

# Modeling Identity

Aaron B. Frank

Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study

George Mason University

[afrank3@gmu.edu](mailto:afrank3@gmu.edu)

# The Challenge of Identity

- Worked on multiple projects emphasizing identity
  - All projects fundamentally interested in exploring and understanding potential for social change
- Moved into the forefront of international relations and national security
  - Shift in the study of continuity and stability to dynamic change, innovation, and instability

# China and Islam in Western Provinces

- Hui Muslims do not differentiate between their ethnic and religious identities, whereas state authorities seek to maintain a sharp distinction between them out of fear that religious activities may contribute to political destabilization.
- Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 59.

# Radicalization in Lebanese Refugee Camps

- **The battle described in this book is fundamentally a battle for identity.** In that sense, all the camp's inhabitants, even the poorest, are involved in the struggle. When faced with uncertainty and vulnerability, displaced people search for something with which to identify. In this respect the camp is less a marginal area than a site of significant expression, at the intersection of local, regional, and transnational space. **In this perspective, mobilization entails creating identities that modify the way individuals represent and interpret their social and political universe.**
- Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3.

# The Shia Revival

- **The Shia-Sunni conflict is at once a struggle for the soul of Islam – a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history – and a manifestation of the kind of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities, so seeming archaic at times, yet so surprisingly vital, with which humanity has become wearily familiar.** Faith and identity converge in this conflict, and their combined power goes a long way toward explaining why, despite the periods of coexistence, the struggle has lasted so long and retains such urgency and significance.
- Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 20.

# Psychology and Terrorism

- **It is not individual psychopathology, but group, organizational and social psychology, with a particular emphasis on “collective identity,” that provides the most powerful lens through which to understand terrorist psychology and behavior.** For some groups, especially nationality-separatist terrorist groups, this collective identity is established extremely early, so that from childhood on, “hatred is bred in the bone.” The importance of collective identity and the processes of forming and transforming collective identities cannot be overemphasized. This fact in turn emphasizes the sociocultural context, which determines the balance between collective identity and individual identity. **Terrorists have subordinated their individual identity to the collective identity, so that what serves the group, organization, or network is of primary importance.**
- Jerrold M. Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to Al-Qaeda* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2007), p. 8.

# Psychology and Terrorism

- **Social bonds are the critical element in this process and precede ideological commitment. These bonds facilitate the process of joining the jihad through mutual emotional and social support, development of a common identity, and encouragement to adopt a new faith.** All these factors are internal to the group. They are more important and relevant to the transformation of potential candidates into global mujahedin than postulated external factors, such as common hatred for an outside group. To an outsider, these invectives stand out. But for an insider, they are not what keep the group together. As in all intimate relationships, this glue, in-group love, is found inside the group. **It may be more accurate to blame global Salafi terrorist activity on in-group love than out-group hate.**
- Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 135.

# State Formation

- **What is common within successful systems, however, is the uniformity of a particular set of rules within an individual state – and tight adherence to them over time.** Frontiers and border points are strong testing grounds of this uniformity across a state's territory...
- In developed countries, this standardization of practice has led to predictability, which generates trust in the impartial administration of the rules. Change takes place through routine, continuity, and well-known practices. **This uniformity of rules and regulations throughout a country is vital to the formation of a distinctive identity for its citizens.**
- Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 132.

... and on and on and on...

# The Washington Post

## The fake feminism of Sarah Palin

By Jessica Valenti  
Sunday, May 30, 2010; B01

**BREAKING NEWS**

19:24 | Arab League condemns Newt Gingrich's Palestinians remark (AP)

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [International](#)

Published 01:41 10.12.11 | Latest update 01:41 10.12.11

### **Newt Gingrich: Palestinians are an 'invented' people**

**U.S. Republican presidential candidate differs with official U.S. policy that respects the Palestinians as a people deserving of their own state based on negotiations with Israel.**

By **Natasha Mozgovaya** and **Reuters**

# What are Identities?

- Fourth narcissistic wound
  - gravity, evolution, rationality, identity
- Connective tissue of society
  - relate individuals to larger groups
  - define roles, responsibilities, privileges and obligations
  - simultaneously denote similarities and differences
- Narratives of individual and collective suffering and victimization
  - entrance based on experience, not beliefs
- Collections of cultural symbols and behaviors
  - styles of dress, body language, cultural symbols and artifacts
- Dynamic and evolutionary
  - constantly being performed or achieved, even after death
  - negotiation between actor and audience
  - dependent on feedback or affirmation

# The Identity Argument

- We had it good but people lost their way and abandoned what we knew to be good.
- We were betrayed by false prophets and selfish leaders whose innovations preyed on the weak, needy and faithful.
- Through discipline, sacrifice and a commitment to the old ways, we will prevail and escape our current difficulties.
- Setbacks are a test of our will and true members of the group will not be deterred.

# ABM and Identity

- Natural fit...
  - relate individuals to larger groups
  - involve boundedly rational decision-making and heuristics
  - characterized by historical experience, memory, and learning
  - context based interactions and preferences
- ... yet
  - current suite of algorithms employed in ABM do not adequately capture key elements of identity theory
    - continuous variables
    - discrete tags
  - leading theories haven't been formalized
  - empirical data sparse and highly specialized
  - agent logic is overly simple
    - behavioral stimulus response
    - cognitive overemphasis on rationality and utility

# What are we Really Modeling?

- Information flows and diffusion
- Beliefs and opinions
  - Disconnected from behavior
- Innovations
  - New things, but not part of sets
- Political cynicism and unauthentic behavior
  - Identity entrepreneurs

# What are the Costs of Doing Poorly?

- Bread vs. Circus model of state formation
  - community formation and stabilization about developing shared history
  - model logistics of delivering material goods and needs
- Conflict escalation
  - identities are stories of shared suffering, pain, and reinforced through affirmation
  - coercion and deterrence strengthen rival identities
    - feed narrative of victimization, reinforce group solidarity by demanding change
    - affirm roles of protectors and reward sacrifice and self-sacrifice
- Misplaced soft targeting
  - innovation and deviance acceptable by leaders that define identity standards
  - influence campaigns seeking to undermine rival leaders as corrupt or hypocrites miss their privileges
- Missing dimension of social influence
  - cultural capital measured by individual ability to authentically perform multiple identities
  - familiarity with habitus and doxic beliefs
  - focus on network connections and economic wealth
- Underutilization of negotiation, concessions, rehabilitation
  - strategic opportunities can separate utility seeking rivals from ritual performing ones
  - change models of identity standards and fracture groups
  - no exit ramp from violent groups maintains group solidarity

# What we Need in Agents

- Employ deontic logic
- Ability to self-select into groups and categorize others
- Strategically interact through projections and stereotypes
- Symbolic coded/decoded interactions between agents
- Confirmation, and reinforcement of role performance over material outcomes
- Persistent and constructed memory
- Frameworks vs. data
- Maintain private, interpreted copies of identity standards
- Control system mediates between identity selection, performance, confirmation
  - Creates emotional states