

# How Terrorists Are Made

Terrorist attacks like those in Paris leave us fearful and horrified, but above all, bewildered. We're unable – and usually even unwilling – to understand what motivates people to kill others indiscriminately. However, our author believes we should try to understand terrorists. Only then can we combat the causes of violence.

TEXT GÜNTHER SCHLEE

**T**he French have a proverb: “*Tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner*” – “To understand everything is to forgive everything.” While we hold our neighbors in the highest possible regard, it must be said here that this is a particularly dumb saying. Understanding something and forgiving it are two completely different things. Ev-

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eryday life is replete with examples that confirm this. It isn't enough for an undercover agent to rationally comprehend the calculating mind of a criminal; he also needs empathy. In other words, he must be able to put himself in the criminal's shoes. He has to “un-

derstand” him in the fullest sense of the word, and yet he still hands him over to the police. Likewise, a battered child would do well to model the inner world of the violent father in its mind in order to gauge his moods and alcohol level. This is a question of survival that has nothing to do with forgiveness. The list of examples is endless. *Tout comprendre, ce n'est pas tout pardonner.*

That violent conflicts cause immeasurable suffering is indisputable. There are also measurable effects. Despite the well-founded public interest in climate-related risks, and despite the urgency of economic and currency issues, there are reasons to assume that violence is still the greatest obstacle to development and the most significant cause of suffering in the world. It destroys human potential and infrastructure, wipes out investments and leads to sensible but

War and terror are forcing the population of Somalia to find their own sources of food, such as fish (top image). In the absence of a functioning state, however, terrorists often support the people and so gain their backing. The pickup (bottom image) is bringing al-Shabaab fighters back from a refugee camp, where they distributed aid supplies.



expensive security measures and to fear-based reactions that can be very expensive without being sensible. Consider, for example, the number of road deaths, which always increases when people avoid traveling by plane for fear of terrorist attacks. So an ability to understand violence better, assess it more realistically and, if possible, recognize and forestall a potential escalation is a worthwhile goal. Nevertheless, it is clear that understanding perpetrators of violence has nothing to do with forgiving, let alone condoning, their behavior.

Understanding violence is easier said than done. In our media-saturated environment, which shapes most of us, including political decision-makers, more strongly than science, effects come to the fore that hinder an understanding of violence. One of them stems from the emotions associated with moral outrage. These often lead to a refusal to deal with a matter intellectually. The statement “I just can’t understand it!” doesn’t express a desire for better comprehension or understanding, but rather implies that the speaker doesn’t want to understand. Another

Islamic values. Its stereotype of the enemy is that of the shameless, promiscuous, profane and capitalistic West, which in turn brands the Islamic State as barbaric and a “terrorist militia.” In conflict situations, such mutual insults often reflect the truth one hundred percent, but here we aren’t concerned with the inherent truth of these statements. The question, rather, is what effect these verbal exclusory statements have on our cognitive ability to explain violent conflicts in which the Islamic State is involved. My assertion is: certainly no conducive effect.

“Terrorists” are people you want to distance yourself from as much as possible: barbarity was vanquished in Germany 70 years ago, albeit with foreign help, and we want nothing more to do with it. This attitude doesn’t help us find out what makes the perpetrators of violence tick – in other words, model their thoughts and actions in our minds. This strong desire to distance ourselves also ignores the thousands of people who support the Islamic State, or at least accept it as the lesser evil (no surprise, considering the available alternatives). They must be quite normal people. Incidentally, ever since Auschwitz, we have known that also the perpetrators of violence are entirely normal people in other contexts. And it ought to be possible to explain the behavior of entirely normal people. Obviously, in many cases there is no serious desire to do so.

Based on such considerations, my colleague, ethnologist Markus V. Hoehne, examined the development of another “terrorist militia,” al-Shabaab, in Somalia. Al-Shabaab grew out from the militias of the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu. In the absence of a functional state, the Islamic Courts had developed as a grass-roots initiative and enjoyed widespread acceptance within the population – not because Somalia was suddenly gripped by an atypical religious zeal and moral rigor, but because business people wanted a little security for their property and their transactions and were happy to fund the courts – one of the very rare cases in the history of mankind where business people were happy to pay taxes. The Islamic

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## The Islamic Courts were a lifeline in a violence-riven economy

er effect is pathologization. We classify a phenomenon as pathological, deviant or crazy. From a medical point of view, of course, this should pique our interest in understanding it, but few people share this medical perspective. In most cases, such statements are an expression of exclusion and a desire to distance oneself.

Take, for example, the so-called Islamic State, which currently controls large sections of Syria and Iraq and which has probably unjustifiably arrogated this name to itself, because in the opinion of many Muslims, the organization is profoundly at odds with



Courts were a lifeline in the violence-riven economy that had generally prevailed and in which the key players were major warlords who plundered the country and sold off communally owned assets (fishing rights, for example, and permission to dump toxic waste) to foreigners at bargain-basement prices.

The court militias were perceived as threatening by their opponents – so much so that Ethiopia, with US support, launched a military campaign against them in 2007. The Islamic Court militias then simply disappeared. They weren't created to fight against regular military units equipped with heavy weapons, so they didn't even engage the enemy. The Islamic Courts vanished with them. Only in this way could the internationally recognized government of Somalia be established in the capital of Mogadishu (internationally recognized because it was formed by a "peace process" coordinated by the "international community"). (Incidentally, the author of this paper was involved in this "peace process" as a resource person in 2002 and 2003, but not in a position in which his rather skeptical views could have major political impact.)

The "peace process" was a compromise between the warlords. The internationally recognized government was therefore a government that emerged from organized crime. (Not the first and not the last in human history. Governments that emerge from organized crime are more common than business people who happily pay their taxes.) Now the warlords were in power again, and with the blessing of the international community. Since then, troops of the African Union (AU) have also been in the country. This development led to the radicalization of some of the former Court militias, giving rise to al-Shabaab. Soon they controlled such large swaths of the country that the "legitimate" government that had been formed through the "peace process" and established in the capital with foreign help no longer dared to venture far from the capital. So the "international community" had to step in again. Kenyan troops marched into Somalia in 2011, thus strengthening the alliance be-

tween Ethiopia, the forces of the African Union, the US and the government they supported. Al-Shabaab then lost control of the cities and was increasingly restricted to conducting hit-and-run operations from the cover of the rugged terrain.

Al-Shabaab soon regained strength in the north of the country in a craggy, mountainous area on the coast bordering the Gulf of Aden, far from the battle

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## The "peace process" in Somalia was a compromise between warlords

troops in the south. Markus Hoehne has been following the development of the northern state-like formations, Somaliland and Puntland (both recent political creations that don't appear on older maps), for some years. In keeping with the standard of our discipline, he speaks the language of the country, has access to the important players and to the voice of the people who comment on their actions, undertakes careful risk assessments, organizes his security himself, and has repeatedly returned safely from regions that most people have never heard of or whose names conjure up feelings of dread. In this way, he has made a key contribution to the analysis of current conflict situations, all of which have not only global implications, but also significant local ramifications. Zinc and coltan were discovered in this coastal area. There is a strong, rapidly growing and insatiable demand in Asian economies particularly for coltan. The mining rights were quickly sold to an Australian company. The seller was the government of Puntland, a semi-autonomous entity in the northeast of the country. However, the "peace process" had just catapulted the president of Puntland to the president of the whole of Somalia. He then set out claims



on behalf of the Somali federal government, whose rights had not yet been defined. Nor, for that matter, had the rights of the states, whose exact number and form were also unclear. Moreover, this government initially found itself unable to move into the capital, and when it did, it hardly dared to venture out again. Nevertheless, the parties soon settled on a fifty-fifty formula. Only they had forgotten one thing: to ask the local population and allow them to share in the new-found wealth in some way. The clan that settled these coastal mountains (the Warsangeli) was smaller than the clan that prevailed in the rest of Puntland (the Majerteen), but it is part of the same confederation of clans (the Harti). Moreover, the government of Puntland believed it could rely on the brotherhood of all Harti without having to consider the specific rights of the locally ruling genealogical sub-clan (the Warsangeli).

But enough of the clan names. What's important in the present context is this: The local group that would have claimed the resources of "its" land was relatively small compared with the competing clan groups. It launched a spirited armed uprising but soon ran into trouble. It is therefore not surprising that they welcomed help from outside. The local sheikh appealed to Islamic sentiments to mobilize his followers against the infidels. The lines of the alliance that stretched from Puntland to Mogadishu and from there to Ethiopia, Kenya and the US made it expedient to portray the opponents as Islamic apostates in collusion with Christian or even godless powers. After being driven out of the south of the country, al-Shabaab fighters found rhetorical and ideological points of contact here. At some point (Hoehne describes it in more detail than we can here), al-Shabaab then evidently gained the upper hand, and the local sheikh became subservient to it.

Shifting our focus from the local clans and their alliances to the larger, global picture, we see the following: The government, which had sold off the mining rights to natural resources (without being able to guarantee the buyers access to those resources) with-

out consulting the local population, found itself in a global economic web. Other nodes in this web were an Australian mining company and customers in Asia. These relationships were supposed to be ce-

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## Simple Somalis became opponents of the West in its "War on Terror"

mented by a political-military alliance under the motto "the War on Terror," which included Ethiopia and Kenya in the immediate area and the USA further afield. Faced with this overwhelming configuration, the local population was forced to form alliances with fighters who likewise appealed to global causes: the struggle of "all Muslims" against the "decadent West." The response to large alliances is large alliances or, if these can't mature into formal institutions, at least appeals to global similarities with like-minded individuals.

Another thing we can learn from this story is how terrorists are made. There were terrorists before, too, but what we observe here is an expansion of this category. The business people of Mogadishu, who expected a little security from the Islamic Courts and supported them as the only available peacekeeping power; the inhabitants of the coastal region, who actually only wanted a share of the revenues from mining in their homeland; the simple Somalis, who felt that warlords are perhaps not the ideal officeholders for a government – they were all bundled into this category and branded opponents of the "West" in its "War on Terror."

This case history also illustrates how tightly resource-based conflicts and processes of collective identity are intertwined. Appeals were made to narrow and broad clan relationships, depending on which group of players wanted narrow or broad pop-

ulation segments to share in the profit from the mining of natural resources. The category “terrorist” also evolved in this context, becoming significantly broader, as did other attributions of self and others.

In general, it can be said that there are no identity-based conflicts versus resource-based conflicts. This distinction, often encountered in English usage, is nonsense, even if some abstruse theories adhere to it, arguing, for example, that identity-based conflict can be implacable while resource-based conflicts are negotiable. Whether a person sees his neighbors as members of a broad clan alliance and shares resources with them, or whether that person sees his neighbors as apostates of Islam in collusion with Christians and atheists and forms alliances against them with Islamists from other parts of the country, it is a resource-based conflict waged through identities (self-descriptions and images of the enemy) or an identity-based conflict with implications for resource distribution – take your pick. The question of identity is a question of subjects – who with whom against whom? – while the question of resources is a question of objects: Who claims what? What is at issue? Every conflict analysis must answer both questions and clarify how the two perspectives are related. ◀



#### THE AUTHOR

**Günther Schlee** is a Director at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. His research focuses on identity and difference, shifting alliances, kinship and friendship. He regularly makes extended field research trips to countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and the Sudan. His research work is characterized by an “inter-ethnic” approach and a combination of historical, sociological and philological methods.