Bombing Versus Negotiating: How Preferences for Combating Terrorism Are Affected by Perceived Terrorist Rationality

Emily Pronin, Kathleen Kennedy, and Sarah Butsch
Princeton University

This research demonstrates that the degree of bias or rationality that people impute to terrorists influences the types of strategies that they advocate for combating terrorism. In 2 experiments, participants read depictions of terrorists that described their decision making as either rooted in rationality and objectivity or as distorted by irrationality and bias. When terrorists were depicted as biased and irrational (vs. as objective and rational), participants were more likely to advocate military action against terrorism and less likely to advocate diplomacy. This effect was mediated by perceptions of terrorists’ capacity for reason rather than by affective responses toward terrorists. This research also shows that perceptions of terrorists as rational and objective versus irrational and biased are not simply fixed in individuals’ minds but can be influenced by contextual manipulations, including putative news reports.

The perception that terrorists are undeterrible fanatics who are willing to kill millions indiscriminately just to sow fear and chaos belies the reality that they are cold, rational killers who use violence to achieve specific political objectives.
—Ehud Sprinzak,
Adviser to Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres

Terrorist attacks make clear the stark differences in worldview held by the groups that perpetrate those attacks versus the groups that are victims of them. And when those differences are brought to such harsh light, it is difficult not to react with mistrust and pessimism about finding common ground—as well as a desire for retaliation.

But it is not the experience of differences in worldview alone that leads to these reactions. It is also the judgments that both sides make about why their adversaries see things differently. When we respond to our adversaries with suspicion, hopelessness about reaching a peaceable solution, and acts of aggression, we may do so not only because we disagree with them but also because we view their judgments as biased and irrational. In the many terrorism-related conflicts around the world today, one can observe the conviction that “our side” has a monopoly on reason and objectivity, and it is the “other side” that refuses to see the past or the present as it really was or is.

The opening quotation of this article illustrates two distinct ways in which terrorists are perceived. Sometimes, they are perceived as irrational “fanatics” battling for revenge, eternal fame, or the promise of an unlikely paradise in the afterlife. Their actions are viewed as biased by unbridled hatred, radical ideology, and extreme pressure to conform. At other times, or perhaps by other people, terrorists are perceived as “rational” warriors, fighting for a specific cause with specific goals in mind. Their actions are viewed as rooted in an objective analysis of their circumstances and the options that they believe are available to them. Indeed, both of these conceptualizations of terrorists and their attacks can be found in scholarly research and analysis (e.g., Crenshaw, 1998; Pape, 2005; Post, 2005; Margalit, 2003; Merari, 2004).

This article concerns the hypothesis that people’s perceptions of terrorists and their decision making as rational and objective, versus as irrational and biased, influence the responses they advocate for combating terrorism. We predict that if people perceive terrorists as rational beings whose views are responsive to objective facts, they will be inclined to resolve their differences with terrorists via diplomacy. We predict that if they perceive terrorists as irrational fanatics whose opinions are hopelessly distorted by bias, they will be pessimistic about the promise of diplomacy and will therefore view more violent unilateral actions as their only option.

Correspondence should be addressed to Emily Pronin, Department of Psychology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08540. E-mail: epronin@princeton.edu
**SOURCES OF BIAS PERCEPTIONS**

People readily impute irrationality and bias to the judgments and actions of others, even when they would deny those influences on themselves (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Because of people’s confidence in their own objectivity, they are especially likely to impute bias to those who see things differently (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). For example, American students who did not agree with President Bush’s decision to enter Iraq tended to impute more self-interested bias to him than did those who supported the invasion (Reeder, Pryor, Wohl, & Griswell, 2005). After 9/11, American students who considered a continuum of options for responding to the terrorist attacks perceived more bias in other students the more those students’ positions diverged from their own (Pronin et al., 2004). People generally view members of groups with different views from their own as biased by their group memberships (Ehrlinger, Gilovich, & Ross, 2005) and by their political ideologies (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995).

Disagreement with terrorists likely contributes to the perception that their views and actions are biased and irrational. Media depictions of terrorism may provide another source of such perceptions. The media can influence public perceptions by virtue of how they frame events and what attributes of events (or actors) they emphasize (Craft & Wanta, 2004; Gamson, 1992; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). Indeed, network media coverage of 9/11 often framed the attackers as biased and irrational. For example, NBC news referred to the process of becoming a terrorist as “learning to hate: the mind of the fanatic” (Capus, 2001a), and ABC news emphasized that the attackers were driven by an apolitical, self-serving desire to enter “paradise” (Slavin, 2001). Rational portrayals of the attackers were less common, although reports did refer to the careful, well-planned, and calculated nature of the attacks (e.g., Beddingfield, 2001; Capus, 2001b).

**THE PRESENT RESEARCH**

People are quick to perceive bias and irrationality in others, especially when they disagree with those others’ opinions and actions. No previous research, however, has examined the consequences of such bias perceptions. We predict that perceptions of terrorists as subject to biasing and irrational influences in their decision making versus as objective and rational in their decision making will lead to different preferred strategies for dealing with terrorism—for example, bombing in the irrational case and negotiation in the rational case. In Study 1, we offer depictions of terrorists’ decisions as susceptible to bias and irrationality or as rooted in objectivity and rationality, and we then measure participants’ attitudes about how to combat terrorism. In Study 2, such depictions are offered via putative newspaper reports on the “terrorist mind,” and we seek to show that the effect of such depictions is mediated by perceptions of terrorists’ capability of responding to reasonable arguments.

**STUDY 1**

Participants read either that terrorists make their decisions on the basis of “a rational analysis of the facts” or on the basis of “social influence, conformity, and emotional reactions.” They then indicated their advocacy of aggressive militaristic means for combating terrorism, versus diplomatic negotiation-oriented means.

**METHOD**

Participants

One-hundred forty-five Princeton University undergraduates (82 men, 61 women, and 2 who did not indicate gender) received candy or money for participating.

Procedure and Questionnaire

Participants were approached on campus and asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. It began with the following description of terrorism:

Terrorism involves an attack, committed by people who believe their actions will inflict immediate harm on other people and their environment/living conditions (e.g. riots, explosives, random shootings). As a political tactic, terrorism is intended to send a strong message of opposition to enemy forces (that the terrorists are willing to sacrifice their own and others’ lives for their cause).

The questionnaire then provided an account of why people become terrorists. This account varied by condition, as indicated by the bracketed portions below (italicized for the rational condition and underlined for the irrational condition).

Recent studies have shed light on factors that lead people to become terrorists as well as personality traits associated with such people. Specifically, the studies have found that terrorists arrive at decisions based on a rational analysis of the facts available to them. Only after weighing potential options for dealing with their political situation, based on a consideration of the available facts, do they think seriously about becoming terrorists/heavy doses of social influence, conformity and emotional reactions. If people in their immediate world, such as friends and family, are terrorists, this creates an emotional pull for them to become a terrorist as well. In fact, one study that was reported in the respected journal *Foreign Affairs* found that 76% of members of terrorist groups joined after a long period of studying the politics of...
their region and of the international landscape/because of pride associated with preexisting social bonds to family or friends already in the network of terrorists]. For example, one of the terrorists that was profiled in that study was Saleh al-Abshari, a former graduate student in Saudi Arabia, who recently decided to become a terrorist. [For his dissertation research, he studied incidents of terrorism throughout ancient and modern history. Based on his historical analysis of the political and social costs and benefits of terrorism, and his assessment of the relationship of that history to the current political climate, Saleh arrived at his decision to become a terrorist/His older brother was a terrorist and died in a riot a few years earlier. Saleh remembers seeing a video with his brother when they were young children, praising the heroism and bravery of terrorists. He describes himself as “filled with great pride” when he thinks about] his decision to become a terrorist.

Dependent measures. After reading this description, participants were asked: “Would it be more effective for opposing forces to negotiate with terrorists, or to use military might against them?” Answers ranged from 1 (negotiation more effective) to 7 (military more effective). Next, they were asked to rate their advocacy of various strategies for combating terrorism ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). Of these strategies, four were designed to be militaristic and unilateral (i.e., not requiring cooperation or reason from the “enemy”):

- Air strikes against terrorist weapons and supply storage
- Assassination of terrorist leaders responsible for attacks
- Attacks by ground troops against terrorist strongholds
- Trials of suspected terrorists in an international criminal court

And, four were designed to involve bilateral negotiation and diplomacy (i.e., requiring reason and cooperation from the “enemy”):

- Diplomatic efforts to improve relations with terrorist groups
- Negotiations with the leadership of terrorist groups
- Group discussions with terrorists to find areas of agreement
- Requiring both sides to agree to a binding mediated resolution

After rating the different strategies, which were randomly ordered, participants were asked to circle the one that would be their “top priority.”

Manipulation check. As a check on the success of our manipulation, participants were asked: “On the whole, are people’s decisions to become terrorists rooted in a rational analysis of the objective facts?” based on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for our measures can be found in Table 1.

Manipulation Check

As expected, participants in the condition that described terrorists as motivated by “a rational analysis of the facts” viewed the decisions of terrorists as more rooted in rationality and objectivity than did participants in the condition that described terrorists as motivated by “heavy doses of social influence, conformity, and emotional reactions,” \( F(1, 143) = 5.82, p = .02, d = .41 \).

Dependent Measures

Our primary prediction was that participants in the rational condition would be more likely to advocate negotiation over military action compared with participants in the irrational condition. Our single-item measure of this hypothesis proved significant, \( F(1, 143) = 5.49, p = .02, d = .39 \). Moreover, across conditions perceptions of terrorists as rational and objective were associated with advocacy of negotiation over military might, \( r(143) = .27, p = .001 \).

We next examined participants’ responses to the individual strategies for combating terrorism. Principal components analysis with varimax rotation revealed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and a scree plot also implied a two-factor solution. These factors were consistent with our a priori theorizing: the first included items we classified as bilateral diplomatic efforts (i.e., negotiation, diplomacy, inter-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Terrorists</th>
<th>Rational and Objective</th>
<th>Irrational and Biased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality of terrorists' decisions</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in military action over negotiation</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy of militaristic strategies</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy of negotiation-oriented strategies</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
group discussion, mediation; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$); the second included items we classified as unilateral militaristic actions (i.e., air strikes, assassinations, ground attacks, criminal extradition; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .67$). Because the decision to engage in military action typically involves a decision to forgo diplomacy and because the decision to engage in diplomacy typically involves a decision to forgo (at least temporarily) military action, we opted in our analyses to treat these two strategies as contrasting alternatives and to examine preferences for one versus the other.

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants were more likely to advocate military actions over bilateral diplomatic efforts in the irrational condition than in the rational condition, $F(1, 143) = 6.62, p = .01, d = .43$. Participants in the irrational condition preferred militaristic approaches to diplomatic ones, $F(1, 79) = 13.42, p = .0005, d = .69$, whereas participants in the rational condition did not ($F = 0$). Across conditions, participants’ perceptions of terrorists’ rationality correlated with the strategies that they advocated. The more participants perceived terrorists as rational, the more they advocated militaristic strategies, $r(143) = .21, p = .01$. The less rational they perceived terrorists to be, the more they advocated militaristic strategies, $r(143) = -.26, p = .002$. Perceptions of terrorists as rational mediated the effect of experimental condition on preferences for militaristic versus diplomatic approaches, according to the Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986; $Z = 1.93, p = .05$).

Participants were also asked to indicate which of the various strategies for combating terrorism would be their top priority. Consistent with our hypothesizing, participants’ top priority was affected by the depiction of terrorists they encountered. Those who encountered the rational depiction chose a diplomatic strategy as their top priority 55% of the time, whereas those who encountered the irrational depiction chose a diplomatic strategy 37% of the time, $\chi^2(N = 126) = 4.04, p = .04$.

**STUDY 2**

In this experiment, participants read an ostensible New York Times article portraying terrorists as rational and objective versus irrational and biased. We expected that those reading the rational article would advocate more diplomatic (and less militaristic) strategies than those reading the irrational one. We also expected that this effect would be mediated by the tendency for participants in the rational condition to view terrorists as more amenable to reasonable arguments. In addition, we sought to rule out an alternative mechanism—that is, that portrayals of terrorists as rational make them seem more likeable, thereby leading people to disfavor violence against them.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

One-hundred thirty-two Princeton undergraduates (60 men, 69 women, and 3 who did not indicate gender) participated in exchange for money.

**Procedure and Questionnaire**

Participants were approached on campus and asked to participate in a psychology and policy study. They read an alleged New York Times article about the “terrorist mind” and then completed a one-page questionnaire. During debriefings, no participant volunteered a suspicion that the article was fake.

The questionnaire resembled that of Study 1, with two exceptions. The manipulation check included the following two items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$): “On the whole, do you think people’s decisions to become terrorists are rooted in a rational analysis of their circumstances?” ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely); “On the whole, do you think terrorists’ actions are mainly the product of irrational biases or rational and objective analysis?”, ranging from 1 (mainly bias) to 7 (mainly objectivity). And, two questions examined possible mediators: “When you think about terrorists, do you think they could be persuaded by reasonable arguments?”, ranging from 1 (definitely not) to 7 (definitely yes); “On an emotional level, how do you feel toward members of terrorist groups?”, ranging from 1 (extremely negative) to 7 (extremely positive).

**Stimulus Article**

In both experimental conditions, the article that participants read was formatted to resemble a printer-friendly version of a “News Analysis” article from The New York Times online. It was titled “Profiling the Mind of the Suicide Terrorist” and its content was drawn from scholarly work by terrorism experts (e.g., Bloom, 2005; Crenshaw, 1998; Margalit, 2003; Pape, 2005; Post, 2005). Its style resembled discussions of the terrorist mind in news sources such as The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Wall Street Journal (e.g., Carey, 2002; Glassman, 2004; Goode, 2001; McDonough, 2001). In both conditions, the article was of similar length (610 or 613 words) and included material about terrorism in the Middle East and in Sri Lanka. Both articles began with the same opening paragraph except for the final sentence, indicated here in italics for the rational version and underlined for the irrational version:

---

1We also asked about the strategy of “economic sanctions.” This strategy requires an opponent capable of reason but also involves unilateral action rather than an attempt to secure cooperation. Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, this strategy did not load strongly on either index (item loadings ranged from .60–.80, except “sanctions” which loaded .36 on one factor and .38 on the other) and thus is not examined further.

2Nineteen participants did not respond to this question.
What goes on in the mind of the terrorist? As society becomes more accustomed to acts of terrorism around the globe, knowing the answer to this question has become increasingly important. Mounting evidence in the field of research on terrorism now offers some compelling answers. The main message? Suicide terrorists [often make their decisions after a thorough, rational analysis of their circumstances] are most often motivated by strictly-held ideology and deeply-felt anger.

The articles then differed in accordance with that last sentence.3

**Rational article.** The rational article focused on the idea that terrorists’ decisions are rooted in a reasoned analysis of their situation and of the political, social, and economic benefits of the use of suicide terror. The following arguments were provided: (a) suicide attackers are rarely brainwashed into accepting their missions but are more like soldiers who accept suicide missions in wartime; (b) suicide attackers do not belong to socially isolated groups seen as having unacceptable goals; (c) suicide attackers generally adopt their strategy when they believe no other alternatives are available; (d) suicide missions are a low-cost strategy that can be implemented against enemies with greater military might; (e) suicide missions increase popular and financial support by attracting local and international attention; (f) suicide attacks accrue legitimacy to their organization by showing that people are dedicated to it, and this in turn leads to increased membership; (g) suicide bombings are used to delegitimize the enemy state, and turn popular opinion against it, by goading it into bloody acts of retaliation; (h) the ultimate goal of suicide terrorism is not to kill but to convey the horror of the terrorists’ situation.

Excerpts included:

Suicide attackers are “rarely brainwashed into accepting such missions through heavy indoctrination by religious cults but accept the task much like a soldier who accepts a ‘suicide mission’ in an ordinary war,” said Robert Pape, a distinguished scholar of international affairs.

Terrorists carry out suicide missions to increase popular and financial support for their organization. The shocking nature of Palestinian suicide attacks attracts the attention of the media and of outsiders, generating financial support from the local population or from external communities, according to Mia Bloom.

**Irrational article.** The irrational article focused on the idea that terrorists’ decisions derive from subjective factors such as thirst for revenge and religious zeal and from nonnormative influences such as intense group pressure. The following arguments were provided: (a) suicide attackers are recruited at an early age and trained to follow unquestioningly; (b) suicide attackers are indoctrinated into a culture that glorifies suicide as an act against the enemy in service of a cult-like leader; (c) children commit to martyrdom before they even understand its meaning; (d) suicide terrorists are often widows, grieving siblings, or close friends, all motivated by a desire for personal revenge; (e) suicide attackers often act out of pride for their family and ethnic or religious group; (f) suicide attacks are committed by people with an extreme hatred for the enemy; (g) would-be terrorists are isolated from alternative views and subjected to intense group pressures that can override individual will; (h) suicide attackers are often motivated by the belief that they will attain paradise in the afterlife for them and their families.

Excerpts included:

Mia Bloom, a political scientist and expert on terrorism, stated that children who grow up in the sub-culture of martyrdom are “subtly indoctrinated into a culture glorifying ultimate sacrifice in the service of the cause against the enemy people or in the service of a cult-like leader such as Villupilai Prabhakaran.”

[P]ride is combined with what Ariel Merari, a leading expert on Middle East suicide terrorism, describes as an “extreme hatred” for those viewed as opposition. Such hatred, he has found, is fostered by the fact that most terrorist groups do not allow prospective attackers to mingle with anyone outside the group’s inner circle before an attack.

In both articles, the arguments were attributed to actual scholars, including Bloom (2005), Pape (2005), Post (2005), Merari (2004), and Varshney (2003), as well as terrorist actors cited in their research, such as one member of the “Tamil Tigers” and several preempted Middle East suicide bombers.

**RESULTS**

Means and standard deviations are shown in Table 2.

**Manipulation Check**

Participants who read the article that portrayed terrorists’ behavior as rooted in rational analysis viewed terrorists’ decisions and actions as more rational and objective than participants who read the article that portrayed terrorists’ behavior as rooted in emotional reactions, social coercion, and religious fervor, $F(1, 130) = 9.47, p = .002, d = .54$.

**Dependent Measures**

Our primary prediction was that participants who read the rational portrayal of terrorists would be more likely to advocate negotiation over military might compared with participants who read the irrational portrayal. Our single-item test of this hypothesis proved significant, $F(1, 130) = 19.63, p < .0001, d$.

---

3Copies of both articles are available upon request.
Across conditions, perceptions of terrorist rationality were associated with advocacy of negotiation over military might, \( r(130) = .27, p = .002 \).

We next examined responses to our two classes of strategies for combating terrorism (from Study 1): bilateral diplomatic efforts (i.e., negotiation, diplomacy, intergroup discussion, binding mediation; Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .84 \)) and unilateral militaristic actions (i.e., air strikes, assassinations, ground attacks, criminal extradition; Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .64 \)).

As predicted, participants were more likely to advocate diplomatic solutions over aggressive military ones after reading the rational article than after reading the irrational one, \( F(1, 130) = 8.59, p = .004, d = .51 \). Participants in the irrational condition advocated militarism over diplomacy, \( F(1, 66) = 4.15, p = .046, d = .41 \), whereas participants in the rational condition advocated diplomacy over militarism, \( F(1, 64) = 4.49, p = .04, d = .43 \). Moreover, militaristic approaches were advocated more strongly by those who read an article portraying terrorists as irrational, \( F(1, 130) = 4.88, p = .03, d = .38 \), whereas diplomatic approaches were advocated more strongly by those who read an article portraying terrorists as rational, \( F(1, 130) = 6.64, p = .01, d = .45 \).

Each of the strategies about which participants were asked also elicited responses in the predicted direction (see Figure 1). A few of these differences reached statistical significance. Participants were more likely to advocate assassinations of terrorist leaders if they were in the irrational condition rather than in the rational one, \( F(1, 130) = 6.57, p = .01, d = .45 \). By contrast, if they read the rational article, they were more likely to advocate negotiations with terrorist leaders, \( F(1, 130) = 7.23, p = .008, d = .47 \), and diplomatic efforts to improve relations with terrorist groups, \( F(1, 130) = 6.50, p = .01, d = .44 \).

Finally, across conditions participants’ tendency to perceive terrorists as rational and objective was associated with their greater endorsement of diplomatic strategies, \( r(130) = .28, p = .001 \), and their lesser endorsement of militaristic strategies, \( r(130) = -.19, p = .03 \). Perceived terroris
ity mediated the effect of condition on preferences for diplomatic over militaristic approaches ($Z = 2.06, p = .04$).

**Mediating Measures**

We next examined our proposed mechanism involving perceptions about whether terrorists could be persuaded by reasonable arguments. As predicted, participants thought that terrorists would be more amenable to reasonable arguments if they read the rational article rather than the irrational article, $F(1, 130) = 6.00, p = .02, d = .43$. Furthermore, their responses on this measure were associated with the strategies they advocated for combating terrorism. The more participants believed terrorists could be persuaded by reasonable arguments, the more they advocated diplomacy over military action, $r(130) = .48, p < .0001$. The belief that terrorists could be persuaded by reasonable arguments mediated the effect of condition on preferences for diplomatic over militaristic approaches ($Z = 2.25, p = .02$).

As expected, our experimental manipulation did not influence participants' feelings toward terrorists. Participants reported similar feelings of negativity in both conditions ($F < 1$). It may be worth noting, however, that negative feelings towards terrorists were not entirely uniform and that negative feelings were associated with advocacy of militaristic approaches over diplomatic ones, $r(130) = .48, p < .0001$.

**DISCUSSION**

It is probably inevitable that people will disagree with the worldviews and actions of those who commit terrorist attacks against them. However, the present studies suggest that it is not disagreement alone that fuels people's preference for responding to terrorism with acts of military aggression. When participants were induced to view terrorists as irrational and biased, they endorsed unilateral militaristic responses. When they were induced to view terrorists as rational and objective, they endorsed diplomatic bilateral efforts.

We also found evidence for a mediator of this effect. Consistent with our conceptual analysis, we found that depictions of terrorists as rational versus irrational elicited the observed effect by influencing beliefs about whether terrorists could be persuaded via reasonable arguments. We also ruled out another possible mediator by showing that participants did not feel more positively toward terrorists after reading depictions of them as rational rather than irrational. Participants did not like rational terrorists more—they simply had more hope that rational terrorists would respond to logic. Another possible mediator (which we did not examine) involves whether our “irrational” depictions made terrorists seem more extreme and fervent and whether those qualities led participants to disfavor negotiation-oriented approaches. If this process occurred, it did so in addition to the pathway outlined in this research whereby our manipulations affected perceived terrorist rationality, which, in turn, affected attitudes about combating terrorism.

**Implications**

Our findings are relevant to considerations of public opinion about terrorism. The media regularly present the public with tales of terrorists and terrorist acts around the globe. When our participants read what they believed to be a genuine newspaper article about the terrorist mind, that article led them to advocate assassinations of terrorist leaders when it portrayed terrorists as irrational but to advocate negotiation with terrorist leaders when it portrayed terrorists as rational.

It is up to future research to examine other factors that might induce people to view terrorists as rational and objective versus irrational and biased. Such factors may include social context, personal experiences, and exposure to out-group members. Notably, political party and self-professed liberalism–conservatism were not significant predictors in this research. Also worthy of investigation are different aspects of perceived terrorist rationality. This research focused on perceptions of terrorists' decision-making processes. It would be interesting for future work to examine the consequences of perceptions of rationality regarding terrorists' goals and/or methods. Our conceptual analysis suggests that those who perceive terrorists' goals or methods as irrational might still be interested in negotiation, if they believe that terrorists' decision processes are amenable to logic and facts. However, it is likely that when we view others' goals and strategies as irrational, we will infer that the processes that led to them were also irrational. But, in those situations in which we instead attribute others' irrational goals to a lack of good information, or their irrational methods to failures of education, we may keep faith in their capacity for objective decision making.

Although this research concerns the problem of terrorism, it is perhaps worth noting our expectation that the effects of perceived bias on conflict-related attitudes will not be limited to that context. For example, whether couples choose to discuss their differences in therapy versus demand divorce may depend on whether they perceive their spouse as capable of viewing the relationship and its flaws in a rational and objective fashion. The fact that the present studies influenced attitudes toward something as grave as whether to bomb versus negotiate suggests that the observed effect may occur in a range of domains and for a range of dependent measures.

This research demonstrates the impact of depicting terrorists as biased versus rational. It is perhaps worth pointing out that those who perpetrate terrorist attacks may engage in similar debates about the bias versus the rationality of their “enemies.” If would-be terrorists come to view the minds of their opponents as rational and objective, perhaps they will be less likely to follow through with their acts of violence. And, to
the extent that terrorist leaders succeed in portraying their enemies as irrational and biased, they may find it easier to recruit public support for terrorist acts (and to recruit attackers to commit those acts).

CONCLUSION

This research suggests that whether we perceive terrorists as irrational fanatics or as rational actors is likely to have serious consequences. In the former case we may choose to attack, and in the latter case we may try diplomacy. It is important to note that such differences in the perception of terrorists do not simply arise from differences in who is doing the perceiving. Rather, we have shown that those perceptions are influenced by contextual factors such as media portrayals.

Indeed, Ehud Sprinzak, whose description of terrorists served to open this article, was prompted by the context of 9/11 to recant his assessment of terrorists as “political” and “rational” (2000, p. 73). He instead described these new attackers as “apolitical” and “megalomaniacal” (2001, p. 73). Not surprisingly, given the results of this research, this changed perception also led him to advocate a new approach to terrorism: preemptive military strikes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funds from Princeton University granted to Emily Pronin and Sarah Butsch provided financial support for this research. We thank Jack Fleming for research assistance. We thank Gary Bass for insightful comments about this research.

REFERENCES


