

How terrorists are made

The French have a proverb: “Tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner” – “To understand everything is to forgive everything.” While we hold our neighbours in the highest possible regard, it must be noted at this point that this is a particularly silly saying. Understanding something and forgiving it are two entirely different kettles of fish. Everyday life is replete with examples that confirm this. An undercover agent not only has to rationally comprehend the calculating mind of a criminal but also needs empathy, i.e. he must be able to put himself in the criminal’s shoes. In other words, he has to “understand” 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 her violent father in her 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 can be continued infinitely. To understand is not to forgive.

That violent conflicts cause immeasurable suffering is indisputable. There are also measurable effects. Notwithstanding well-founded public interest in climate-related risks and notwithstanding 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 expensive security measures as well as fear-induced reactions that can be very expensive without being sensible. Consider, for example, the number of road deaths, which increases when people avoid travelling by plane for fear of terrorist attacks. So an ability to understand violence better, assess it realistically and, if possible, recognise a potential escalation and prevent an outbreak of violence is a worthwhile goal. Nevertheless, it is clear that understanding perpetrators of violence has nothing to do with forgiving, let alone condoning, their behaviour.

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!” does not express a desire for better comprehension or understanding but implies that the speaker does not want to understand. Another effect is pathologisation. We classify a phenomenon as pathological, deviant, crazy. From a medical point of view, of course, this should pique our interest to understand 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 “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 organisation is profoundly at odds with Islamic values. Its stereotype of the enemy is that of the shameless, promiscuous, profane capitalistic West, which in turn brands the Islamic State as barbaric and a “terroristic militia”. In conflict situations, such mutual insults often reflect the truth one hundred percent, but here we are not concerned with the inherent truth of these statements. The question, rather, is what effects these verbal exclusory statements have on our cognitive ability to explain violent conflicts in which the Islamic State is involved. My assertion is: no conducive effect whatsoever. “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 does not help us to find out what makes the perpetrators of violence tick, i.e. to 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). Incidentally, ever since Auschwitz we have known that perpetrators of violence are entirely normal people in other contexts. So it should in fact be possible to explain the behaviour of entirely normal people. Obviously, in many cases there is no serious desire to do so.

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Based on such considerations, Markus V. Hoehne raised the question of what has become of another “terrorist militia”, Al-Shabaab, in Somalia in recent times. The organisation that has emerged from Al-Shabaab, namely the militias of the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu, was so important and was perceived by its opponents as so threatening, that Ethiopia launched a military campaign against it in 2007 with US support. 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 sceptical views could have major political impact.) The Islamic Court Militias simply disappeared. They were not created to fight against regular military units equipped with heavy weapons and were not in a position to fight, so they did not engage the enemy. With them, the Islamic Courts vanished. In the absence of a functional state, the Islamic Courts had developed as a grass-root initiative and enjoyed widespread acceptance within the population – not because Somalia was suddenly gripped by an atypical religious zeal and moral rigour 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 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 flogged off communally owned assets to foreigners (fishing rights, for example, and permission to dump toxic waste). The “peace process” was a compromise between the warlords brokered by the “international community”. The internationally recognized government was therefore a government that emerged from organised crime. (Not the first and not the last in human history. Governments that emerge from organised crime are more common than business people who happily pay their taxes.) Now the warlords were in power again 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 radicalisation of some of the Court Militias from which Al-Shabaab arose. Soon they controlled such large swaths of the country that the “legitimate” government formed through the “peace process”, which had been established in the capital with foreign help, no longer dared 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 between Ethiopia, the forces of the African Union, the USA and the

government they supported. Al-Shabaab then lost control of the cities and was increasingly constrained to conduct hit-and-run operations from the cover of the rugged terrain.

Soon Al-Shabaab 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 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 do not 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, organises 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. 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 Somalian 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, been defined. Moreover, initially this government 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. But they had forgotten just 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 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 subclan (the Warsangeli). Enough of the clan names! What’s important in the present context is this: The local group that claimed the resources of “its” land was relatively small in comparison to the competing aggregations of groups and their overarching affiliations. It launched a spirited armed uprising but soon ran into trouble. It is therefore not surprising that they welcomed help from outside.



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The local sheikh appealed to Islamic sentiments to mobilise his followers against the infidels. The lines of the alliance that stretched from Puntland to Mogadishu and from there to Ethiopia, Kenya and the USA 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 raw materials (without being able to guarantee access to those resources by the buyers) without 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 cemented by a political military alliance under the motto of *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 reaction to large alliances are large alliances or, if they cannot mature into formal institutions, at least appeals to beliefs globally shared with kindred spirits.

Another thing we can learn from this story is how terrorists are made. There were terrorists before, 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 in 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 population segments to share in the profit from the mining of raw materials. The category of “terrorist” also evolved in this context, becoming significantly broader, as did other

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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 neighbours as members of a broad clan alliance and shares resources with them or whether that person sees his neighbours 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, as you will. 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’s it about? Every conflict analysis must answer both questions and clarify how the two perspectives are related.

“Identity” and “alliance” are key study objects of the Integration and Conflict Department of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. These concepts are meant to expand and improve theories of actions that result only from the calculations and motives of individuals. Any theory that seeks to explain decisions solely in terms of the benefits or disadvantages they have for the decision-maker as an individual is an impoverished one. The reference group in this context is understood to be the group to whom the cost and benefit calculations relate apart from the decision-makers themselves, i.e. the answer to the questions: costs for whom?, benefits for whom? We usually consider at least our families in our decisions and reflect on what benefits and costs will accrue to them as a result. We call this process of expanding the self *identification*. To a greater or lesser extent, we also include other people as immediate members of our expanded self. You can visualise the whole thing as a group of concentric circles: distant or close kinship (according to relationships and classifications that differ from one linguistic community to another), close (the same sect) or distant religious affinity

(Christian, Muslim, etc.), close or distant linguistic propinquity, etc. Other criteria considered in decision-making vary from case to case and region to region, as does the logic that links these identities: whether they can overlap, whether they are mutually exclusive, etc. In the Somali case discussed here, for example, close and distant clan affiliations play a role, as does religious identity, which seeks to transcend clan boundaries. We would have also liked to investigate statelike entities and state projects in more detail. Shifting identities within Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland and the transfer of loyalties also play a role here.



TRUE ALTRUISM, I.E. HELPING OTHERS DESPITE OR BECAUSE OF THEIR OTHERNESS, IS RELATIVELY RARE.

Another binding force acts not by expanding the self but expressly by emphasising differences, namely the alliance or federation. Alliances are always formed between different groups, institutions or individuals and serve to achieve a defined catalogue of shared goals. Examples are political coalitions and military alliances. You can assist your allies for two reasons: to support them in achieving shared goals, or with a view to receiving possible later services in return. Both cases are forms of pseudo-altruism, because one party helps the other, but the ultimate benefit is meant to accrue to a self or those with whom one identifies. Even helping those with whom one identifies is, in a manner speaking, a form of pseudo-altruism, because help is granted on the basis one's similarity to the actor and not their otherness (alterity). True altruism, i.e. helping others despite or because of their otherness and without expectation of services in return or recognition by third parties, is relatively rare and plays a more subsidiary role in the analysis of social and political relationships than the two forms of pseudo-altruism described above.

By itself and through many collaborations, the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology has analysed the relationships outlined here in other parts of Africa other than in East and North Africa, especially in the countries of the upper Guinea coast, which were notorious in the 1990s for their interlinked civil wars and which captured the public's attention in 2014 as a result of the Ebola outbreak. Another key research area is Central Asia, specifically the postsocialist states in this region as well as Afghanistan. The approach described here has proved robust in all these cases. Its further refinement and application to other parts of the globe are therefore promising.