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Why We Have the Center for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict in Oxford

John, Lord Alderdice, FRCPsych
Center for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict

In 1963, in the middle of the Cold War, a center for scientific culture and learning was established in Erice, in Sicily. Named after the Italian physicist Ettore Majorana, it became the venue for regular scientific meetings and the establishment in 1973 of the World Federation of Scientists (WFS) by Antonino Zichichi, Isidor Isaac Rabi, and other leading physicists who were deeply concerned that their scientific discoveries were being used to develop technologies that threatened the continued existence of mankind as much as benefiting human well-being. The 1982 Erice Statement, and the series of International Seminars on Nuclear War held there, had a significant impact on reducing the danger of a planet-wide nuclear disaster and ultimately contributed to the end of the Cold War. In addition to addressing the nuclear question, the WFS identified fifteen classes of “Planetary Emergency” and began to organize to address the whole range of threats. Tens of thousands of scientists from at least 110 countries worldwide participated in meetings in Erice over succeeding years.

The issue of terrorism had been around in the thinking of WFS members over the years. In 1996 at the Twenty-First Session of the International Seminars on Nuclear War and Planetary Emergencies, Karl Rebane from Estonia presented a paper titled “High-Tech Terrorism as an Increasing Global Problem,” in which he identified the possibility that terrorism, which had long been a tactic of asymmetric warfare, would with some certainty espouse the power of chemical, nuclear, or biological weaponry in addition to the developing power of the Internet. In his recommendations for WFS, he pointed to the importance of international cooperation to mitigate the dangers of this emerging threat and proposed that

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WFS identify this as a Planetary Emergency and establish a group to address it. He also advised that issues of education, morality, faith, and both personal and collective responsibility would need to play a role in our response.

A Permanent Monitoring Panel on the Motivations for Terrorism

While the problems were identified in that paper, it was the events of 9/11 that triggered the holding by WFS of a special session in 2002 when it was agreed to establish the Permanent Monitoring Panel on Terrorism. Dick Garwin in an excellent paper at the Twenty-Seventh Session of the International Seminars on Nuclear War and Planetary Emergencies focused attention on a range of measures that could be undertaken to mitigate the terrorist threat, and he continued for many years to give leadership in this work. But almost immediately the new Permanent Monitoring Panel on Terrorism, chaired by Ahmad Kamal (for many years Pakistan's ambassador to the United Nations), ran into difficulties. While many scientists from the West wanted to focus on what could be done by way of security measures to mitigate the terrorist threat, most of those from the Muslim world wanted to concentrate on the root causes of the problem. Some of the members of the panel who knew me and my work on the psychological aspects of terrorism advised Kamal to invite me to join the panel. I attended the second meeting of the panel in Geneva in October 2004, where it was decided to identify separate strands for the discussions, including a group on social, cultural, and motivational aspects of terrorism under my chairmanship. The work of this group expanded over subsequent years and in 2007 it became the Permanent Monitoring Panel on the Motivations for Terrorism, sitting alongside and cooperating with the Permanent Monitoring Panel on the Mitigation of Terrorist Acts.

With the Motivations for Terrorism a specific challenge arose in applying the previous WFS approach to the nuclear problem. While the use of nuclear weapons was not universally accepted as morally legitimate, the main protagonists in the Cold War—the United States and the Soviet Union—regarded the possession of such weapons and their use in certain contexts (at the very least as a deterrent) to be morally defensible. Scientists in the field of nuclear physics were publicly and academically regarded by both sides for their expert knowledge. Their work benefited from communication with other scientists. They also acquired the kind of funding that could be made available only by governments or very large foundations. Even during that period of stand-off between the two superpowers, meetings between scientists from both sides were generally accepted (with some security reservations) as legitimate and

even necessary professional activities. These meetings provided an acceptable context for engagement between the two sides, and Erice was an excellent setting for such work.

From the start the work on terrorism has posed a different set of problems. Terrorism is a tactic of asymmetric warfare, generally adopted when there is a profound imbalance of power. Those who use the tactic generally do so because other methods of achieving the change they seek have been unsuccessful, and they have access to limited resources. The techniques of terrorism while sometimes sophisticated are not usually at the cutting edge of scientific enterprise. Those who undertake the engineering and operational work of terrorism are not high-level scientists as usually understood, and scientific events are not an obvious context for meeting them.

There is also a profound problem of legitimacy. While those who undertake terrorist attacks are aware that they are breaking the law, they see themselves as engaged in a war and believe they are justified by a higher moral authority to act in the service of the people whose cause they espouse. In the case of Islamic terrorists, they may in addition believe they are undertaking a religious duty of “jihad.” But those whom they are attacking, whether the direct victims or the targets of their pressure (usually governments), invariably see the terrorists behavior as criminal—a “scourge which must be eliminated.” Meetings with those who promote or engage in terrorism are not always regarded as legitimate activities, and indeed this is the official policy line of the United States and its allies in relation to Islamist groups that use terrorism.

The WFS/Erice model of scientific collaboration on the nuclear weapons issue has therefore been difficult to apply directly, in the content and membership of scientific discussions or even in having meetings that are regarded by all sides as legitimate. James Gilligan, however, many years ago proposed that societal violence should be studied as a public health problem rather than a legal or moral one and in the Permanent Monitoring Panel on Motivations for Terrorism we followed this approach, studying terrorism from the psychological and social anthropological points of view.

A New Approach Emerges

A significant number of scientific papers were written and published by members of the group, based on extensive research that involved meeting people and communities involved in or supportive of terrorism and conducting interview and polling research. The outcome of

that work cannot easily be summarized in a few sentences but the key findings are described in the following paragraphs.

Contrary to the widely held view, there is no indication that involvement in terrorism is a signifier of individual psychological or personality disorder, nor are social or economic disadvantages of the individual concerned a reliable indicator. The psychology of the leaders reflects in some interesting ways the psychology of the group, but it is at that level of “the psychology of the group” that the pathology is to be found. The disturbance seems to be related to the perceptions of humiliation, disrespect, shame, and a deep sense of unremitting unfairness that are felt and then transmitted through successive generations of the group. When more peaceful routes to their resolution are continually blocked, the rage that is generated, accompanied by the urge to redress the narcissistic wound, finds an outlet in violence and terrorism. More recent work points out the role of mimesis or contagion in the spread of the phenomenon (i.e., the “inspiration” of others and of the past may be more important for some individuals and small groups than the continued felt sense of current humiliation).

It also became clear that religious fundamentalism does not of itself lead to terrorism, and the direct connection being made between the two may not only be misguided but counterproductive.

We studied a number of long-term political conflicts where terrorism had been a feature and with financial assistance from the Lounsbery Foundation (United States) explored the contribution of problems of water, energy, and the environment in the wider Middle East to the spread of terrorism in that region. We also cooperated with the Strategic Foresight Group in Mumbai on taking forward this work in the field of water diplomacy—a program called “The Blue Peace.” Some other members established, initially in cooperation with Bahcesehir University in Istanbul, an International Dialogue Initiative to address the “large group” psychological problems of the relationships between the Muslim world and the West. Several members of the Permanent Monitoring Panel also met extensively in the Middle East with Palestinian and Israeli officials to explore how a process of engagement might be created using the insights coming out of our research, and many other such initiatives were undertaken.

The Need for a New Center

Up to this point we had been working from different academic institutions and meeting once a year in Erice, but the administrative problems of accessing funding led a small group of colleagues to establish a US company in 2008. It was called ARTIS Research and Risk Modeling (<http://artisinternational.org/>) and its purpose was to acquire the funding necessary to take forward direct field research on the motivations for terrorism. Substantial progress was made in accessing funds and conducting research, and a sister company, ARTIS (Europe) Ltd., was also incorporated in the United Kingdom. Despite these and other initiatives there were a number of challenges for the Permanent Monitoring Panel on Motivations for Terrorism, not only in persuading the governments to whom we had particular access (in Washington, DC, and London) to act on our findings but also in persuading significant numbers of our colleagues to come regularly to Erice, in a relatively remote part of Sicily, and to make once-yearly meetings a sufficient generator of momentum for our work.

When in 2012, the president of WFS, Antonino Zichichi, encouraged all of us to produce proposals for an ambitious new project for the twenty-first century (the New Manhattan Project), the Permanent Monitoring Panel on Motivations for Terrorism developed a paper with two alternative responses for the work of our panel—either developing a center based in Geneva and located at the World Laboratory at CERN or a center based at the University of Oxford, where three of our members already had research appointments at Harris Manchester College.

We were greatly encouraged by Ralph Waller, the principal of Harris Manchester College, and over the succeeding months with his enthusiastic backing we moved ahead with implementation of the second proposal, and so in addition to ARTIS (our research and risk analysis companies) we established the Center for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict (CRIC) at Harris Manchester College and with research links to the School of Anthropology and the Department of Politics and International Relations.

The Center for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict

CRIC was formally established at the college by a decision of the Governing Body of the College in 2013 to facilitate research, teaching and training, seminars and conferences, and direct engagement in situations of political violence and long-standing community conflict in various parts of the world.

I have described in some detail the origins of the CRIC because the principles developed through the WFS still inform the approach taken by the center. The key insistence is that theoretical advancement must be based on the evidence emerging from direct involvement with communities in conflict, and that resolving conflicts can be assisted by the thoughtful application of lessons learned from studying the experiences of other communities that have suffered similarly.

The name of the center may seem a little strange; it was not our purpose, however, to address the vast range of transient conflicts but specifically those situations where all attempts to resolve politically motivated violence had failed. This means addressing not only terrorism and communal violence but also their roots and connections in political radicalization, religious fundamentalism, and the long-term problems that exist over centuries between indigenous peoples and the incomers to their countries.

Multidisciplinary collaborations across the University of Oxford and internationally are an essential feature of our work, which is guided by the four Founding Fellows of CRIC—John Alderdice, Scott Atran, Richard Davis and Harvey Whitehouse—reporting to the Governing Body of the College and in certain research projects to the Department of Politics and International Relations and the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnology. There are a number of CRIC patrons, fellows, and associates appointed to help the work of the center, and at any time we usually have one or more Visiting Fellows in Oxford working with us.

Since its establishment in 2013 the CRIC has taken forward the four key elements of our work—research, teaching, conferences, and direct engagement.

We use our network to help and encourage colleagues in their research and publication efforts in collaboration with funders and colleagues in various countries.

We are keen to develop ways to transmit our understandings of conflict to the next generation. We have not yet established formal courses but provide supervision for individuals and small groups as well as ad hoc public lectures.

We have organized a series of conferences on a variety of subjects, including *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, *Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East*, *Water as a Source of Conflict and Cooperation in the Middle East*, *Dealing with Extremism*, *the Large-Group Psychology of Political Violence across Borders*, *Faith and Modernity from the Perspective of Religious Scholars in Iran and the United Kingdom*, and *the Evolution and Dissolution of Societies*.

These conferences are an important part of the way we try to take forward our understanding of the issues concerned and to involve ourselves in communities in long-term conflict. They are relatively small high-level, invitation-only meetings with twenty or thirty senior figures from various parts of the world where there is serious on-going, intractable conflict. They are often organized in conjunction with partner organizations such as Strategic Foresight Group, the Swiss Government's Development Agency, the Center for Democracy and Peace Building, and of course ARTIS.

We also continue to engage in visits to interview, conduct research, and develop our understanding in those countries where there is serious violence.

The CRIC is a very young institution, but already it is having an impact out of proportion to its size and modest resources. This is because the issues we are addressing have a heightened public profile and also because of the quality and leading-edge of some of our research. Our work can be followed through the CRIC page on the Harris Manchester College website – (www.hmc.ox.ac.uk) by going directly to our own website (<http://cric.hmc.ox.ac.uk>) or by contacting me at john.alderdice@hmc.ox.ac.uk.