

## Articles

# Idiosyncratic Terrorism: Disaggregating an Undertheorized Concept

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### Abstract

*It is widely recognized that some terrorism is idiosyncratic, and indeed, some define lone-actor terrorism as inherently idiosyncratic. Yet the notion of idiosyncratic terrorism remains undefined and undertheorized. What exactly does it mean for terrorists to be idiosyncratic, and why does it matter? To disaggregate and further develop this undertheorized concept, this article identifies four dimensions of idiosyncrasy among terrorists, each of which can be divided into subtypes: idiosyncratic ideologies, tactics, strategic thinking, and motives. Empirical examples of each are provided for both lone-actor and group-based terrorism. In addition, five case studies of idiosyncratic terrorism are presented. Potential implications for further theoretical and empirical inquiries, and for counterterrorism policy, are explored.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism theory, ideology, idiosyncrasy, tactics, lone-actor terrorism, group-based terrorism

### Introduction

Terrorism researchers often remark, typically in passing, that a particular terrorist, terrorist group or terrorist attack is idiosyncratic.[1] Lone-actor terrorists, in particular, are frequently described as idiosyncratic in some way.[2] Yet what is meant by the term “idiosyncratic” varies widely, is rarely defined, and has not yet been subject to extended theoretical elaboration or empirical examination. What exactly does it mean for terrorists to be idiosyncratic, and why does it matter, in terms of terrorism theory and counterterrorism policy? This article’s preliminary answers to these questions help transcend the dichotomy between lone-actor and group-based terrorism, while developing conceptual building blocks useful for generating new hypotheses and developing terrorism theory.

This article identifies four dimensions of idiosyncrasy: idiosyncratic ideology, idiosyncratic motives, idiosyncratic tactics, and idiosyncratic strategic thinking. Each is also divided into distinct subtypes. This conceptual development helps correct misconceptions about idiosyncratic terrorism, such as the idea that it primarily applies to lone wolves and is mainly associated with mental illness.

More broadly, this article argues that idiosyncratic terrorism should not be written off as impossible to understand, as “black swan occurrences,” but should be taken seriously and examined in depth by researchers and practitioners alike.[3] Idiosyncrasy, in all its dimensions, is important both for analyzing the nature of modern terrorism and for devising effective counterterrorism measures. Moreover, clarifying terms and developing typologies are critical endeavors that can drive empirical agendas and enable theory building. After years of debates about lone wolves, it may be useful to take terrorism theory in a new direction, focused on characteristics of terrorism rather than the number of perpetrators involved.[4]

The importance of understanding idiosyncratic terrorism extends to policy as well, potentially informing counterterrorism practices from plot detection to deradicalization initiatives. In particular, this study’s highlighting of the bizarre beliefs, unusual motives, odd tactics, and hopelessly naïve strategic thinking of many terrorists could be helpful in preventing or reversing radicalization. This parallels Lankford’s attempts to delegitimize terrorism by arguing that group terrorists are often suicidal or mentally ill.[5]

The significance of idiosyncratic terrorism is illustrated by the fact that even the most bizarre, seemingly half-

baked ideology can motivate mass murders that inspire numerous copycats. The example of Elliot Rodger, whose manifesto preposterously contended that there is something inherently wrong with all women and they therefore deserve to die, is a disturbing case in point. His attack, which killed six in 2014, inspired several massacres, resulting in about 50 deaths so far. As argued below, strange ideologies such as Rodger's represent only one of four dimensions of idiosyncrasy: some terrorists espouse typical ideologies but are idiosyncratic in other respects.

After reviewing relevant literature, this article defines idiosyncratic terrorism, its four dimensions, and their sub-categories, while presenting examples of each for both lone-actor and group-based terrorism. In addition, five case studies are presented to provide further insight about idiosyncratic terrorism. The conclusion outlines several implications of idiosyncratic terrorism for future empirical work and counterterrorism policy.

### ***Previous Literature on Idiosyncratic Terrorism***

Researchers often mention that certain terrorists are idiosyncratic, but this term is typically undefined and its usage varies widely. For example, some observe that lone terrorists tend to have idiosyncratic ideologies, in terms of their substantive beliefs, while others label ideologies as idiosyncratic because they combine personal and political motives.[6] As described below, these are best understood as two separate dimensions of idiosyncrasy: ideological and motivational.

The term idiosyncratic has been used in several other ways that are not relevant to this article's argument. For example, Bakker and de Graaf describe lone wolves as "by definition, idiosyncratic," but by that they mean simply that the lone wolf category contains diverse phenomena.[7] By contrast, this article focuses on "idiosyncrasy" in the sense of strange or unusual characteristics, as clarified with more specificity below.

An early terrorism definition by Schmid and Jongman defined terrorism as acts committed for "idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons," thus including mass attacks by non-ideological psychotics.[8] Consistent with the trend toward defining terrorism as ideological, this sense of idiosyncratic terrorism is excluded from this study.

Indeed, contemporary studies often exclude attackers driven solely by psychological problems.[9] Yet when some ideology is present among psychologically disturbed offenders, there is a divergence of opinion. Turchie and Puckett argue that for true lone wolves, the primary objective is ideological, even if they have more personal motivations as well.[10] This article follows Spaaij's more inclusive terrorism definition, which only requires that a "broader political, ideological or religious cause... informs" the attack.[11]

Few studies have analyzed idiosyncratic terrorism in depth. Jeffrey Simon describes idiosyncratic lone wolves as terrorists whose "severe personality and psychological issues" really "explain their actions," not the cause they adopted.[12] Simon found that idiosyncratic terrorists tend to be single-issue terrorists, and are more dangerous when the perpetrator, like the Unabomber, is highly intelligent and lacks remorse.[13] Departing from Simon's framework, this article understands idiosyncratic terrorism not as a particular category of lone terrorists, but rather as characteristic shared by many lone and group terrorists.

Marc Sageman has briefly analyzed some idiosyncratic terrorists. Sageman identifies Russian nihilists as idiosyncratic, and observes that "mental disorder was a major contributor to" their violence.[14] Sageman notes that the "complete scorn for society" shared by French illegalists, Aum Shinrikyo and the Rajneeshees explains their "unprovoked violence." [15]

Jeffrey Kaplan has documented idiosyncratic features in several terrorist groups.[16] Kaplan defined "idiosyncratic sectarians" as type of white supremacist "whose structure more nearly approximates a cult... characterized by a single all-powerful charismatic leader... than a political or religious movement." [17] In the 1990s, Hoffman proposed that "idiosyncratic millenarian movements" may pose a greater threat than traditional terrorists.[18] Going further, building on Rapoport's four-wave theory of terrorism, Kaplan proposed a Fifth

Wave, based on utopian movements endeavoring to create a “lost ‘Golden Age’ or an entirely new world in a single generation.”[19] Examples include Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), the Janjaweed, and ISIS.

**Four Dimensions of Terrorist Idiosyncrasy**

Idiosyncrasy can be defined as an aspect of a terrorist perpetrator or attack that is unique, unusual, or unexpected, given the type of terrorism and time period. Terrorism that is somewhat innovative or creative is not idiosyncratic unless it is a significant departure from the norm or the common sense of the time. Idiosyncratic terrorism, in turn, can be defined as a violent attack motivated in some way by ideology, and which is idiosyncratic in at least one dimension. Some terrorists may only be idiosyncratic in one way, while others are idiosyncratic across all dimensions. Idiosyncrasy is not a binary, either/or concept, but a matter of degree: for each dimension, terrorists can range from not idiosyncratic at all to highly idiosyncratic.

These definitions are broad enough to encompass various meanings of idiosyncrasy, while avoiding inappropriate breadth by clarifying that a trait shared by most terrorists cannot be idiosyncratic, and that non-ideological violence would not qualify either. Table 1 provides examples of each dimension and its subtypes for both lone-actor and group-based terrorists, each of which are described below.

**Table 1: Dimensions and Subdimensions of Idiosyncratic Terrorism**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Subdimension</i>	<i>Lone Actor Example</i>	<i>Dyad/Group Example</i>
Ideology	Novel	Elliot Rodger	Aum Shinrikyo
	Hybrid	Andrew Joseph Stack III	DC Snipers
Motive	Psychological	Paul Ciancia	Long Island UFO Plot
	Personal/Political	Chris Dorner	Bundy family standoff
	Opportunistic/Impulsive	Joshua Cartwright	Joseph & Jerry Kane
Tactics	Novel or rare	James Lee	Rajneeshees
	Faux/simulated attacks	Jaromír Balda	PNFE*
Strategic thinking	Religious	David Copeland	ISIS (Islamic State)
	Wishful thinking	Brendon Tarrant	Galleanists
	Delusional	Pekka-Eric Auvinen	Manson Family

\* Parti Nationaliste Français et Européen

*Idiosyncratic Ideologies*

While ideology has been called “the most elusive concept in... social science,” it can be understood broadly as a set of normative beliefs about the world—the way it is and the way it should be.[20] When these beliefs are unusual or strange, the ideology is idiosyncratic. Ideologies can be idiosyncratic in two principal ways: by being novel and unusual, or by unconventionally fusing extant ideologies. Examples of *novel ideologies* include the “Incel” (“involuntary celibate”) ideology elaborated by Elliot Rodger, and Aum Shinrikyo’s doomsday prophecies. Idiosyncratic ideologies are not unique to disturbed individuals or obscure cults. As outlined in a case study below, ISIS is idiosyncratic in several respects.[21]

An example of *hybrid ideologies* includes the D.C. Snipers, who killed 17 people. Their ideology combined various influences, including the Nation of Islam, black nationalism, the film “The Matrix,” and Eastern religion. Andrew Joseph Stack III, who flew a plane into an IRS building, is a lone-actor example, since his manifesto (like those of anti-immigrant terrorists Brenton Tarrant and Patrick Crusius) mixed left- and right-wing themes. Terrorists’ ideological hybridization can be understood in terms of “cultic milieu” theory, which depicts a “generally supportive cultic milieu” that “is continually giving birth to new cults,” as seekers float between different nodes in the milieu and innovate beliefs.[22]

While lone terrorists are probably more likely to have idiosyncratic ideologies, such ideologies appear to be

frequent among group-based terrorists as well. For example, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an African group known for relying on kidnapped child soldiers, integrates tribal nationalism, Christianity, and its leader's religious visions.[23] Terrorism perpetrated by small groups (such as the Symbionese Liberation Army and the White Panther Party (see case studies below) have also involved idiosyncratic ideologies.

When perpetrators' beliefs are so bizarre that they resemble an assemblage of delusions rather than an ideology, it is a fair question whether their behavior qualifies as terrorism at all. The question of where to draw the line need not be resolved here. Yet mental disorders are not inherently disqualifying. One might assume John Ford and Joseph Mazzuchelli's scheme to use radium to poison Long Island officials (who, they believed, hid evidence of a UFO crash) arose solely from delusional thinking. However, the belief that authorities are concealing UFO evidence has many adherents, and can be understood as an ideology.

#### *Idiosyncratic Motives*

Motives and ideologies are often conflated, but should be analytically separated. As noted above, ideology describes a normative perspective for interpreting the world. Motives, by contrast, refer to specific motivations behind the attack, which may relate to ideology in any number of ways. For example, instead of simply wanting to intimidate people into acceding to their ideological demands (the assumption behind the US definition of terrorism), some terrorists' motives may be to express the ideology, to implement it, or to publicize it.[24] From Timothy McVeigh's writings, he apparently saw his attack as pure revenge for Waco and Ruby Ridge, rather than an attempt to coerce officials to adopt particular policies. This motive is not necessarily idiosyncratic, though it is somewhat at odds with terrorism's US legal definition. To the extent that the motives behind an attack are unusual, strange, or unexpected, the motives are idiosyncratic.

Many cases of idiosyncratic motives involve mixing personal and political motivations. One type of mixed motives is *psychologically influenced mixed motives*, in which the perpetrator intends the attack to advance an ideology, but simultaneously has a mental-illness-related motive. For example, a suicidal individual might decide to commit suicide in a way that will express their ideology. As Adam Lankford has argued, this may be true for many suicide terrorists.[25] Paul Ciancia's right-wing attack on airport security officers is another example. In addition, psychotic delusions or paranoia can motivate some attacks, along with an ideology. The UFO plot noted above provides one example (the main defendant was committed to an institution).

A second subtype can be termed *personal-political mixed motives*. These terrorists seek to express their ideology, but have additional objectives like personal vengeance. Christopher Dorner's manifesto suggests his 2013 attacks on police officers were meant primarily as personal revenge, while also indicating a desire to raise awareness about racism and police brutality.[26] Todd Shepard, who hoped his murder of a police officer would spark a revolution, was also avenging his girlfriend's killing by police. The Bundy family standoff in Nevada, involving an assortment of armed anti-government extremists, was motivated by their desire to intimidate authorities into returning confiscated cattle (a personal economic motive), in addition to their quixotic ambition to end federal control over grazing land. Moreover, Chechen female suicide bombers were largely motivated by recruits' desires to avenge murdered relatives, consistent with Chechen culture's "strong norm of revenge," though jihadi ideology also played a role.[27] While mixtures of personal and political motives are widely believed to characterize lone wolves, they may frequently appear among group terrorists as well.

A third subtype includes terrorists with *opportunistic/impulsive mixed motives*. Some US far-right extremists who killed police—including Joshua Cartwright and Richard Poplawski—did so in reaction to police visits regarding domestic disputes.[28] While they were likely influenced by their ideologies, it is possible their main motive was suicide or anger about a domestic argument. In fact, many far-right attacks involve personal motivations—such as killing police to avoid arrest—in addition to ideological motives.[29] These attacks often appear unplanned and impulsive, as in the cases of "sovereign citizens" (like Joe and Jerry Kane) who shoot officers during traffic stops. Absent manifestos or other evidence, perpetrators' motives are often unclear. Some murders by extremists might lack any ideological motivation, but as Singh suggests, "Violence is never totally idiosyncratic; it always says or expresses something." [30]

### *Idiosyncratic Tactics*

Sometimes, terrorists' ideologies may not be idiosyncratic, but their choice of tactics is decidedly strange. Idiosyncratic tactics can be defined as terrorist actions that are unusual or unexpected, given the time period and the terrorism type. Thus, using a tactic associated with another era or a different variety of terrorism would be idiosyncratic. Idiosyncratic tactics can be further divided into at least two categories: *novel or rare tactics* and *faux or simulated attacks*.

As an example of *novel or rare tactics*, James Lee, like many environmentalists, was deeply concerned about overpopulation and wildlife preservation. Yet his tactic for addressing these issues was somewhat bizarre: he took hostages at the Discovery Channel headquarters, in an attempt to force them to broadcast his views.[31] This was a tactic highly unusual for terrorists in general, at least in the current era, and unheard of for radical environmentalists.

In another example, Luke Helder wrote a manifesto discussing such diverse concepts as astral projection, marijuana legalization, and excessive government regulation.[32] Aside from being an example of a hybrid ideology, his tactic was particularly unique. He placed pipe bombs in mailboxes, arranged in several locations to make a "smiley face" on the map. It was also unexpected to use any tactic to promote astral projection, a New Age belief already probably shared by millions of people.

The largest act of bioterrorism in US history provides another example. The Rajneeshee cult's attempt to win a local election by placing salmonella in numerous restaurants' salad bars, thus disabling non-cult voters, is unique in modern terrorism. The victims survived, but the threat of mass casualties was real. Rajneeshee adherents later plotted to murder a federal prosecutor—a more conventional tactic, which underscores the threat idiosyncratic terrorists pose.[33]

Another subtype involves *faux (false flag) or simulated terrorist attacks*, meant to be perceived as an attack by a hated group. Such tactics are idiosyncratic, since they are quite rare, and are motivated by the atypical objective of tricking the government into oppressing those believed to be responsible. For example, anti-immigrant extremist Jaromír Balda disabled trains in a simulated jihadi attack near Prague.[34] In the 1990s, a neo-Nazi group (*Parti Nationaliste Français et Européen*) claiming to be a (nonexistent) militant Jewish organization attacked Arab targets, hoping to instigate Jewish-Arab conflict.[35]

A final possible subdimension, which is excluded from Table 1 due to definitional uncertainty, involves unclaimed attacks. While such attacks, which undermine terrorism's basic communicative function, may seem inherently idiosyncratic, research demonstrates that many terrorist attacks are actually unclaimed, often for strategic reasons.[36] Yet in some circumstances, perpetrators' failure to take responsibility may well be idiosyncratic. The Unabomber mailed bombs over a period of 17 years before publicly communicating his motives—a perplexing strategy for changing society through violence. Moreover, Joseph Paul Franklin, who once belonged to the cult-like American Nazi Party, committed numerous racially motivated murders, but never publicized his motives. Kaplan thus describes this as "failed terrorism." [37] Nevertheless, Franklin was the model for the main protagonist in *The Turner Diaries*, which inspired McVeigh and other far-right terrorists.

### *Idiosyncratic Strategic Thinking*

Idiosyncratic strategic thinking includes terrorists' unusual expectations about the causal effects of their attacks. To a degree, it is normal for terrorists to be unjustifiably optimistic about the chances their violence will have its desired effects. After all, research demonstrates that terrorists nearly always fail to achieve their strategic goals.[38] Yet any causal expectations that would appear, to an ordinary person, to be extremely unrealistic or unusual can be reasonably described as idiosyncratic, even if this means a significant proportion of all terrorists are idiosyncratic. (A trait shared by the majority of terrorists, by contrast, should not be considered idiosyncratic).

Maynard argues that many atrocities (such as genocide) are influenced by a “future-oriented moral fallacy” in which the “known moral harms in the present—the deaths of victims” are “outweighed by massive future goods which have not been discounted for their uncertainty.”[39] This “extraordinarily permissive logic” involves a “consequentialist calculus” in which “the confident assertion of huge benefits multiplied into the infinite future” justifies mass murder.[40] While previous research has noted the role of such consequentialist reasoning in political violence, these unrealistic causal expectations have rarely been analyzed by terrorism researchers.[41]

Abrahms and Lula demonstrate that one reason for terrorists’ excessive optimism is that terrorists make invalid historical analogies, especially to successful guerrilla campaigns, and incorrectly predict that terrorism against civilians will also succeed.[42] For example, Osama bin Laden appears to have believed the 9/11 attacks would prompt the US to exit the Middle East, similar to how such attacks succeeded in ending American intervention in Lebanon and Somalia.

Yet this cannot explain all terrorists’ unrealistic beliefs about their success. A century earlier, many anarchists thought assassinating politicians would spark a total revolution against capitalism and the state, despite any historical precedent for such a causal sequence, and despite the fact that they soon had considerable evidence assassinations had no such effect. Such magical thinking about the causal power of violence also characterizes the work of some radical philosophers, such as Georges Sorel.[43]

There are three main types of idiosyncratic strategic thinking: *religious* (based on unusual religious beliefs), *wishful thinking* (resulting from the desire to believe their goals are attainable), and *delusional* (based on a distorted understanding of reality).

First, some are based on *religious* beliefs, such as ISIS’s conviction that terrorism will spark a ground war against the West that will usher in the apocalypse, or Aum Shinrikyo’s doomsday prophecies. David Copeland, who believed he had been chosen by God to commit bomb attacks that would trigger a race war in the UK, is a lone-actor example, though he could also illustrate delusional thinking.[44]

Second, *wishful thinking* explains many terrorists’ idiosyncratic strategic thinking. Psychological studies have shown that the optimism bias—the tendency to overestimate one’s likelihood of success—is pervasive among ordinary people.[45] Yet wishful thinking should be even stronger among radicals. Given their desire for dramatic social change, to avoid hopelessness they have every incentive to believe victory is within grasp and achievable through some concrete action. Among nonreligious terrorists, this subtype may be most common. The idea that a single massacre will somehow usher in a massive race war—seemingly a common neo-Nazi belief, and the specific motivation behind Dylann Roof’s mass shooting—is a prominent example.[46]

The third subtype, *delusional strategic thinking*, involves evident influences from mental illness. One possible example is Pekka-Eric Auvinen, who implausibly saw his school shooting as the harbinger of an international social-Darwinist revolution by “intelligent people” against everyone else.[47] (Though most school shootings are nonideological, studies show that some have strong ideological motives and thus qualify as terrorism).[48] The iconic serial killer Charles Manson represents an even clearer example of this subtype. Manson and his followers were terrorists, because their murders were meant to trigger an apocalyptic race war.[49] Manson believed in an incredible causal sequence: his group’s killings of whites would be perceived as being committed by blacks, thus prompting reprisal killings of blacks by whites, which would lead to racist and non-racist whites killing each other until whites were virtually eliminated. This, in turn, would somehow allow Manson’s cult to rule society. (Manson later claimed that this was untrue and his group was instead focused on justice for “ATWA” (Air, Trees, Water, and Animals), but this appears to be an attempt at personal reinvention).

One might think that such fanciful thinking about causality would be confined to those, like Manson, who were clearly out of touch with reality. However, New Zealand mosque attacker Brenton Tarrant, who shows no sign of psychosis, appeared to believe the most fantastical chain of events would result from his shooting: it would somehow cause the US, thousands of miles away, to adopt such severe gun control policies that right-wing extremists would rise up, starting a civil war in which they would ultimately triumph.[50] While Tarrant’s ideology, which resembled Breivik’s, was not highly idiosyncratic, his strategic thinking surely was.

In the case of anti-government extremists Jerad and Amanda Miller, who killed two officers and a civilian in Las Vegas in 2014, there was nothing particularly unusual about their ideology, motive, or tactics. The only idiosyncratic element was their strategic thinking—they seemed to believe that their attack would spark an anti-government revolution. Their writings do not provide insight into why they believed such an unlikely result would follow. Another dyad, the D.C. Snipers, should have realized it was impossible to leverage their shootings to extort millions from the government to finance a utopian community in Canada, as they hoped. Either psychological disturbance, wishful thinking, or both could explain such cases. As suggested above, a group example of wishful thinking could include the US-based Galleanist anarchists of the interwar period, who quite implausibly believed that assassinations and bombings would trigger a total revolution.

Stephen Paddock, the Las Vegas mass murderer who killed 58 in 2017, may have been inspired by idiosyncratic cause-and-effect reasoning. Investigations revealed he was a classic right-wing extremist, obsessed with gun ownership rights, conspiracy theories, and the sieges at Waco and Ruby Ridge.[51] While his motivation is technically unknown, some information points toward an ideological motivation with idiosyncratic strategic thinking. Paddock said shortly before the shooting that “Somebody has to wake up the American public and get them to arm themselves,” adding ominously that, “Sometimes sacrifices have to be made.”[52] An epic mass shooting, in his mind, might have been just the thing to accomplish this task.

As another example, Anders Breivik believed his more moderate fellow travelers would be persecuted due to his attack and radicalize in response.[53] There is no indication this occurred, and it is hard to see why this would seem more likely than any number of other alternative causal sequences. The narcissistic Breivik probably believed himself to be playing three-dimensional chess, so to speak, when in reality he was simply being foolish and deceiving himself.

Highlighting the fact that terrorists often have seemingly delusional expectations about their attacks’ causal impacts may dissuade radicalized individuals from committing attacks, or otherwise aid in deradicalization. Since terrorism is above all “a perception game,” shifting the framing of terrorists from stealthy “lone wolves” or brilliant “masterminds” to hopelessly unrealistic and naïve dupes may have a salutary effect.[54] Even deeply radicalized individuals may rethink their involvement upon realizing that likeminded terrorists often have indefensibly bizarre expectations regarding the effects of their attacks.

### ***Case Studies of Idiosyncratic Terrorism***

Five brief case studies, which encompass various ideological motivations, are described here to provide further insight on the nature of idiosyncratic terrorism. This parallels Spaaij’s approach in his influential article on the “enigma of lone wolf terrorism,” which used five diverse case studies to illustrate “the main features and patterns” of a broad terrorism category.[55] For each case study, perpetrators are evaluated for idiosyncrasy in each of the four dimensions. The likely sources of their idiosyncrasies are discussed as well. Results are summarized in Table 2.

#### *The White Panther Party (1967/68–70)*

The White Panther Party (WPP) was a New Left group linked to at least two bombings. The WPP’s ideology was idiosyncratic in that it attempted to meld the ideas of Black Panther Party (whose program the WPP endorsed in its manifesto) with a more radical, anarchistic ideology opposed to capitalism and the state. It espoused a puerile anarchism (“Everything is free for everybody. Money sucks. Leaders suck”), while awkwardly fashioning sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll into a political program (“Our program of rock and roll, dope and f\*\*\*ing in the streets...”).

Moreover, their manifesto was laced with drug-fueled, surrealistic stream-of-consciousness statements, like “We are LSD driven total maniacs of the universe” and “a generation of visionary maniac white mother\*\*\*\*er country dope fiend rock and roll freaks who are ready to get down and kick out the jams — ALL THE JAMS — break everything loose and free everybody from their very real and imaginary prisons.” Despite similarities

with groups like the Yippies, the WPP were unique in their imagined alliance with the Black Panthers and their advocacy of terrorism. (“But we will use guns if we have to—we will do anything—if we have to. We have no illusions”). In both respects, they presaged the Weather Underground, which was founded in 1969. WPP members were charged with bombing a CIA recruiting station in 1968, and with firebombing an army draft office in 1970. The WPP’s tactics, motives, and strategic thinking do not appear idiosyncratic.

The source of the WPP’s idiosyncratic ideology seems to be psychedelic drugs. In fact, WPP founder John Sinclair later attributed the rise of revolutionary 1960s activism to LSD. He said the drug prompted “a messianic feeling of love, of brotherhood,” a “tremendously inspiring” feeling that “this would alter everything,” and they “were going to take over the world.”[56] He added, “This was the general belief. It was the LSD...Acid was amping everything up, driving everything into greater and greater frenzy...We thought at the time that as a result of our LSD-inspired activities great things would happen. And, of course, it didn’t.”[57]

#### *Symbionese Liberation Army (1973–1975)*

The Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) was a short-lived, but high-profile, terrorist group, known above all for kidnapping heiress Patricia Hearst. Like some contemporaries, the SLA was inspired by Maoism and anti-imperialism. Yet its ideology contained several peculiar elements likely arising from its leader Donald DeFreeze’s mental illness. For example, the SLA’s first major action, assassinating Marcus Foster, a black school superintendent, arose from DeFreeze’s paranoid, unsubstantiated belief that Foster was a CIA agent.[58] Other violent radicals never accepted the Foster assassination, which baffled them. Given the lack of any evidence for their suspicions, this qualifies as an idiosyncratic tactic.

Their ideology featured delusional conspiracy theories, such as their belief that authorities were planning on murdering millions of Americans in the immediate future. As one communique stated, “warn black and poor people that they are about to be murdered down to the last man, woman, and child” by the “corporate state.”[59] Even individuals who later joined the SLA complained that the group’s publicly communicated ideology had made no sense.

In the same audio message, DeFreeze declared, “All corporate enemies of the people will be shot on sight at any time and at any place. This order is permanent, until... all enemy forces have either surrendered or been destroyed.”[60] This clearly directed sympathizers to immediately kill any policemen or other government official. Indeed, members were obsessed with killing police, often daydreaming about high-casualty shootouts. Before a bank robbery, one member “rub[bed] his hands together” excitedly, saying “Oh, I hope they come...I want to kill some pigs... yes, I want to kill some pigs.”[61] Their fervent desire to murder all their enemies was highly unusual for militants of the time.

The Hearst kidnapping was also idiosyncratic, since atypically, they had no plan for negotiating her release. Their demand that Hearst’s father donate millions of dollars in “quality food” to the poor was conceived as a mere prelude to the “real” negotiations, which never transpired. They may have hoped to exchange Hearst for imprisoned members, but this idea went nowhere.

Their strategic thinking was idiosyncratic as well. Members were overjoyed after releasing one communique, since they “truly believed, as they repeatedly told each other, that surely this message” would “rally the people to the SLA cause.”[62] (Their statement “declared revolutionary war” against the “fascist military-corporate state” and invited “robbers, pimps... drug addicts[and] prostitutes” to join them)[63] Oddly enough, they expected their bank robbery to “rally *the people* to our side...the oppressed masses would be heartened to join in the fight... The revolution, led by the SLA, was on its way.”[64] Perhaps most strangely, DeFreeze “really believed that the government... would soon declare martial law” in response to the SLA, and then “blacks and poor people would rise up” and “spark the people’s revolution.”[65]

The group’s atmosphere was cult-like, centered around DeFreeze, who was revered as a prophet despite his near-constant drinking, his strange pronouncements, and his periodic groping of female members.[66] For example, DeFreeze once proclaimed, in a “subdued, mystical tone of voice” that “I really am a prophet. I am

here on earth to lead the people.”[67] DeFreeze was known as Cinque Mtume (“Fifth Prophet”), the “General Field Marshal” of the “United Federated Forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army.” Perhaps because the SLA’s white members believed only black or other “Third World” people could lead the revolution, they accepted him as their absolute leader, following his whims without question.

Apart from assassinating Foster and kidnapping (and sexually assaulting) Hearst, the SLA’s major crimes included bank robberies, which caused the death of one customer, and several bombings. After training for “search and destroy missions” to “shoot down and kill policemen” in Los Angeles, most members died during a shootout with police.[68] The remaining few returned to San Francisco, where they committed bombings, and released a communique lauding DeFreeze as a “beautiful Black genius, revolutionary warrior”, and imploring “White Amerikkkans” to ignore the “oinking” of the “cringing pigs” and join the “war of the flea” against the “ruling class and all its pig agents.”[69] They were arrested months later.

The main source of the SLA’s idiosyncrasies was probably its leader’s mental illness. A pre-SLA probation report described DeFreeze as a “a schizoid personality with strong schizophrenic potential” and “a fascination with firearms and explosives.”[70] This example illustrates that it is not only lone wolves who are influenced by mental illness. The presence of a charismatic leader can also contribute to a group’s eccentricities.

#### *Atomwaffen Division* (2015–Present)

This neo-Nazi network has cells in the US and several European countries. Members have been involved in several murders and terrorist plots. Atomwaffen’s ideology is extremely bizarre even by far-right standards. Guided by neo-Nazi James Mason, it espouses a syncretistic mix of Nazi ideology and occult beliefs, including the near-worship of Charles Manson. The group’s influences include the neo-Nazi Satanic group Order of the Nine Angles, which encourages human sacrifice.

Though Nazi occultism has a long history,[71] Atomwaffen’s ideology merits the idiosyncratic label, as any group revering a serial-killer cult leader and fashioning its own religion borrowing from Hinduism and black magic is certainly bizarre. For example, this quotation is from one Atomwaffen-linked group:

“Through the Racial Holy War, the Last Battalion consisting of Charles Manson, George Lincoln Rockwell and other Aryan heroes, and the New Reich shall return to Earth... achieving Endsieg and Total Aryan Victory. Kalki shall bring us out of the Kali Yuga and into the Satya Yuga, and all race traitors and race defilers shall be burned in Holy Fire under Kalki’s wrathful gaze.”[72]

The reference to Kalki, a Hindu apocalyptic figure, reflects the influence of Savitri Devi, who deified Hitler as an avatar of Vishnu and reinterpreted Kalki as Hitler-like. In Internet “memes,” members describe themselves as “Agents of Kalki” and proclaim that “Soldiers of God Never Die”, accompanied by the “black sun” symbol of Nazi esotericism.

Members are fervent adherents of accelerationism, the idea—promoted by Mason’s book *Siege*—that racist violence can destabilize society and ignite a race war. This “magical thinking,” as Kaplan puts it, qualifies as idiosyncratic strategic thinking.[73] Described as “a long string of essays celebrating murder and chaos in the name of white supremacy,” *Siege* is reportedly required reading for Atomwaffen members, who regard it as “something akin to divine revelation.”[74] Mason, a convicted pedophile, was a marginal figure in the neo-Nazi cultic milieu before Atomwaffen rediscovered his teachings.

Six deaths have been tied to Atomwaffen so far. One member murdered a gay Jewish college student, an act praised by other members. Another member, Nicholas Giampa, killed his girlfriend’s parents after they disapproved of their relationship—an idiosyncratic mixed-motive attack, assuming ideology played a role. Members released at least two “memes” celebrating Giampa’s murders. Member Timothy Wilson plotted to blow up a hospital, before dying in a shootout with the FBI.[75]

Strangely enough, another member, Devon Arthurs, converted to Islam, describing himself as a “Salafi National Socialist”, and murdered two roommates (also Atomwaffen members). He told police he killed them because

they taunted him for his faith, and to send a message to those who disrespect Islam, while also claiming he prevented his roommates' terrorist attacks. Leaving aside the question of whether this counts as terrorism, or the perhaps thornier question of how to categorize it, this illustrates the unexpected ideological combinations and unpredictable pathways to violence among idiosyncratic terrorists. Ironically, Brandon Russell, their cell's leader (another roommate), had celebrated jihadi violence as a model for Atomwaffen.

Some potential attacks by members appear to have been narrowly thwarted. Russell was found with bomb-making components, including radioactive elements, and was later arrested with semiautomatic weapons, body armor, and a thousand rounds of ammunition. When members Aiden Bruce-Umbaugh and Kaleb Cole were arrested, they were armed, wearing tactical gear and had thousands of bullets. Authorities believe their arrest prevented an imminent mass shooting.

Several other members were suspected of preparing for attacks. To illustrate, member Jarrett Smith, a US Army soldier obsessed with "anti-cosmic" Satanism, was arrested on explosives charges after plotting assassinations. [76] Three members planning a mass shooting were arrested for weapon offenses and for manufacturing the hallucinogen DMT. They are not the only members enamored of psychedelics. Another member, Andrew Thomasberg, calling himself a "psychedelic Nazi," claimed "There's nothing more Aryan than entheogenic drug use." Thomasberg revered far-right terrorists as "saints" and was planning an attack before his arrest.[77] In 2020, the FBI simultaneously arrested several senior members in various states for "swatting" threats against journalists, among other charges.

Members of the Atomwaffen affiliates Feuerkrieg Division and Sonnenkrieg Division carried out a bombing in Lithuania, and were arrested for planning attacks and other terrorist offenses in Latvia, the UK, and elsewhere. One member, described by a UK judge as a "deeply entrenched neo-Nazi with an interest in Satanism and occult practices", was arrested for possessing bomb-making manuals, and had been planning an attack.[78] Members were also investigated for raping a female member and carving swastikas and occult symbols into her skin.[79]

The primary source of Atomwaffen's idiosyncrasies (which include idiosyncratic ideology, motives, and strategic thinking) is neo-Nazi esotericism. Some of its idiosyncratic features, such as apocalypticism, may indicate a greater risk of violence than can be found in other far-right groups.

#### *Incel Terrorism (2014 – Present)*

The Incel movement is a virulently misogynistic Internet subculture that has led to about 50 homicide deaths since its founding. While the term "involuntary celibate" arose in the 1990s and had no violent connotation, Elliot Rodger turned it into a terrorist ideology rooted in the bizarre idea that women were fundamentally flawed and deserved death.

In his book-length manifesto, Rodger described his rationale for a massacre of women, his so-called "Day of Retribution." Since women's rejection of him is a "declaration of war," he declares a war against women that "will result in their complete and utter annihilation," causing a "blow" to his "enemies... so catastrophic it will redefine the very essence of human nature.[80] He also fantasized about torturing and killing "good-looking men" who have "pleasurable sex lives while I've had to suffer." [81]

Rodger displayed clear signs of narcissism, with messianic, nearly apocalyptic features:

I am Elliot Rodger... Magnificent, glorious, supreme, eminent... Divine! I am the closest thing there is to a living god. Humanity is a disgusting, depraved, and evil species. It is my purpose to punish them all. I will purify the world of everything that is wrong with it.[82]

In his "ultimate and perfect ideology of... a fair and pure world," all women should be "quarantined" in "concentration camps," where he could "gleefully watch them die," though some would be kept alive and artificially inseminated to perpetuate humanity.[83]

On his "Day of Retribution," Rodger stabbed three college students to death, shot and killed two sorority

members and one male college student, and attempted to run people over. He committed suicide afterwards, as announced and planned in his manifesto.

An Internet subculture of “Incels” subsequently formed in which Rodger was lauded as a “saint.” Several related murders ensued. These include Christopher Harper-Mercer’s mass shooting in Oregon in 2015, which killed nine people; a murder by Sheldon Bentley in Canada in 2016; William Atchison’s double murder in New Mexico in 2017; Scott Beierle’s 2018 murder of two women in a Florida yoga studio; and Nicholas Cruz’s murder of 17 people in Florida in 2018. In an Internet post, Cruz stated that “Elliot Rodger will not be forgotten,” and Beierle posted numerous videos with Incel content. Moreover, Alek Minassian killed 10 pedestrians in a 2018 vehicle attack in Toronto, after tweeting, “the Incel Rebellion has already begun” and “We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!”—that is, popular, sexually active men and women. He continued: “All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” In 2019, two Incel-motivated mass shootings, by Christopher Cleary and Bryan Clyde, were thwarted by authorities.

While some perpetrators had several ideological influences (for example, Harper-Mercer’s manifesto emphasizes Satanism and racism), Incel ideology was the primary motive in Minassian’s and Beierle’s attacks. Personal/political or psychological mixed motives appear typical of Incel attackers. Rodger’s mental disorders, possibly including psychosis, psychopathy and narcissism, presumably explain the emergence of this ideology.[84]

#### *Islamic State (ISIS) (2014–Present)*

Some may be reluctant to accept the categorization of ISIS as idiosyncratic because jihadi ideology is widespread, or due to the group’s historic successes. Yet success is by no means mutually exclusive with idiosyncrasies. (The Rajneeshee cult, which was surely idiosyncratic, had thousands of followers at its peak) Moreover, although ISIS shares beliefs with other jihadists, its ideology is idiosyncratic in several important respects.

First, ISIS took the doctrine of *takfir*, or excommunication, to the furthest possible extreme, so that essentially, any Muslim who is not an ISIS member or supporter could be killed on the spot. Indeed, there have been reports of ISIS summarily executing people during traffic stops because they were suspected of being Shiites. This is a dramatic departure from Al Qaeda, which applied *takfir* only against the Saudi government, and refrained from violence against minority Islamic sects. Moreover, the doctrine of *takfir* has been “seldom used in Islamic history.”[85] In effect, ISIS took a doctrine with no practical application for most of history, and interpreted it to justify killing nearly anyone in the world.

ISIS’s second idiosyncrasy relates to its heavy reliance on Dhahirism, an obscure school of Islamic jurisprudence considered so rare many Muslims believed it to be extinct.[86] Third, ISIS’s “unilateral, contested declaration of a caliphate” is unthinkable in traditional Islam.[87] Fourth, ISIS’s apocalyptic focus is highly unique even for jihadists. Members truly believe their current wave of violence will somehow trigger the end of the world.[88] (As noted above, this qualifies as idiosyncratic strategic thinking).

Fifth, as Kaplan and Costa observe, their apocalyptic fervor predictably unleashed antinomian currents “freeing them from the normal constraints of Islamic law and simple human decency.”[89] This wide-ranging abrogation of Islamic law includes not only a “literal declaration of the genocide of all Muslims... save for those who follow the teachings of Al-Baghdadi”, but also “forced conversion, sexual servitude... and mass executions.”[90]

Perhaps because of ISIS’s unique acts of brutality (which themselves qualify as idiosyncratic tactics), ISIS attracted many foreign fighters and lone wolves with psychological mixed motives, who were suicidal or delusional.[91] ISIS thus appears idiosyncratic across all four dimensions.

**Table 2. Case Studies of Idiosyncratic Terrorism**

	Terrorism Type	Dimensions of Idiosyncrasy	Source of Idiosyncrasies	Fatalities Victims (+Perpetrators)	Other Terrorist Offenses
White Panther Party	Group-based	Ideology	Psychedelic drugs	0	Bombings
Symbionese Liberation Army	Group-based	Ideology, Tactics, Strategic Thinking	Mental illness of leader	2 (+6)	Bombings and robberies
Atomwaffen Division	Group-based, Lone-actor	Ideology, Motive, Strategic Thinking	Occult influences	5 (+1)	Bombings and murder plots
“Incel” Terrorism	Lone-actor	Ideology, Motive	Mental illness of founder	47 (+4)	Mass murder plots
Islamic State (ISIS)	Group-based, Lone-actor	Ideology, Tactics, Motives, Strategic Thinking	Apocalyptic antinomianism	Thousands	Rape, slavery, torture, genocide

*Conclusions from the Case Studies*

Three preliminary conclusions emerge from the case studies. First, although mental illness is sometimes the primary influence, idiosyncrasy has other sources as well, including odd religious innovations and drug use. In addition to the role of hallucinogens in the WPP and Atomwaffen, further examples include Aum Shinrikyo’s manufacturing of LSD (often given to members surreptitiously) and Charles Manson’s obsessive psychedelic use. Moreover, the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, an LSD cult, paid the Weather Underground \$25,000 to free psychedelic promoter Timothy Leary from prison. Leary subsequently released a pro-terrorist manifesto, saying, “Arm yourself and shoot to live... To shoot a genocidal robot policeman in the defense of life is a sacred act.”[92] Other factors, such as exceptional creativity, eccentric personalities, or subclinical psychopathic or psychotic traits (which have been shown to predict radical beliefs), also probably generate idiosyncrasies.[93]

Second, mental illness can be a primary influence on group terrorism, as illustrated by the SLA. Another example is the New World Liberation Front (NWLF). Perhaps the most prolific terrorist cell in US history, the NWLF committed 70 bombings against corporate and government targets in the mid-1970s, while releasing communiques about social programs, feminism, and even Jewish conspiracies—an idiosyncratic topic for far-left terrorists, to be sure. The cell consisted of Ronald Huffman and his girlfriend Maureen Minton (who ran a marijuana farm together), and possibly others as well. After years of bombings, Huffman murdered Minton with an axe, allegedly believing her to be possessed by a “demon dog,” and for some reason removed part of her brain, which was in his possession when he was arrested hours later.[94] The NWLF often praised the SLA, and the SLA carried out a bombing in its name.

Third, a cultish atmosphere and apocalyptic orientation may often be found among idiosyncratic terrorists, as in Kaplan’s Fifth Wave terrorism, but this is not always the case. Idiosyncratic features are also present in groups without these characteristics, such as the WPP and Incels.

**Conclusion: The Importance of Idiosyncratic Terrorism**

As argued above, idiosyncrasy can be understood as a characteristic of terrorism that exists in four dimensions, each of which has recognizable subtypes. This preliminary theorization, which should be refined through future research, advances terrorism studies by showing that an aspect of terrorism commonly seen as unexplainable can in fact be analytically disaggregated, with several implications for research and policy.

*Implications for Future Research and Theoretical Development*

Typologies are valued for their potential to “discover new relationships...to generate hypotheses,” to spur “the development of theories, and to identify areas for investigation”[95] This article contributes toward these goals by shedding light on the relationship between charisma, mental illness, drugs and violence; suggesting several potential hypotheses; facilitating theory-building by providing conceptual building blocks applicable to group and solo terrorists alike; and identifying idiosyncrasy in all its dimensions as a new area for empirical investigation and theoretical development.

Based on the examples and case studies above, preliminary generalizations about idiosyncratic terrorism, which can be developed into more specific hypotheses for future research, include the following:

- 1) idiosyncrasies are frequently found among group-based terrorists, even if lone terrorists are more likely to be idiosyncratic;
- 2) idiosyncratic group-based terrorists often have charismatic leadership and/or apocalyptic beliefs;
- 3) idiosyncratic terrorism can be influenced by mental illness, although other factors, such as drug use or eccentric personalities, also generate idiosyncrasies;
- 4) idiosyncratic terrorism may often involve the coercion of participants (through kidnapping, death threats, or other means), as in the cases of ISIS, the LRA, the SLA, and Aum Shinrikyo, and;
- 5) solo attacks (such as Rodger’s) sometimes inspire numerous copycats attacks, even when the ideology is extremely bizarre.

Future research can test and further refine these generalizations. For example, previous research on charisma and terrorism found that violence tends to arise in response to a breakdown in charismatic authority.[96] However, this does not appear to explain all cases involving charismatic leaders, such as that of the SLA. Further research should document other pathways toward violence by idiosyncratic terrorists. For example, studies of opportunistic/impulsive motives might identify risk factors predicting which extremists are likely to attack. Moreover, terrorism researchers could explore the copycat effect, which is likely more dangerous when ideology provides an additional motivation beyond mere mimetic mirroring. Notably, copycat attacks can evolve in unanticipated directions: Breivik’s massacre inspired Tarrant’s mosque attack, which in turn was the direct inspiration for a deadly shooting at a Poway, California synagogue. Strangely, the Poway attacker was motivated by Christian anti-Semitism, while neither Breivik nor Tarrant identified as religious Christians or targeted Jews.[97]

*Policy Implications of Idiosyncratic Terrorism*

Potential policy implications of idiosyncratic terrorism, phrased as tentative predictions, include the following:

- 1) publicizing information about terrorists’ frequent idiosyncrasies, such as odd beliefs and hopelessly naïve strategic thinking, may help prevent or reverse radicalization;
- 2) monitoring online subcultures, and face-to-face cult-like groups, for emerging idiosyncratic terrorist ideologies or tactics, and preemptively removing (when possible) websites where antisocial ideologies are hatched and spread, can prevent idiosyncratic terrorism;
- 3) blocking the publication of attackers’ manifestos, or monitoring the Internet for discussions of past attacks to identify potential attackers, may help prevent copycats; and
- 4) incorporating idiosyncratic strategic thinking into risk assessments may help predict violence by radicalized individuals.

The first implication can be seen as building upon and broadening Lankford’s argument that publicizing terrorists’ mental illness could decrease support for terrorism, as the concept of idiosyncrasy encompasses far more than mental illness. Since “push factors”—in particular, disillusionment with terrorist leaders and

tactics—tend to be the dominant factor influencing deradicalization, highlighting terrorists’ bizarre ideas and patently ridiculous strategic thinking could be a promising strategy for counter-messaging efforts.[98]

*From Loneliness to Strangeness: Towards a Reorientation of Terrorism Studies*

Building on recent arguments that the “lone wolf” concept should be abandoned due to the rareness of true isolation and stealth,[99] perhaps a reorientation away from the concept of lone-wolf terrorism toward the concept of idiosyncrasy in its various dimensions may be a more productive direction for Terrorism Studies. The research and theoretical focus on lone-wolf terrorism encourages misconceptions about terrorism, such as the idea that idiosyncrasy is synonymous with lone wolves or mental illness. Such a reorientation should also sidestep unresolvable debates on how isolated or uniquely dangerous solo terrorists allegedly are.

Indeed, the features that are said to make lone wolves so dangerous—their unpredictability, their potential interest in weapons of mass destruction, and their creativity—apply equally to group terrorists with idiosyncratic features. It is not only their “loneliness” that makes lone terrorists dangerous; it is to a large degree their strangeness. But this quality can often be found in dyads or groups, and is not perpetually inscrutable—rather, it can be further understood through quantitative and qualitative investigation.

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