

## The Quest for Certainty and Social Response to Terrorism

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Terrorism is a form of psychological warfare, with the aim to advance political objectives through the spreading of fear. Classic ideologues of terrorism have argued that terrorism destabilizes the state and unmasks its impotence, thereby inviting a political alternative that the terrorists are interested in promoting. The instability and insecurity fostered by terrorism may give rise to a state of psychological uncertainty, the unraveling of expectations, the setting of doubt, and the waning of trust in one's leadership. In psychological terms, the terrorist logic rests on the assumptions that (1) terrorism introduces a state of aversive uncertainty, and that this (2) fosters disappointment in the government entrusted to provide certainty, hence increasing the appeal of anti-government forces. In this vein, Osama bin Laden has proclaimed "neither America nor the people who live in it will dream of security before we live it in Palestine, and not before all the infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad" and that "The Western regimes and the government of the United States of America bear the blame for what might happen. If their people do not wish to be harmed inside their very own countries, they should seek to elect governments that are truly representative of them and that can protect their interests." If terrorism breeds insecurity and uncertainty it should elevate people's need for cognitive closure. However, previous need for closure research suggests that this motivation is likely to engender support for one's group and its leadership rather than undermine it. We conducted 5 studies to test the psychological impact of terrorist attacks regarding the claims of the terrorists about the efficacy of terrorism as a means to achieving a political goal. The present set of studies explored the psychological relation between uncertainty and support for counterterrorism. We found support for the notion that uncertainty arousal, through reminders of the possibility of terrorist attacks, elevates the need for closure and that, the need for closure may enhance group identification, interdependence with others, in group favoritism, support for tough, and decisive policies aimed at restoring certainty, and for leaders assumed likely to carry out such policies. Therefore, it seems that the terrorist ideologues were correct in their assertion that terrorism arouses aversive uncertainty. However, it also seems that this may foster greater group solidarity and rallying around a leader. This only happened in our studies when the leader was perceived to be decisive. As such, the terrorist aims may well be efficacious when leadership fails to provide the certainty individuals are seeking.