflict resolution. That is, due to mutual victimisation, each of the adversary groups develops a profound sense of being the 'real' victim. Consequently, competitive victimhood motivates groups to draw attention to their own suffering while failing to acknowledge the suffering they inflict on each other. Importantly, the more groups operate out of a competitive victimhood mindset the less likely they are to consider resolution of their violent conflict (Shnabel et al., 2013).

Is there an alternative strategy powerful enough to disrupt the ISIS's narratives without generating further suffering? Given its etymological roots, forgiveness as a strategy usually prompts sentiments ranging from naivety and unrealistic pacifism to misplaced religious and spiritual moralisation. Yet, analysis of real-life stories of victims and academic research conducted in post- and ongoing-conflict settings challenge such sentiments as well as our common association between weakness and forgiveness (Noor et al., 2008; [www.theforgivenesstoolbox.com](http://www.theforgivenesstoolbox.com)).

"Bombing Syria will be received as an act of revenge for the Paris attack"

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A key goal of forgiveness is to break the cycle of revenge and to protect the victims from becoming victimisers. It is a desire to go beyond one's impulse for personal revenge. As such, victims place their personal tragedies into the public domain and invite society into a bigger search for seeking answers to the big why-questions to prevent future tragedies. It also forms the discipline not to give in to the enticements of dehumanising an entire community that may share some basic memberships with the actual perpetrators. To forgive is to surprise your enemy. At least, it will confuse them. It certainly can undermine the ISIS narrative of framing the conflict as Muslims fighting against the evil West.

We cannot expect the pursuit of such alternative strategies from our governments, before giving them our permission and reassurances to do so. Simultaneously, we need to demand from our governments to give us adequate time to mourn the dead. This is even more important in today's world with many people having many bloods and belongings to different places and nations across the world. Following the Twin Tower and the Paris attacks, Western citizens were deprived of going through the process of mourning and introspection and non-Western citizens from maintaining their sympathy and condolences for the West, due to Western governments declaring wars on entire regions overnight. Consequently, we all have accepted and acted out of the then al-Qaeda and now ISIS narratives.

Naturally, the way we currently define strength and weakness, or leadership, allows limited mental space to consider these alternative strategies to revenge seriously. However, a useful mantra to use against cynicism and alleged realism is the vision that there are infinite solutions to resolve conflict once adversary groups have meaningfully acknowledged their mutual grievances.

**Masi Noor**

*Liverpool John Moores University*



REUTERS/ABDOLRAHMAN ISMAIL

### An imagined dialogue with my late friend Ed Cairns

**Di:** Good morning, Ed. We miss you, you know. Can you spare me a moment? I have a query here from Jon Sutton, Editor of *The Psychologist*, that I would like to discuss with you. He is concerned about the current situation, the bombings in Paris, Beirut and elsewhere and the decision in the UK to bomb Syria. He thinks that you would have something to say [see <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-14/edition-6/war-and-peace-0>], but wonders why the rest of us are silent.

**Ed:** This is more than one question, Di. 'Does psychology have relevance to understanding and responding to the situation?' is one. 'Why don't psychologists speak up?' is another.

**Di:** What about the first?

**Ed:** We know a great deal about structural

and direct violence, we can say much about the cyclical processes that escalate conflict, and we know that the trauma of war affects both those who attack and those who are attacked. We also know quite a lot about the way young people are recruited into rebel groups and how the process may be reversed.

**Di:** But is peace psychology still relevant? Aren't members of ISIS so extreme that we cannot negotiate with them? Isn't this a new form of war?

**Ed:** History is replete with examples of extremism. The Buddhist monks who burned themselves in protest against the South Vietnamese government, the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot, the Spanish Inquisition, Fascism in Germany, the apartheid regime in South Africa, the Klu Klux Klan in America to name a few. I am

*interrogations, and torture.* Report to the Special Committee of the Board of Directors of the American Psychological Association. Chicago, IL: Sidley Austin LLP. Available at [www.apa.org/independent-review/APA-FINAL-Report-7.2.15.pdf](http://www.apa.org/independent-review/APA-FINAL-Report-7.2.15.pdf)

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sure you can think of many other examples.

**Di:** So although the context has changed there are still continuities with the past? Psychological understandings still apply?

**Ed:** Yes, one of the main differences is that the violence is in our own backyard, something we understand in Northern Ireland. You Aussies go off and fight in other places and expect the war to stay 'over there'.

**Di:** I guess you are right about that. Is there anything we can do to improve the situation?

**Ed:** Well, the key to success is working together. Those of us from other faiths need to work to understand and build better relationships with Islam, so we can stand together against all forms of violence. If we focus only on ISIS and do so by means that alienate the vast majority of Muslims, we may win a battle but will certainly lose the war.

**Di:** What about the second question? Why are we silent?

**Ed:** Well, I must say the silence of the psychologists is making me cross. There are a few things in the epistemology of the discipline that contribute. One is the focus on individual psychology. Earlier psychologists, like the psychoanalysts, recognised the importance of communities and societies, but the prevailing fashion is to look at individuals as the unit of study. Having this micro focus makes it difficult to comment on global affairs. Another is the need for empirical data. Don't get me wrong, I did empirical work myself. But if we must always wait for the data to come in before warning against a course of action it may be too late to change the course of action. Also the emphasis on the present in psychology sometimes robs us of the lessons of the past. Our discipline tends to de-

"history is replete with examples of extremism... there is no need to give up"

contextualise: it is not too surprising if we find it hard to comment on contexts.

**Di:** Another reason for silence is the close link between American psychology, which is very influential around the world, and the military. It is difficult to speak out against bombing if you are employed by the armed forces. Like other APA members (I'm an international member of APA like you were, Ed) I was shocked by the findings of the Hoffman Report (Hoffman et al., 2015), which revealed the complicity of psychologists in the development of torture techniques, but if we had stopped to look back and reflect the important role of the army in the history of psychology was there all along.

Now, you studied children. What do you think about this so-called radicalisation process where young Muslims are lured away to fight for ISIS. How can we intervene? In Australia we are planning more extreme measures like refusing re-entry to Australia even though the fighters hold Australian passports, or locking up people who are deemed to be a terrorist threat for life.

**Ed:** Drawing on past experience we know that punishment is not necessarily effective, that rewards are more reliable in shaping new behaviours. Do you know examples of converting militants back to functioning in civil society?

**Di:** Yes, there was a conversion programme in the Philippines, where rebel soldiers were re-employed into the armed forces of the government. And I know former child soldiers from African countries who are not only productive citizens in Australia, but are also becoming peace workers.

**Ed:** So there is no need to give up hope? There might be ways to intervene in the process that leads youngsters to take up their weapons, and to instead help reconcile them with their communities.

**Di:** Yes. What worries me most is the way those who protest against Islam here in Australia (they call themselves Australia First) are starting to sound like ISIS, and even to look like them, wearing combat gear and flags across their faces.

**Ed:** You've hit your word limit.

**Di:** But there is so much more to say.

**Ed:** So don't remain silent any more.

**Diane Bretherton**  
University of Queensland

### 'The last thing we should do is send in troops'

I feel the last thing we (the US and the West) should do is send in troops, as that appears to be exactly what they are hoping for to draw us in to [see [tinyurl.com/zxox8f4](http://tinyurl.com/zxox8f4)]. I think one of the more hopeful signs – other than the Vienna talks on Syria – is the moderate Muslim movement in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama [see [tinyurl.com/zzfb6r6](http://tinyurl.com/zzfb6r6)]. The world needs resistance and push-back against violent extremism from inside Islam. It needs to offer potential recruits another equally compelling vision.

I do feel that the West should do all it can to exert pressure on the Saudis to cut funding to Wahhabism in all its manifestations. This is the source. Finally, I also think that some of Hillary Clinton's proposed policies (24-step plan) can provide more immediate responses to contain ISIL.

But ultimately, the US and the West more generally, need to learn from the six former heads of Shin Bet, the Israeli security agency, interviewed in the documentary *The Gatekeepers*. They all, to a man, come to the conclusion that the more sophisticated they get at military tactics (such as our use of drones), the farther away they move from their strategic political goals. I highly recommend this film.

Readers may also be interested in my essay on what America can do to reduce its own violent tendencies ([tinyurl.com/jso9vz4](http://tinyurl.com/jso9vz4)), and my essay with Andrea Bartoli on dealing with extremists ([www.beyondintractability.org/essay/dealing-extremists](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/dealing-extremists)).

**Peter Coleman**

Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University

and facilitating forgiveness through re-categorization into a common victim or perpetrator identity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49, 867-877.

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### In pursuit of harmonious cohesion

Political responses to the November 13th attack on Paris have been swift, dramatic and decisive. But an important question is whether these responses are proportionate, reasonable and strategically appropriate, or whether they are knee-jerk, or even politically opportunistic, reactions to momentary fluctuations in public sentiment. Research suggests that, by changing the way we view human relationships, shocking terrorist events might promote a reactionary lurch, but that reaction does not have to be an enduring one. What we all have to live with, however, are the political and policy decisions that follow.

The Syrian refugee crisis throughout 2015 clearly affected public opinion across Europe, and certainly in the UK, to become more wary and fearful about immigration. It created a climate in which border control was already becoming a significant issue. Throughout the summer a series of horrendous terror attacks orchestrated by ISIS fuelled a more retributive political rhetoric that strengthened support for nationalistic political parties. By the end of 2015 the British Parliament had approved a widening of bombing strikes to Syria (a primarily symbolic gesture of solidarity with France's 'war' on ISIS). However, in some ways there is more to learn from the UK's orientation to France than its views on ISIS.

There was a striking shift in the government's orientation to European unity. The general election campaign had been dominated by debates on

immigration and border control. Heralding his strategy for renegotiations prior to the Euro referendum, on 10 November David Cameron gave a speech articulating how Britain was so different from the rest of Europe, how we had different objectives, needs and positions on many things. He stated, 'The commitment...to an ever closer union is not a commitment that should apply any longer to Britain. We do not believe in it, we do not subscribe to it.' Yet by 14 November, one day after the attacks in Paris, he was declaring to France that 'your values are our values...more than ever we should come together and stand united'.

This apparent volte-face can be readily explained by simple psychological principles. Almost all terrorist attacks are followed by shock and then a political proclamation of the defence of society's core values. Often these are framed in terms of protecting a decent society in which everyone is treated fairly and equally. Yet, in the face of a common enemy the illusion of an idealised society (one in which true, correct and pure principles are upheld) emerges through a particular form of cohesion, which can be labelled 'rivalrous cohesion' (Abrams, 2010). By focusing on a common enemy, one's group, region, nation or continent finds an empowering common focus that obliterates important differences in perspective and creates a sense of unity and consensus. This form of cohesion is essential to mobilise armies, win competitions, and so forth, but it is also

potentially dangerous as a vehicle for extreme group polarisation and intensification of conflict.

What can psychology offer here? It is important to recognise that there are other forms of cohesion. Harmonious cohesion is a state in which humanitarian principles and shared valuing of all individuals predominates. This is likely to arise in societies that do not face significant economic pressures, in which there is less inequality, and when there are few or no significant external threats (Abrams & Vasiljevic, 2014). The road to harmonious cohesion is gradual and gentle, but it requires the promotion of empathy, the sharing of superordinate identities and multiple cross-cutting identities, thereby limiting simplistic categorisation of 'them and us'. Sustaining and nourishing this slow route to cohesion is hard, particularly as the route to rivalrous cohesion is potentially much faster and easier. Rivalrous cohesion is likely to be a response to uncertainty, particularly uncertainty over where threats reside, who our friends are, and so on. If we accept the argument that core psychological needs include those of belonging, meaning, control and esteem (cf. Williams, 2009) we can readily see how the threat arising from a terrorist attack elevates all of these, and how rivalrous cohesion helps to satisfy them all.

In fact, and rather strangely, even in a society where almost everyone strongly believes in equality, fairness and justice, people show both types of cohesion at the same time. When they consider non-

threatening groups such as older people, women, people with disabilities, and so forth, they adopt a 'benevolent' attitude, advocating promotion of more equality of opportunity, treatment and rights, and behaving more generously towards those groups. However, when they consider groups that potentially challenge majority values or way of life they withdraw these advantages (Abrams & Houston, 2006, Abrams et al., 2014).

Rivalrous cohesion exists and can be expressed by people on both the political right and political left (witness the infighting in the Labour Party). But reactions to terrorist events may cause a population shift to the right not just by hardening the resolve of 'hawks' but by weakening that of the 'doves' to accept the rivalrous cohesion agenda (Nail et al., 2009). This greater malleability means that doves may be engaged by rivalrous cohesion, but are likely to return to their core values. The risk is that, in the ebb and flow of political opinion, decisions are made that set a trajectory that accelerates rivalrous cohesion when that may not in fact reflect the more enduring priorities of the population.

Psychology's role in all this is to alert both the people in general but in particular those who are making critical policy judgements and decisions, and who may be responding to immediate pressure from public opinion, that there is a potential cost to pursuing rivalrous cohesion, a cost that should not be underestimated and that should be weighed carefully against the losses that may damage hard-won harmonious cohesion.

**Professor Dominic Abrams**

*Professor of Social Psychology and Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes University of Kent*

**ISIS and the law of political irony**

Economist and peace and conflict scholar Kenneth Boulding used to lecture about the 'law of political irony' – Many things you do to hurt people help them, and many things you do to help people hurt them. That is exactly what is happening with ISIS. We are bombing them in an effort to weaken or, ideally, even destroy them. However, this action is actually making them stronger – and us weaker.

ISIS's worldwide terror strategy is designed to instil fear and hatred of 'the other' across the globe. And that's working – just look at the US Presidential candidate Donald Trump, and the astonishing support he is receiving for his broad anti-Muslim rhetoric, suggesting that all Muslims be at least temporarily forbidden from entering the United States. But, when we so label and lash back at 'the other' – who most often are not ISIS terrorists, but all people we fear might be such (as in all Muslims, or even all people with brown skin) – we create more animosity, fear and even hatred. That drives more people join ISIS, and the escalation spiral takes off (Pruitt et al., 2003).

No doubt, the ISIS leadership is what we call 'incorrigible' – they have an apocalyptic vision, and they can't be negotiated with using either competitive or cooperative ('win-win') negotiation. They have to be isolated, delegitimised, and disarmed.

But the vast majority of Muslims are not incorrigible. They may not share our values; we may disagree with many of their beliefs; but if we allow them to live as they choose, most of them will allow us to do the same.

ISIS can't be defeated with outsiders bombing because the 'backlash effect' will take hold – for every ISIS operative we kill, we will create several more by deeply angering people whose homes we have destroyed (Burgess et al., 2004). If we assume that all Muslims or 'brown-skinned' people are our enemies, they



**Kurdish protesters in London burn an ISIS flag**

will, indeed, become so, as people don't usually befriend people who demonise them.

Many Muslims fear ISIS as much as we do, and those people are essential allies if we are to successfully fight ISIS both at home and abroad. Locals have the knowledge of who is and who isn't a threat; they have legitimacy and credibility on their home turf. We don't – we are interlopers (with a bad reputation, by the way).

In short, what ISIS is trying to do is drive an escalation/dehumanisation spiral to the point of producing a catastrophic and apocalyptic war between the West and the Islamic world. Our central objective should be preventing this strategy from working. Bombing civilians in the hope of killing a few (or even many) ISIS operatives likely will do the opposite.

**Heidi Burgess PhD**

**Guy Burgess PhD**

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**We are keen to build an online resource around this question, with as much diversity as possible. Submit your practical, evidence-based suggestions in the comments at <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/can-psychology-help-us-out-mess> or e-mail the editor on [jon.sutton@bps.org.uk](mailto:jon.sutton@bps.org.uk).**

## Understanding 'identity fusion' where it matters

Can psychology contribute to tackling the root causes of violent extremism? And can it contribute something meaningful to resolving what currently seems to be an intractable conflict? I believe it can, and have been conducting research into just how. This year I've been working with cognitive scientists and anthropologists at Oxford University's Institute for Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology (ICEA) and the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict (CRIC) in designing and conducting science-based field studies into the mechanisms (both psychological and social) of radicalisation in the Middle East.

There is a pressing need for empirical peer-reviewed research in this area. The US and UK spend tens of billions on munitions and equipment, and yet almost nothing on scientific research to understand the phenomenon they are fighting, and which poses a grave threat to world security. In 2010 the anthropologist Scott Atran (a co-founder of CRIC) in a statement before the US Senate argued that we have no sustained, systematic scientific research that will enable us to understand the 'motivation, intent, will and the dreams' of current or would-be violent extremists (Atran, 2010). Five years on (and many atrocities since) we still have no programme of research and no coherent vision.

However, the situation is changing. The UK Ministry of Defence recently invited applications for research outfits to competitively register on their Military Strategic Effects (MSE) Framework. The MSE will commission research into what the military term Target Audience Research and Analysis, or TAA. TAA is a scientific, deductive approach to understanding the motivations, norms, values and beliefs, rituals, decision-making processes, and other psychological and social (group) features of potential 'audiences' in the fight against terrorism. The ultimate objective in conducting TAA is to gain insight into how to craft the most effective interventions to change behaviour.

Clearly psychology has a huge role to play in this. There are major academic and applied research efforts in large-scale behaviour change. Most of this

research is carried out by psychologists, such as Susan Michie's team at UCL's Centre for Behaviour Change (CBC). The CBC is focused on health behaviours; and the much-publicised Behavioural Insights Team is focused on behaviour change for policy. Yet the same high-quality science that is the hub of these units can also be applied to understanding the allure and the behaviours of terrorist networks and how to design credible, evidence-based, measurable interventions to weaken them.

To that end, the MSE has just requested bids to conduct research in a Middle East country to better understand the pathways towards radicalisation, and how to develop communication interventions that might effectively influence potential recruits to choose otherwise. In writing a section of this bid on the 'psychological drivers' towards radicalisation, I was struck by the paucity of experimental and field-based scientific research into the mechanisms of radicalisation. In a comprehensive systematic review, Christmann (2012) presents several broad process theories, but there is little psychological insight into the mental and social processes that 'push' and/or 'pull' an individual further along the pathway of radicalisation. And where there is such insight the necessary empirical support is lacking.

That's why scientific field research conducted as close to terrorists as is possible is so vital. In my research I work directly with an organisation that specialises in field research in the Middle East. Although run by an Oxford-educated Arabist, the organisation

employs heads of research who are trained social scientists, proficient field researchers, and themselves Muslim. Each research lead heads a team of social science researchers who are drawn from the country in which we are conducting research. These researchers administer our surveys, interview schedules and (increasingly) tablet-loaded quasi-experimental tasks in the very communities where military intelligence suggests extremists originate.

Recently, our team collected survey data from 200 males in Benghazi in an effort to better understand the processes that lead to identity fusion – tight, visceral bonds that have been shown to bind together people who have shared dysphoric experiences (e.g. Whitehouse et al., 2014). Understanding the cognitive and social processes (and the external stimuli) that trigger identity fusion is vital if we are to understand the mechanisms that bond radicalised individuals together, because evidence suggests (e.g. Christmann, 2012) that youths are drawn to extremist groups because their personal identity conflicts may be resolved by submission to a greater ideal. This kind of psychologically informed science-based research will be necessary to fully understand the radicalisation pathway, which is likely a complex interplay of personal, social and external factors.

Together with our research team in the Middle East, and backed by traditional academic and military funding, my colleagues and I at Oxford are hoping to extend this work in the near future into Yemen, Syria and Jordan. Our aim is to generate a reliable and rigorous body of empirical research that illuminates the pathways to and from violent extremism, and the psychosocial factors inherent in that transition. Success in this endeavour will require considerable resources and an interdisciplinary approach that is backed by academia, the military and Middle East partners. I feel this research is necessary, urgent and justifiable. Social scientists of all stripes can do more than mop up the mess: we may be able to lay the foundations for preventing the spilling of blood in the first place.

**Dr Lee Rowland** CPsychol  
Consulting research  
psychologist



**There is little psychological insight into the mental and social processes that 'push' and/or 'pull' an individual further along the pathway of radicalisation**