Understanding Uighur Terrorism: The Human Needs Theory
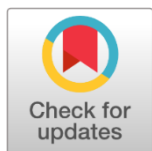
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Abstract: This paper applies the Human Needs Theory to Uighur terrorism. The theory posits that people become violent when their basic human needs are unfulfilled, denied, or taken away from them. Also referred to as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Uighur terrorists are a minority group of Muslim extremists in the western Chinese Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. Until the mid-1700s, they were considered a peaceful group, but when they lost their autonomy during the Qing dynasty rule (until 1910), and faced oppression by their new government, they resorted to violence. In this case, the Uighurs' human need "stolen" by the Chinese was their identity. Not only is the Uighur issue underrepresented in the media; it has also received such negligible attention that most governments and scholars believe that the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang is mostly occupied by terrorists.

Keywords: China, Conflict, Human Needs Theory, Human rights activism, Identity, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Social welfare, Terrorism, Uighur.

Introduction

Developed by Burton (1979), the Human Needs Theory rests on the premise that people become violent when their basic human needs are unfulfilled, denied, or taken away from them. To better understand what human needs are, the authors briefly discuss Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and its five levels for which human beings instinctively strive to achieve. The particular terrorist group analyzed in this paper is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The Chinese government believes that ETIM consists of Uighur rebel cadres. The Uighur people are a group of Muslims in the western Chinese Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. Until the mid-1700s, they were considered a peaceful group, but when they lost their autonomy in the Qing dynasty (until 1910), and faced oppression by their new government, they resorted to violence. Hence,

in this case, the Uighurs' human need "stolen" by the Chinese was their identity. The Uighur issue in the Xinjiang region has taken place for many decades. Yet, not only is it an underrepresented conflict in the media; it has also received such scant attention that most governments and scholars believe that the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang is mostly occupied by terrorists.

This paper begins with a description of the Human Needs Theory – its main principles and what "needs" actually mean (based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs). Then, the authors provide a historical and present background of the Uighurs' situation in Xinjiang. What comes subsequently is the heart of this analysis: the application of the Human Needs Theory to the Uighur terrorist group. An important objective here is to

understand the roots of their motivation for becoming a dangerous, hostile terrorist organization. This analysis ends with a discussion section. Pertinent questions will be answered: How can the use of the Human Needs Theory in this Uighur situation help readers in the future? Why do they need to pay attention to a terrorist group that is not a direct threat to the Western world?.

Description of the Human Needs Theory

This section begins with general perspectives on the Human Needs Theory and what it entails. Then, the authors explain how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – with its safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs, respectively – are the types of needs upon which Burton based his Human Needs Theory.

General Perspectives

Developed by Burton (1979), the Human Needs Theory posits that opposing groups fight and are violent towards one another because one or more of their basic human needs, both biological and psychological, are either denied or not fulfilled. Put simply, the theory proposes that peoples' insecurities drive them to be violent. It provides an explanation as to why terrorist groups become hostile and engage in acts of terror. The Human Needs Theory takes a psychological approach to understanding people, in this case terrorist organizations, and aims to make some sort of sense as to why violent individuals and groups do what they do (Burton, 1990). Why does conflict arise? There must be a reason people in the world become violent and hostile toward other groups. What is the root of their motivation? Burton (1979) asks the following questions in an attempt to understand why terrorist group choose engage in violent acts:

Are conflicts--at all social levels--due to inherent human aggressiveness, especially male aggressiveness, derived from the consequences of evolution and survival-of-the-fittest struggles? Or are conflicts due to the emergence of inappropriate social institutions and norms that reasonably would seem to be well within human capacities to alter, to which the person has problems in adjustment? (p. 7).

Upon looking at the Human Needs Theory, we assume the latter. The reason terrorists become violent and wreak havoc upon their enemies lies in the fact that they were at some point in time denied basic human needs, causing psychological damage. Perhaps they believe that their enemies are responsible for the denial of their needs. For example, a group may feel that their security or identity is threatened and, therefore, retaliate. The Human Needs Theory does not aim to justify acts of terror by violent groups on innocent people, but with this idea in mind, we are able to begin to understand the motivation behind the violence (Staub, 1999).

Christie (1997) lists the core needs which need to be satisfied in people: "...a just and sustainable peace will require, at a minimum, the equitable satisfaction of human needs for security, identity, well-being, and self-determination" (p. 315). Burton (1998) believes that these basic human needs are constant, something people always have, even though they may not always be aware of them. For example, although a person always has a need for security, he or she may not realize this until the security is threatened and he or she is in a dangerous situation. This theory can be directly related to terrorism. For example, the human need for identity is something that is often seen in terrorist organizations. The goal of most terrorists is to maximize their visibility, to be recognized, for people to know who they are and to fear them. A key reason for genocides, murders, and attacks is the

identity need of certain terrorist groups. Terrorists attack other people in order to maintain the security of their groups' identity (Christie, 1997).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow (1943) developed a pyramid containing five levels of basic human needs, starting at the bottom with physiological needs, and working its way up to safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs, respectively. These are the types of needs upon which Burton based his Human Needs Theory. These needs are the most fundamental things that human beings need to live a satisfying life. The idea of the hierarchy is that one must fulfill the lower level(s) in order to fulfill higher levels, beginning with physiological needs. Once a person's physiological needs are met, that person can go on to attain safety needs, love and belonging needs, and so on.

At the bottom of the pyramid are the physiological needs, which are the most basic necessities of a human being's survival, or biological needs. Physiological needs include essentials such as water, oxygen, and so on. Next are the safety needs, which describe one's need to feel safe and secure. Adults are often less aware of this need than children are, unless in emergency or threatening situations. Following are needs for love, affection, and belongingness (Alderfer, 1969). People naturally long for acceptance, to be loved, and to simply feel as though they belong in certain place or with a certain group of people. The second to highest of the five levels is the need for esteem. This includes a person's self-esteem, as well as esteem received from others. Finally, the highest level of needs, and what Maslow believes people strive to meet, is the need form self-actualization. At this level, a person feels completely happy and fulfilled. All other lower level needs have been met and he or she feels as if the world is on his or her side (Drinnien, Irwin, & Simmons, 1987).

Looking at Burton's Human Needs Theory and applying his ideas to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we can deduce that people and groups that engage in violent behavior, or acts of terror, cannot possibly have reached self-actualization. According to Burton (1979; 1990), somewhere along the way, one of the lower-level needs must have been threatened or denied, thus causing the motivation to become violent and engage in conflict.

Description of the Uighur Terrorist Group

The topic analyzed through Burton's Human Needs Theory is the Uighur terrorist group. Uighur terrorists are a minority group of Muslim extremists located just west to Xinjiang, a Chinese region. The Uighurs have had a long history with China, but not one that has always been violent. The Uighurs used to hold the title of the dominant ethnic group in their region, but this is no longer the case (Chung, 2002; Cornelison, 2015). Their role of dominance all changed during the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century when Beijing brought the region under control. After Beijing's takeover, the Uighurs have had a rocky, uneasy relationship with Beijing. Since this change in power, the Uighurs have been under Chinese communist rule and have become victims of persecution (Bhattacharji, 2012; Shan & Ping, 2014).

The Uighur People

The Uighurs are traditionally seen as a nonviolent people; most of them practice a peaceful form of Islam. However, as noted by Davis (2008), some critics believe the Uighurs have seen many of their members break away from their peaceful Islamic practices and have joined a more fundamentalist way of practicing Islam because of Chinese communist leaders' restrictions on their cultural and religious freedoms. For example, the Uighur language, which was traditionally

written in Arabic, has been phased out of higher education because Xinjiang's leaders believe it is not be suitable for China's scientific progress (Haider, 2005). Oftentimes, the Uighurs are not allowed to leave China, or even Xinjiang. On some rare occasions the Uighurs do leave Xinjiang, they are often not trusted by their fellow members of society and are forced to work as migrant workers to make a living (Mackerras, 2015). As far as religious practices go, Uighurs who are employed by the Chinese government are not allowed to fast during Ramadan, a traditional Islamic observance. Only limited numbers of Uighur people are allowed to make their religious pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). Furthermore, political authorities will often dictate the sermons to be heard during their Friday prayers at the mosque (Tharoor, 2009). Many of the Uighurs' rights have been taken away from them, and the Chinese Communist Party has made it clear that they do not favor the Uighurs. According to an article in *The New York Times*, titled "The Uighurs" (2009),

> The Chinese government's thirst for energy to drive its economy and its growing dominance in global affairs has made the Uyghur presence in East Turkestan an inconvenience. In order to resolve this, the Chinese government is undertaking methodical long and short term measures. These measures impact every area of Uighur society, including its politics, economics, and culture. The message these measures spell out is clear. Uighurs must assimilate or face extinction (p. A1).

> That being said, it is no wonder the Uighur people would so strongly resent the leaders of Xinjiang (or Beijing). It makes sense that these people, who in the past were regarded as a peaceful people, have become angry and decided to take action to fight back for their rights as human beings, even if it means engaging in terrorist acts (Haider, 2005).

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

The extremely hostile relationship between the Uighur people and the Chinese Communist Party can be described as a Clash of Civilizations (Huntington, 1996). It refers to the cultural and religious differences between the Uighurs and the Chinese Communist Party, which is essentially the reason why they do not get along with each other. After the attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001, the Uighurs were given the name East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and became officially "terrorists." The violence led by the Uighur terrorists is their way of protesting their unfair, unequal relationship with the leaders of Xinjiang. The ETIM has made attacks on the Chinese government, law enforcement, and Chinese laypeople (Roggio, 2009).

It was not until August, 2008 that the Uighur terrorists were truly taken seriously. They made some frequent attacks throughout the 1990s in protest of the Chinese Communist Party, but it was not until their attack in Beijing, just days before the start of the 2008 Olympics, that people really started to pay attention to this hostile group. Sixteen people were killed when two members of a Uighur terrorist group attacked a Chinese military police unit. After the attack in Beijing, Uighur terrorists have been considered a higher threat and, hence, increasingly discussed in the Chinese media (Bhattacharji, 2012)

Although the Uighurs are considered a minority in Xinjiang and many people do not see them necessarily as a threat, but more of an annoyance, this group is very important and not a phenomenon to which we should turn a blind eye. Although they are small, relatively new, and not yet universally recognized, they are a force to be reckoned with and have been successful with their attacks in the past (Sheives, 2006).

Recently, the ETIM has grown and spread outside of the region of Xinjiang. In addition, the leader of the movement, Abdul Haq al Turkistani, is affiliated with Al Qaeda (Roggio, 2009). Chinese government officials believe that other important Uighur people are connected to Al Qaeda and have even been trained in Jihadist terrorist camps in Pakistan (Bhattacharji, 2012). This is an unsettling, frightening thought; although the targets of the ETIM are the Chinese Hans and the government and leaders of Xinjiang, it is common knowledge that the goal of Al Qaeda is destroy the United States of America and even wipe out Western civilization. How long will it be before the ETIM jumps on the anti-Western civilization bandwagon and begins targeting Americans alongside our biggest threat, Al Qaeda? Al Qaeda is well known for its recruiting and brainwashing skills, even with young children, and this raises a concern for the Western world. We, as Westerners, have not been and are not currently being affected by the violence caused by Uighur terrorists, but it may not be long before they decide we are evil too (Shen, 2009).

The ETIM is most definitely a group of which one should take notice. They have a deeply rooted motivation for their violence, have been successful in their threats and attacks, and are affiliated with Al Qaeda. As they continue to grow, we should continue to be aware of this dangerous group.

Applying the Human Needs Theory to Uighur Terrorism

Now that we have a better understanding of both the Human Needs Theory and the history of the Uighur terrorist group, we need to look at the different ways in which we can apply the theory to this particular matter. In doing so, let us make sense of the reasons why the previously peaceful Uighur people became violent terrorists. Through the lens of the Human Needs Theory, it is clear that the threat to the

Uighurs' autonomy has increased their dedication to an "in-group" cause. Much of the terrorism that has happened is not only attributable to the fact that these groups are different; they also feel threatened by each other. According to the Human Needs Theory, the reason people become violent towards one another lies in the fact that they are psychologically damaged due to a lack of fulfillment or denial of one or more basic human needs, such as identity.

Once referred to as a peaceful people, the Uighur people have become notorious for their terrorist activities, fighting against the Han Chinese and the Chinese Communist Party against persecution and the denial of their cultural and religious rights. Based upon the tenets of the Human Needs Theory, we can deduce that the Uighurs' basic human needs, such as identity and security, were threatened, and they took matters into their own hands to protect those needs.

Indeed, at some point, one or more of the Uighurs' core human needs were denied and/or threatened. Going back to the seventh century, the Uighur people have always wanted to be an independent unit. However, the Han Chinese people were trying to assimilate the Uighurs (Loory, 2009). Since the change of power to the Chinese Communist Party, the Uighurs have not been treated as an equal people, but as second-class citizens. Certain restrictions have been placed upon them, including, but not limited to, not being allowed to partake two of the five pillars of Islam, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and Hajj, the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca (Uighurs, 2009). These people not only lost the power they once held, but have had rights, including some of their sacred religious rights, stripped from them.

Let us also look at the Qing dynasty, during which time Beijing's leaders took over the power of Xinjiang. Imagine being a small, minority group, yet the group holds political power. Suddenly, there is a major change, and

a new, strict political party has taken over. They do not like, let alone accept, the other group and act in ways which make them feel like inferior people. It is safe to say that, in this sort of situation, the minority group that lost power (the Uighurs) would experience feelings of loss of identity. How is a person supposed to identify with oneself if they cannot even identify with their religion?

The feeling of losing identity can be related back to Maslow's (1943) third level of needs – the needs for love and belonging. In this case, the Uighur people felt powerless, empty, and as if they did not belong in their new surroundings (Shichor, 2005). This feeling of emptiness, and loss of identity, is exactly the kind of motive Burton would look for when applying his Human Needs Theory. The Uighur people wanted their old way of life back and believed the best way to make that happen was to retaliate against the Han Chinese. While this way of thinking may not seem rational, it was important to look at how the Uighur people have chosen to fight back.

The Uighur people are referred to as terrorists for a reason. According to Matusitz (2012), a terrorist organization can be defined as "an illicit clandestine organization that generally consists of planners, trainers, and actual bombers/killers" (p. 10), and terrorism is defined by "the use of violence to create fear (i.e. terror, psychic fear) for (1) political, (2) religious, or (3) ideological reasons" (p. 4). This being said, we can conclude that Uighur terrorist group fits the bill.

The objective of terrorism, and of terrorist actions, "is to achieve the greatest attainable publicity for a group, cause, or individual" (Matusitz, 2012, p. 4) as humanly possible. By gaining publicity and attention, the terrorist group gets their name back out there, and people begin to pay more attention to them (Matusitz, 2014). That is exactly what the Uighurs want. By making attacks on the Han Chinese, and even Chinese laypeople, the

Uighur people are gaining attention and slowly regaining their identity.

The Uighur people were so distraught with their loss of rights and the persecution from the Chinese Communist Party that they felt the only possible way to regain their previous way of life, rights, and identity, was to act in violent ways. As reported by Davis (2008), as a minority, they felt that had to do something big to get the attention they have been longing for, and that is when they turned to terrorist acts.

And what if the Han Chinese had treated the Uighur people differently when they took power of Xinjiang? Had the Uighur people not been treated as inferior beings and had not been robbed of their rights, would they have experienced this loss of identity and belonging? If so, the violence that has spiraled from their actions may not have ever happened. If the Han Chinese had treated them differently, perhaps today there would be one less terrorist organization in the world. There are hundreds of dangerous terrorist groups out there today, and while one less probably would not make much of a dent in our daily lives, it would indeed be a start to fewer hostilities.

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a person cannot reach self-actualization, which is total and complete happiness with oneself and the world around them, until they have fulfilled the lower levels (Huitt, 2007). The Uighurs' need for identity would fall under the middle level, the need for love and belonging. Without fulfilling the need of belonging, or being able to identify with others, the Uighurs will not be able to fulfill the needs for esteem or self-actualization, which instinctively is every person's goal to attain. Until the Uighur people's need for identity is met, they will continue to strive for attention, as they fight back to the Chinese government for their independence (Hyer, 2006).

The Uighur people seem to have had a rollercoaster of a history, once being dominant

of the land where they lived, losing their power, being stripped of cultural and religious rights, and now fighting back. At face value, it makes sense that they are angry and that they are retaliating. However, killing and genocide are not the way to handle any sort of dispute between cultural, ethnic, or religious groups. What this group has done is create even more hostility, anger, and violence. The Human Needs Theory does not provide justification for what the Uighur terrorists have done. There is no justice found for the innocent people who have died because of their actions. However, with this theory, we can better understand the minds of those who feel compelled by their natural human instinct to commit violence for the sake of their basic human needs.

Discussion and Future Directions

By applying the main tenets of the Human Needs Theory to Uighur terrorism, it is easy to understand why the Uighurs have been motivated to become such a violent people. An important conclusion is that their violence lies in their need for identity that has been denied, which has led them in a fight for attention and recognition, be it positive or negative. We took a look into Maslow's hierarchy of needs and came to an understanding of how people's actions are in fact motivated by relevant levels of needs.

Burton's Human Needs Theory does not provide a justification for terrorism. However, it can provide us with a better understanding of the terrorists' motives and why they act in such a violent manner. If we can truly understand why groups of people turn to terrorism, then perhaps we can figure out how to stop it before it even starts. If the Uighurs had not been treated so poorly by the Han Chinese, they may have never experienced the loss of their identity, and therefore may have never turned into a violent terrorist organization. If we are able to pinpoint the motivation of people like the Uighurs, there is

a possibility that we can find a way to prevent such conflicts from happening again. History repeats itself, and it always will, unless a change is made. Understanding what makes the minds of terrorists tick may be our ticket to change, and eventually a more peaceful world.

On a more immediate note, this group can be seen as important to the Western world because they have begun to have some affiliation with Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is an extremely dangerous group and a huge threat to the Western world. It is possible that it is only a matter of time before Al Qaeda brainwashes the Uighur terrorists into believing that it is not only the Chinese Hans who are evil, but that it is also the United States and the Western world who deserve to be blamed for their feelings of insecurity (Chung, 2002). Though this group alone is not as well established as Al Qaeda, they have been successful in the past. Furthermore, although they, in and of themselves, may not pose much of a direct threat to the United States, working in affiliation with Al Qaeda poses a much larger threat to our Western society. Not to mention, we certainly do not need any more people jumping in the Al Qaeda anti-Western movement. In a few years, this group could be a huge threat to the United States, and therefore should be watched closely.

Upon analyzing the Human Needs Theory, one realizes that there are both strengths and weaknesses. The good part of the theory is that it allows us to get into the minds of terrorists and better identify what their motivations are. This can be a useful tool, if we learn how to use it correctly. The weaker aspect of this theory is that we must know the detailed history of other terrorist groups in order to identify what needs were denied or unfulfilled and to then apply the theory. As researchers, it can be hard to pinpoint exactly what needs were denied or unfulfilled and eventually led them to violence. Normally, an assessment of an individual would be done by

a psychologist to learn the root of that kind of damage.

Because this group is small, especially compared to organizations such as Al Qaeda, who have thousands of members, and growing, there has not been a great amount of publicity about this group and their attacks. To better understand them, it is advised to take a deeper look into their violent history, looking at other attacks they have made. Have they targeted more Chinese government officials in retaliation of the persecution they have faced, or have they issued more attacks on everyday lay people to simply gain attention? This will help us better understand where they currently stand, and what their current goals are.

In addition to the need for identity, other needs can be explored. While the Chinese Communist Party has not acted violently toward the Uighurs, it has not treated them fairly. Given these circumstances, it is evident that they feel their basic need for safety has been threatened, now that they (as a minority) have engaged in a violent conflict with the Chinese government. There is much more that can be explored with this theory and this group, both applied together and left alone. An increased investigation of why the Uighur people became terrorists may increase our understanding of other formerly peaceful groups turning to terrorism around the world. It very well may be unrealistic to hope for a future in which all different cultures all over the world live in peace. This, however, does not mean that we should not strive for a more civil, peaceful planet. While there will always be a Clash of Civilizations between cultures, but must there always be extreme violence and conflict?.

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