

# SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

MODULE II: WHAT IS SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY?

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## SLIDE 1

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### Opening Credits

Music

## SLIDE 2

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### Social Identity Theory: Module II: What is Social Identity Theory?

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## SLIDE 3

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### Introduction

This module will provide you with a working definition of SIT and demonstrate its efficacy as a framework for understanding individual and group dynamics. When considered alongside the previous module, you should be able to see how SIT differs from past scholarly approaches to terrorism studies. Additionally, this module will prepare you for applying the language and framework of SIT to the phenomenon we refer to as “religious terrorism.” In Modules 3 and 4, we will use SIT to zero in on current issues confronting terrorism studies.

By the end of this module, you should be able to:

1. Define Social Identity Theory,
2. Discuss the effects of individual and group dynamics on an individual’s understanding of his or her identity,
3. Think critically about past and present approaches to terrorism studies, and

Discuss how Social Identity Theory can be helpful to analysts studying terrorism—in particular, religious terrorism.

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### Thinking About Groups

In order to talk about SIT, we must first ask some key questions about group mentality: for example, how can we explain the political, tactical and strategic choices made by individual movements and groups? How can we explain the differences in specific groups’ ideological emphasis, resilience and success? How are we to understand revolutionary commitment in

order to deal with it in its specific contexts? How can SIT provide more accurate analysis to decision-makers through a framework for rigorous critical thinking?

There is a preliminary caveat we must address: any wide-scale theorizing about the behaviors of individuals and groups in society has to be made through generalizations. This is simply our way of attempting to organize the infinity of experience and information being offered to us at any given moment; it should not be taken as infallible truth, but merely as useful ways of thinking about people and society.

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### What is a Group?

Let's begin with the basics: by defining what we mean by "group." For our purposes, a "group" is any given body of people who consider themselves so. Now, we can now make a few assumptions about groups and the individuals operating within them. For one, within every group bound together by a shared culture operate certain sets of social mechanisms, roles, institutions, values and symbols, all of which fundamentally condition its members' perception of the world and its challenges. Additionally, the members of each culture-group operate in accordance with norms and customs that guide their interactions with one another and with strangers. This might sound exotic at first, but a quick look at a person's associations: church, service groups, business associations, etc., will make it clear that an independent and sometimes interdependent social culture develops around a group.

Geert Hofstede, an influential Dutch social psychologist, delineated 5 variables used to characterize national cultures—these will be extremely helpful when thinking about how social and cultural influences can shape individual beliefs. They are as follows:

1. The respective significance of the individual and the group,
2. The differences in social roles between men and women,
3. The manner of dealing with inequality,
4. The degree of tolerance for the unknown, and
5. The trade-off between long and short-term gratification of needs.

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### The Individual and the Group

Now let's take a closer look at the first of these 5 variables—that every culture falls somewhere on the spectrum from pronounced individualism at one end to strong collectivism at the other. Individualist cultures include the industrialized North; for

example, the US and the UK. These cultures tend to emphasize interpersonal competition, individual achievement, enterprise, innovation and easy separation from kin and other groups. Though familiar to most of us, this type of culture is actually anomalous when looked at in relation to the majority of world cultures. In contrast, collectivist cultures—such as those you might find in the Mediterranean region and, in fact, most of the rest of the world—tend to prefer communal achievements, close ties with other in-group members (especially kin), providing protection in exchange for loyalty and a disinclination to innovate or diverge from established ways. As we stated earlier, collectivism is a far more common human trait than individualism.

So why is this aspect of cultural belief significant for our purposes? Because the attitudes within the ambient culture, as well as those within a specific group or movement, will have crucial effects on ideological choices, group longevity and *modus operandi*—their particular way of doing things. As those charged with formulating policy and practical measures in relation to insurgencies, we must seriously consider the cultural differences between themselves and the subjects of their investigation. If at all possible, we should also attain a reasonable familiarity with indigenous socio-cultural conditions through dialogue with members of the group under consideration, but more on that later. Perhaps most importantly—this becomes very important as we begin using SIT to look at sub-national violent groups and terrorist organizations—four specific collectivist and Mediterranean cultural markers emerge as important and helpful tools for framing analysis.

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### SIT in Groups

Now, why choose to belong to a group? Groups become a component of our own personal identity. Not only do they define who we are to others, but they also allow us to become part of something bigger than ourselves, connecting us with like-minded people and perhaps allowing us to feel like we're contributing to a cause we believe in. For an individual operating in a group, there are pros and cons—tradeoffs—to being in that position. For one, any values associated with the group have implications for the group members' personal feelings of self-worth. Accordingly, achievements will create a sense of pride, while a negative or valueless perception of the group will lead to personal shame. The extent of this is dependent on the level of group orientation present in the ambient culture—that is, how valued group identity is within the culture at large. If a group fails to add positive value to an individual's sense of who he or she is, there is no reason to remain a supporter of that group.

Now that we've defined the term "group," we can begin to explore Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT is an analytical tool that embeds the specific dynamics of group processes within the context of cultural differences. According to Henri Tajfel, the British social psychologist who first formulated the concept, social identity is a "part of an individual's self-concept" derived from "his or her knowledge of membership of a social group (or groups)," including the "value and emotional significance" the member gets from his or her membership to the group. In other words, being categorized as a member of certain groups comprises an important part of an individual's self-concept. According to SIT, a great deal of who we think we are is a result of which groups we belong to, and in joining or leaving a group, we can and do re-define who we are.

SIT is derived from these three components:

1. The cognitive component: the knowledge that one belongs to a group.
2. The evaluative component: the positive or negative connotation of the group and of one's membership of it.
3. The emotional component: the emotions that accompany the cognitive and evaluative components, such as pride in and love of one's own group, and hatred, respect, etc. for other groups.

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### Stereotyping

It is difficult to continue our discussion of group dynamics without addressing the concept of "stereotyping." Every moment, human beings are bombarded with a wealth of complex information concerning other people. We therefore have a need to simplify and systematize such data, and one way to achieve this is to generate schematic mental images of particular types of persons. These images are what we refer to as "stereotypes," and they help us perceive and interpret reality. Prior to the formulation of Social Identity Theory, stereotypes already had been the subject of intense study. Scholars believed that people are apt to characterize large human groups based on a few crude attributes. These are learnt from a young age and become more pronounced in a situation of conflict between groups. They also produce harmful consequences if expressed in a context of inter-group conflict because if they are crudely rather than closely defined, inaccurate decisions will be made and harmful prejudices will be exerted, likely intensifying the conflict. Despite this, it is impossible for humans to operate in the world without some use of stereotypes. Call to mind some familiar stereotypes: for example, scientists think critically, criminals are dangerous to associate with, and so forth.

Within the context of Social Identity Theory, stereotypes are reconceived as based on category membership. These stereotypes function according to the belief that all members

of a particular group have the same qualities, which creates a particular “in-group” in opposition to an “out-group.” A particular group member is assumed to be, or treated as, essentially identical to the other members of the group. When a specific social identity becomes salient, self-perception and conduct become stereotypical of the in-group, while perceptions of members of other groups become out-group stereotypical. This is particularly true when the in-group is in a clandestine setting—when the boundaries are more distinct between the in-group and out-group. The primary reason for such stereotyping is to incite group loyalty by identifying the common enemy. It has been demonstrated that merely categorizing people as belonging to one group or another produces social comparison, which in turn leads to group-oriented behavior patterns, especially forms of discrimination in favor of in-groups and against out-groups. Conflict of any kind, but especially armed struggle, ensures that stereotypes are further entrenched.

Within terrorism studies, groups that respond to insurgencies will inevitably subject the insurgents to attitudes and practices of stereotyping; the cultural differences and distance makes seeing nuance impractical. Thus, each group will regard the other through a conceptual apparatus that has tuned out a detailed grip on the actual nature and characteristics of the other in favor of a convenient and often grossly inaccurate stereotyped simplification. Not only does this practice obstruct the acquisition of accurate information necessary for the formulation of appropriate policy, but it also locks insurgents, governments and the international community into an unrelenting spiral of ignorance, suspicion and further violence.

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### Personal Identity

Now that we’ve discussed some of the basic concepts functioning within group dynamics, we need to turn our attention to the problem of personal identity. How do our personal identities work? How are they formed? What are they derived? The multiplicity of sources and competing forces at work can create tension and conflict within a person’s individual identity; for example, if I come from a family with a particularly conservative political background but my personal beliefs are more liberal or progressive, how do I negotiate my own identity within my family? Among other people who align themselves as “liberals”? Is it possible to separate myself as an individual outside of my beliefs? To understand an individual’s motivation, need to be able to identify their dominant sources of identification. How can we begin to do this? What are the limitations of this approach, or the approach of any other kind of general social theory? Only after acknowledging SIT’s limitations can it be a helpful tool for analysts.

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### Positive Social Identity

When applied to the study of terrorist groups and movements, SIT is significant because of its attendant models for understanding intergroup relations and conflict. The terrorist group is a source of social identity, hinging on positive value and emotional attachment. Sets of norms and standards define the views, beliefs and behaviors that are considered either acceptable or unacceptable within the group, thereby establishing, maintaining and enhancing group identity. These norms are set by group elites.

SIT suggests that groups have a fundamental need to provide their members with a positive social identity—to establish a positively-valued distinctiveness from other groups—in order to maintain their existence. When the identities and associated political interests of one group clash with another, the result can be political conflict, including insurgency and terrorist violence. If there is a negative association attributed to a certain group, some members may leave, creating instability and potentially crippling the group. Similarly, if an out-group's value is more positive than the in-group's, an individual has incentive to reevaluate his own membership and possibly defect to the out-group. Thus, the in-group is left even more vulnerable to disintegration.

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### Example: Lebanon

Let's illustrate the complexities of intergroup relations with a case study from Lebanon. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the sub-national groups Hizbullah and Amal were competing for the Lebanese Shi'a constituency. Hizbullah's popularity increased as it acquired better military capabilities, more charismatic leadership, political clout, regional standing and state support. Meanwhile, Amal's insufficiencies in these areas eroded their membership, while more and more people joined the ranks of Hizbullah. This is a clear illustration of a group's survival and the attainment of its ideological objectives depending on its ability to supply members with a positively valued social identity.

When a group's ability to make a positive contribution to its members' social identities is diminished, its viability is threatened. In such situations, two broad responses are open to group members who are discontented with their negative social identity: social mobility and social change. In social mobility, individuals leave the in-group to join the out-group. This is what we discussed in relation to Hizbullah and Amal, and it depends on "permeability of intergroup boundaries"—that is, how feasible it is for a member of one group to defect to a competing group. This is determined by external constraints: for

example, negative views of the former group and obstacles in the group to which access is sought. Due to the tightly knit and highly secretive nature of these groups as well as the disapproval and swift punishment that usually accompany acts of treason, social mobility is rare. The example of Hizbullah and Amal was in relation to both groups' social movements and political parties. Defection to and from their military wings was close to impossible. In the US we tend to see only the terrorist aspect of these organizations and thereby miss the involved social dynamics at work. US analysts need to maintain their perspective, but also widen the lens of their analytical understanding to account for the nuance involved in situations such as these. Social mobility means the option of defection, either of a few members or *en masse* is either difficult or unlikely. But the way in which these groups are viewed may change without the in-group seeing that movement. For instance, Lebanese Christians and Sunni populations may no longer consider Hizbullah as simply a Shi'a militia to be feared: they may also see them as a part of the government, as defenders against Israeli invasion and as providers of social services within the community. Meanwhile, observers from the US continue to focus on their identity as opposition, unable to see that ascribed identity transfer.

When social mobility is not permissible or desirable, the alternative response is "social change," a proactive collective effort to improve the positive values and emotions associated within the in-group. This response is common within groups and organizations in which the disapproval of dissidents is high and from which defection is difficult. This includes virtually every terrorist group. Social change can be brought about through social creativity, social competition or both—concepts that will be discussed next.

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### Social Creativity and Social Competition

Social creativity describes the in-group's effort to redefine and manipulate the premises of competition with the dominant out-group. It can entail any of the following three approaches:

1. Redefining the value of some existing comparison, turning a weakness into a strength. For example, "Our group may be small, but this allows us to be more stealthy than Group X."
2. Introducing the idea that true positive values are, by definition, the opposite of those espoused by the out-group. For example, "Our enemies are God's enemies, therefore Group X is not only evil but also ultimately doomed."
3. Comparing itself to another, worse-off out-group, thereby looking more favorable in comparison. For example, "Group X may be more powerful than us, but we are far better off than Group Y."



Social creativity, then, is largely a matter of indoctrinating group members with a new sense of their group's, and thereby their own, identity. All of this is done in order to protect and perhaps enhance group cohesion. Social creativity can be either a process of rationalizing adverse reality or of sincere spiritual or ideological "enlightenment"—when we're talking about religious terrorist groups, it most often is both. Social creativity can be understood as a mental and emotional mechanism that enables group members to hold on to their cause in the face of "objective" adversity. Rather than admitting that what one has struggled and killed for has turned out to be wrong and pointless, the group will further entrench itself in its rhetoric of righteousness.

In contrast, social competition refers to a subordinate group's effort to improve its actual social status in relation to the dominant group. This means intensifying the competitive relationship by engaging the out-group in direct conflict. Since each group's ability, or inability, to provide its members with positive value directly determines a group's cohesion and viability, they will struggle against negative comparison in order to maintain membership and avoid disintegration. Without members, there is no group, and without a group, there is no possibility of pursuing the group's ideological goals.

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### Patronage and Clientilism

Social anthropologists have examined several markers of social interaction in strongly group-oriented environments. Some of these markers include: patronage and clientilism, "challenge and response," and the notion of "limited good." Terrorist groups and other clandestine violent organizations that depend on group cohesion for their survival exhibit these traits in fine focus. These markers are closely intertwined, and only a close examination of all three can really shed light on the phenomenon as a whole.

Let's begin by defining the patron-client relationship. Patron-client relationships can only arise when separate groups in interaction with each other operate at unequal strength or status. What binds patrons and clients together is reciprocity—a sort of implicit, non-legal contractual obligation, unenforceable by any authority apart from one's sense of honor and shame. By means of this principle of reciprocity, the honorable person selects (or is selected by) another for a series of ongoing, unspecified acts of mutual support. While goal-oriented rational choice is without doubt an integral part of the patron-client relationship, goals and choices—and even rationality itself—is necessarily informed by the sociocultural norms and cues within the surrounding environment.

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### Challenge and Response

“Challenge and response” is a model for understanding the processes whereby groups and individuals create and maintain, or challenge and disrupt, patron-client relations. Some deeply ingrained cultural traits are:

- a. A strong sense of group identification (versus the individualism of North America and Western Europe).
- b. A strong sense of individual and collective honor, meaning that virtually all social interaction outside the immediate family is seen as a contest for honor.

The central cultural mechanism of “challenge-response” lies in public communication between individuals or groups that consider themselves to be the other’s social equals, or are vying for the same social status. According to Aristotle, “Individuals revolt in order that they may be equal, and equals that they may be superior. Such is the state of mind that creates revolutions.” Terrorism is a form of public communication whereby one group attempts to improve its standing in relation to another group, usually a government. It must be perceived, assessed and evaluated in order to function properly. Terrorism relies on the “public proclamation”—using violence as a message to damage the credibility and status of its adversary.

Challenge and response is comprised of 3 elements:

- c. Challenge: some action or statement on the part of the group.
- d. Perception: the perception of that action by the adversarial group and the public at large.
- e. Response/evaluation: a response by that group and the evaluation of the public at large. Failure or reluctance to act will still count as a response, and will be met either with public approval or disapproval.

Because it is chiefly a message to the public, an unsuccessful challenge can still promote approval or provoke disapproval of the public. This is why the public nature of challenge, perception, response and evaluation is critical. This dynamic is clearly demonstrated in terrorist targeting. Terrorist groups are too small and poorly funded to triumph through traditional military engagement. Instead, they seek to embarrass and insult their enemy into overreaction. By taking inappropriate countermeasures, the enemy is in danger of losing the hearts and minds of the people. Terrorist targets therefore tend to be highly symbolic or vulnerable, and an attack is meant to show the enemy’s inability to defend itself and its people.

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### The Social Value of Honor

Honor and its counterpart, shame, have a pivotal social value in strongly group-oriented environments. Honor is a socially acknowledged claim to worth and status, and can be either individual or collective; the honor associated with a group reflects on its members, and vice versa. In environments where honor is a central concern, there is a constant dialectic between the idealized norms of socially sanctioned speech and behavior and the way in which an individual or group seeks to reproduce those norms. In other words, codes of conduct, rules of engagement and acting in accordance with the ideologies and principles of the group become matters of honor. When a person perceives that his or her actions do, in fact, reproduce those idealized norms, he or she expects other members of society to acknowledge this fact. Such an acknowledgement is a grant of honor. As social scientist Bruce Malina writes,

“Honor as a pivotal value in a society implies a chosen way of conduct undertaken with a view to and because of entitlement to certain social treatment in return. Other people not only say that a person is honorable; they also treat that person in the way that honorable persons are treated.”

The social process whereby honor is acquired, challenged, protected or lost is the ‘challenge and response game’ because it hinges on public communication or competition between individuals or groups that are, or consider themselves to be, each others’ social equals. This interaction is necessarily public because honor is a socially acknowledged claim to status and all attempts to alter or maintain that status must be socially evaluated. It is important to note that even non-action will be socially interpreted as a kind of response to a challenge, meriting a grant or withdrawal of honor. Also key to this concept is the fact that physical space—one’s body, territory or property—is considered a symbolic repository of honor, and physical affronts and violence symbolize the breaking of social and personal or intergroup boundaries. Thus, acts such as sabotage, terrorism, or territorial occupation are not only physical or manifested actions, but symbolic “refus[als] to recognize...honor and prestige.” Such challenges require a response that seeks to evict or inflict damage on the intruder and reclaim lost goods, thereby restoring honor. Failure to redress the balance and restore the *status quo ante* may mean leaving one’s honor in a state of desecration, thus rendering oneself socially dishonored and dishonorable. On the other hand—and this is especially important when it comes to terrorist groups—the mere attempt to restore one’s honor, even if ultimately unsuccessful, may constitute the restoration of one’s honor, through the public perception and reassertion of oneself as a person or group of honor and integrity.

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### Colleague Contracts

Eastern Mediterranean patron-client relations, which are among the best studied, would be utterly unenforceable and practically impossible without a range of social norms and codes related to honor and shame. These relations, then, are based on a positive challenge within the challenge-response model. A gesture, petition, statement or gift may set the patron-client process in motion; thus, “there are no free gifts, just gifts which mark the initiation or continuance of an ongoing reciprocal relationship.” When patron-client ‘contracts’ are not stratified, but occur between individuals or groups with the same social status, one can refer to it as a “colleague contract.”

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### Limited Good

Using anthropological insight from studies of eastern Mediterranean communities, patronage and clientelism can be viewed as intimately connected to the idea of the “limited good.” Informed by the social realities of peasant society, this belief operates under the assumption that social, economic, and natural resources exist only in limited quantity and are always in short supply. Even as eastern Mediterranean societies have developed in terms of societal structures, modes of production, and so forth, certain social and material goods continue to exist only in finite quantities and are therefore subject to intense competition. In the Palestinian context, physical space—land—has not only been a limited good, it has also been invaded by an out-group. This challenge to national honor by means of invasion of physical space is thus a double challenge to in-group (Palestinian) honor. It is important to understand that honor is also considered to be of limited availability in the eastern Mediterranean. Within the competitive and comparative challenge-response model, the quest for honor is a zero-sum game—meaning your gain of honor is my loss, and vice versa.

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### Example: Challenge-Response

In order to demonstrate the challenge-response system in action, let’s look at another case study in religious terrorism: the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11. Al-Qa’ida’s operation against the U.S. illustrates the challenge-response model in several ways. First, the attack served as redress for the failure of al-Qa’ida’s 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. By

rectifying the mistakes of the 1993 attack, al-Qa'ida sought to regain its group's lost honor, and by striking back at the out-group that "invaded" Islamic physical space (in this case, Saudi Arabia) in connection with Desert Shield/Storm, al-Qa'ida made an attempt to impugn the honor of Muslims as a group overall. Additionally, the attack was not only physical—it was also a symbolic attack on U.S. financial and economic might. As the buildings also contained thousands of unprotected civilians, the attack also had the effect of creating a statement about the U.S. government's inability to protect its own citizens. And though the attacks seem to have gained little public support in the West and in the Islamic world at large, it still succeeded in provoking the U.S. to take widespread and unpopular counterterrorism measures. The resulting "War on Terror" we are all very familiar with serves as a back-and-forth between al-Qa'ida and the US, both seeking to communicate their respective messages to the public at large.

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### Maintaining Goodwill

The challenge and response model also offers insight into not only intergroup aggression, but also the mechanisms for creating and maintaining goodwill within a group. It describes the dynamics at play when terrorist groups approach potential patrons; likewise, it also describes when states or larger terrorist groups seek out smaller terrorist groups as clients. Patrons and clients operate in a symbiotic relationship: "clients" attach themselves to more powerful "patrons" either for ambition, protection or to extend a particular interest, while the "patron" protects and assists the group in exchange for sustaining the patron's political hegemony. This exchange can have serious implications for both patron and client, in terms of social identity, as it effects the public perception of both. It also affects internal social identity; for example, when members may be in disagreement about the benefits or drawbacks to aligning their group with another.

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### Example: Hizbullah and Iran

Let's look at a final case study in order to illustrate the complex realities of the patron-client relationship: Hizbullah and Iran. These groups are closely aligned in a patron-client relationship. As the patron, Iran supplies Hizbullah with finances, weapons and status. Hizbullah also benefits from its formal recognition by a powerful Middle Eastern state. As the client, Hizbullah supports Iran's state ideology, bolstering its regional standing and ensuring that the "Iranian angle" is always a concern in Israeli-Lebanese affairs. Additionally, gifts and favors are necessary to keep the relationship viable. Members on

either side of this relationship decide whether the relationship betters or worsens their social standing, while the public at large evaluates, and either approves or disapproves of the relationship.

Let's see this in action: after the July 2006 Israeli assault on Lebanese infrastructure, Iran supplied Hizbullah with several hundred million US dollars in order to facilitate reconstruction. In return, Hizbullah was expected to use the money to benefit not only itself, but also its patron in Tehran. By distributing its money through Hizbullah, Iran raised its local popularity in Lebanon. As a result, this act heightened Western concerns about the effectiveness of Iran's influence in the Middle East. Thus, the interaction between Hizbullah and Iran illustrates many of the key points we have learned in this discussion about patron-client relationships.

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### Conclusion

In conclusion, the framework provided by Social Identity Theory allows for a more nuanced, thorough, and dynamic reading of social psychology than previous scholarly approaches have. This is particularly significant for those engaged in terrorism studies, as a more informed, all-encompassing view of terrorist and other sub-national groups is crucial for the future of intelligence analysis and policy-making. We will not take a closer look at religious terrorism studies, tracing the history of religious terrorist groups and surveying the groups operating today—those that we may be familiar to us, and those we might find surprising. By keeping SIT in mind, we can ask more penetrating questions about these groups: how do they identify themselves? From what cultural contexts do they arise? And what are our own biases when examining them?

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### Closing Credits

Music