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### **Quantifying and Qualifying Charisma: A Theoretical Framework for Measuring the Presence of Charismatic Authority in Terrorist Groups**

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Lorne Dawson, University of Waterloo

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**QUANTIFYING AND QUALIFYING CHARISMA: A THEORETICAL  
FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING THE PRESENCE OF CHARISMATIC  
AUTHORITY IN TERRORIST GROUPS**

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**ABSTRACT:**

In the past four decades, there has been increased multi-disciplinary scholarly interest in the study of charismatic authority. However, there has yet to be any systematic examination of charismatic authority in the context of terrorism, despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of charismatic leaders in the recruitment, radicalization and operation of terrorist groups. This article seeks to contribute to future empirical research by presenting a theoretical framework for measuring the presence of charismatic authority in terrorist groups that is based on Max Weber's seminal work on legitimate domination (*herrschaft*) and on theoretical insights drawn from the study of charismatic authority in new religious movements. The framework is then applied to an illustrative case study of the relationship between charismatic authority and the radicalization process within the far-right terrorist group "the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord." The article concludes with a discussion of findings and suggestions for future research.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a common story told by speaking coaches, self-help “success” gurus, and internet bloggers interested in corporate leadership. It begins after an evening dinner attended by a nameless young lady and by British political rivals William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. When asked her opinion of both men, the young lady responded:

When I left the dining room after sitting next to Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest man in England. But after sitting next to Mr. Disraeli, I thought I was the cleverest woman in England.<sup>1</sup>

In her description, the young lady echoes countless accounts of individuals who have come into contact with a charismatic leader. It is an experience that is primal, mysterious, intensely personal, and evokes powerfully complex emotions. As the above quote suggests, charismatic leaders are adept at making those they meet feel in some way special, chosen, or unique. At the same time the experience is highly subjective and abstract, and it is often difficult for most people to pin-point what it is exactly that makes a particular person “charismatic.” These comments reflect recurring problems within the study of charismatic authority: how exactly do charismatic leaders move and influence their followers to engage in risky behaviours? How is it, despite the ubiquity of charismatic individuals in society, only a select few manage to cultivate a loyal and devoted following? What exactly distinguishes a charismatic leader from other types of leaders? These questions have been explored in varying degrees in the context of new religious movements (NRMs), management studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology.<sup>2</sup> Yet within terrorism studies, charismatic authority has not been analyzed in a systematic or empirical manner to date.<sup>3</sup> This has not gone unnoticed. Recent scholarship acknowledges the gap in the literature in regards to charismatic leaders and their role in the operation of terrorist groups and the radicalization process.<sup>4</sup> There is consensus among scholars that charisma somehow plays a pivotal role in the recruitment and socialization of potential terrorist operatives, yet there is limited analysis beyond brief speculative statements as to why this is the case.<sup>5</sup> Scholars also note the importance of charismatic leaders in the operation of terrorist groups, but again, the exact role they play in contributing to terrorist success is unexamined.<sup>6</sup>

Some tentative steps have been taken towards understanding broader notions of authority and leadership relationships in terrorist groups, but the research tends to be too narrowly focused on two areas of inquiry: (1) case and ethnographic studies that describe, as a sub-aspect of a larger analysis, the operational and ideological aspects of leaders within Islamist terrorist groups,<sup>7</sup> and (2) studies of the effectiveness of leadership decapitation (the capture or killing of terrorist leaders).<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the findings from the empirical case studies offer promising preliminary insights on leadership within terrorist and radical groups, but lack in-depth analysis specifically focused on characteristics of charismatic leadership and the social dynamics involved in the creation, maintenance and dissolution of authority relationships. On the other hand, conclusive findings from the research on leadership removal strategies remain elusive due to contradictory opinions on the overall effectiveness of the strategies, which are rooted in alternative interpretations of charismatic leadership. As it stands, the literature on terrorist leaders tends to be focused on “what” leadership is, and does not adequately explain “how” and “why” leaders are influential in their respective groups. In order to determine the extent of this influence, more empirical and theoretical explorations of charismatic authority and other forms of terrorist leadership are needed.<sup>9</sup>

There are two main barriers facing scholars interested in studying charismatic authority in terrorist groups. The first, as Hofmann and Dawson argue, is that the social scientific concept of charismatic authority is widely misused in terrorism studies.<sup>10</sup> They note that for the most part, terrorism scholars have been using charisma in adjectival and tautological fashions, and that much of the research flirts with important concepts involving charismatic authority but never quite adequately addresses it. This has led to charismatic authority being overlooked as a potentially important contributor to the formation, operation, and demise of terrorist groups. The second barrier is the lack of models or methods to measure charismatic authority within terrorist groups.<sup>11</sup> In her assessment of the effectiveness of leadership decapitation, Jenna Jordan raises the point that it is difficult to quantify or qualify “charisma.”<sup>12</sup> This is a valid argument. Charismatic authority is an abstract social-scientific concept, and admittedly, a hard thing to accurately gauge. This does not mean, however, that we should abandon all efforts to do so. The failure to



develop a method to operationalize charisma within terrorist organizations has resulted in the use of poorly substituted measures in place of rigorous and theoretically grounded metrics that can be replicated.<sup>13</sup> It has also resulted in the superficial application of charisma (or an analogous concept) as a *post hoc* explanation for the success or failure of counter-terrorism strategies.<sup>14</sup> If the full extent of the influence of charismatic terrorist leadership is to be understood, a model that allows for the qualitative and quantitative measurement of charismatic authority is required.

This article is a first attempt at addressing this lacuna by developing a theoretical framework to operationalize the influence of charismatic authority within terrorist groups. For the purposes of this article, terrorism is defined as threats or acts of violence meant to coerce and/or intimidate a political entity or a section of the public in order to further an ideologically, politically, and/or religiously motivated cause.<sup>15</sup> The creation of the theoretical framework builds directly from observations made by Hofmann and Dawson that call for more robust theoretical and empirical approaches to understanding the dynamics of charismatic terrorist leadership.<sup>16</sup> The hope is that by using the framework in conjunction with available qualitative and quantitative data, it is possible to detect, to a degree, how present or absent charismatic authority is within a particular terrorist group. This, in turn, can potentially aid researchers in conducting comparative case studies or statistical analyses of charismatic terrorist leadership. Although the complex nature of charismatic authority naturally lends itself better to qualitative research, it is indeed possible to quantitatively code charisma. There are precedents in social psychology and managerial science, where empirical studies have devised ways to quantify various aspects of charismatic and other forms of leadership.<sup>17</sup> There are, undeniably, certain limits to employing a statistical approach to analyzing charismatic leadership. But, this does not mean that we should abandon all attempts to do so. A holistic understanding of charismatic terrorist leadership will require insight from multiple methodological and epistemological approaches.

The article begins with a short background discussion of the social-scientific definition of charismatic authority. It then presents and discusses each of the fourteen indicators which make up the proposed framework. The latter half of the article applies the developed framework to an illustrative case study that examines the relationship between various social dynamics of charis-

matic authority and the radicalization process found within the far-right terrorist group known as The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA). The article then concludes with a discussion of findings, along with suggestions for future research.

## WHAT IS “CHARISMATIC” AUTHORITY?

Despite the multi-disciplinary nature of the study of charismatic authority, there is common agreement among scholars recognizing Max Weber’s work on legitimate domination (*herrschaft*) as the root of the social scientific definition of charismatic authority.<sup>18</sup> In his exploration of legitimate domination, Weber conceives of three different “ideal-types”<sup>19</sup> or “pure” forms of authority: traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic. Traditional authority is derived from custom, where people obey a certain person or office (monarchs, tribal shamans, etc.) because “it has always been that way.” Rational-legal authority is derived from an office that intrinsically possesses legitimate authority. In other words, the authority derived from a rational-legal office is not necessarily contingent on the personal qualities possessed by the individual holding the position. Charismatic authority, however, turns the concepts of traditional and rational-legal authority on their heads. Rather than situating legitimacy for authority in custom, bureaucracy, or office, charismatic authority is vested within a single individual who is recognized as special or extraordinary by their followers. As Weber explains, charismatic authority is:

A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men, and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.<sup>20</sup>

In simpler terms, the ideal-typical charismatic leader draws their perceived extraordinariness from some sort of transmundane or divine source. As Tucker explains, “...charismatic authority [is] understood as leadership based upon a transcendent call by a divine being in which both the person called and his followers believe.”<sup>21</sup> The overtly supernatural or religious-like quality of this “transcendent call” is important, and serves as the basis of legitimacy for the charismatic leader. For example, successful charismatic Islamist leaders like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and



Anwar Al-Awlaki inspire and attract followers due to their perceived ability to interpret Allah's will.<sup>22</sup> But the religious-like quality of charisma can also manifest in purely secular contexts, as seen with the extreme veneration of Velupillai Prabhakaran of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In both cases, the charismatic leader is seen by their followers as a literal or figurative avatar of a sacred and otherworldly mission. This particular strong form of devotion is what allows "pure" charismatic leaders to inspire such fanatical loyalty from their followers. As a result of this strong bond between leader and follower, certain scholars have noted the important roles that charismatic leaders play in the formation, operation, and dissolution of their groups.<sup>23</sup>

While authority in a charismatically-led group is inexorably tied to the leader, it is important to note that it is not rooted in individual personality characteristics. Charismatic individuals are common in society, where they are cultivated and rewarded in business, religion and politics. However, despite the ubiquity of charismatic people, very few obtain any measure of true authority over others. This prompts Weber to note that "it is the recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma."<sup>24</sup> A charismatic leader must be recognized by *others*, who on the basis of this recognition grant him or her authority. In simpler terms, charismatic authority is a *relational* phenomenon that is socially constructed through interactions between leaders and followers. As Bryan Wilson explains:

Charisma is not a personality attribute, but a successful claim to power by virtue of supernatural ordination. If a man runs naked down the street proclaiming that he alone can save others from impending doom, and if he immediately wins a following, then he is a charismatic leader: a social relationship has come into being. If he does not win a following, he is simply a lunatic.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars therefore stress the importance of recognizing the "charismatic bond" between leaders and followers as the focal point of research, rather than the personal qualities or characteristics of individual charismatic leaders.<sup>26</sup>

## INDICATORS OF THE PRESENCE OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY WITHIN TERRORIST GROUPS

The theoretical justification for the fourteen indicators is drawn primarily from Weber's theories of legitimate domination<sup>27</sup> and insights from empirical research on new religious movements (NRMs).<sup>28</sup> The term "new religious movement" is used in sociology as a more neutral designation for the groups colloquially and pejoratively identified as cults. It first gained popularity in discussions of the myriad alternative religious groups and traditions that saw rapid growth in North America, Europe, and elsewhere in the 1960s, 70s and 80s (e.g., Transcendental Meditation, Scientology, New Age religions, Wicca, and UFO religions like Heaven's Gate), but is now used more generally to designate all newer and non-mainstream forms of religious innovation.<sup>29</sup> The decision to supplement Weber's theories with those found in NRM studies is an informed choice. Scholars note that there are significant parallels between the social processes found in NRMs and terrorist organizations.<sup>30</sup> Lorne Dawson, in particular, makes a strong case for more cross fertilization between the study of NRMs and terrorist organizations:

In understanding how these religious ideological commitments are instilled [within terrorist groups], and with such force, it is imperative that more attention be given to analysing the role of charismatic leaders and forms of authority. The force of the ideology is intimately entwined with that of the leaders who convey it. In this regard much can be gained from study and selective application of insights from the existing literature dealing with charismatic authority in NRMs, millennialist movements, and other kinds of social and political movements.<sup>31</sup>

This does not suggest that the social processes found within NRMs are completely analogous with those in terrorist groups. However, carefully adapting any "lessons learned" from studies of NRMs is logical given the congruity between multiple social processes and presence of charismatic authority in terrorist groups and so-called "cultic" movements.

It should be noted that the indicators are crafted as a heuristic device rather than an iron-clad set of attributes to identify charismatic terrorist leaders. They do not possess a particular rank-order of importance, nor does the absence of one or more indicators necessarily indicate a weaker form or absence of charismatic authority. For example, Osama bin Laden's lack of physical impairment or suffering (see indicator 4) does not in any way lessen his overall charismatic



authority. Rather, when “suffering” does play a role in the recognition and legitimation of the terrorist leader, it is an additional method with which researchers can identify and analyze the leader’s charismatic authority. There is also some overlap between certain indicators, which are differentiated from one another by subtle nuances that may not translate well to quantitative or survey research (for example, indicators 6, 7 and 8). It will be up to individual research designs to determine whether to collapse multiple indicators together or to exclude some entirely.

There are certain features of the ideal-type of charismatic authority that are ubiquitous to most terrorist groups. For example, Weber notes that “the leader and his followers stand outside the ties of this world and routine occupations,” and that followers reject methodical and material gain in pursuit of the leader’s outlined goals.<sup>32</sup> These traits and behaviors are evident in most examples of terrorist groups, whereby joining a violent and clandestine organization typically necessitates the abandonment of conventional employment and the rational pursuit of wealth in favour of the ideological and political goals of the movement.<sup>33</sup> Since the purpose of the indicators are to differentiate levels of the presence of charismatic authority, it excludes those aspects that are near-universally present at similar levels across terrorist groups.

The indicators are crafted from three overlapping but analytically distinct social processes involved in the attribution and maintenance of the charismatic bond: (1) the conditions giving rise to charismatic authority, (2) the social construction and management of charismatic authority, and (3) the conditions and motivations which lead to the bureaucratization (or routinization) of charisma into traditional or rational-legal forms of authority.<sup>34</sup> Indicators 1 and 2 refer to both situational and contextually specific conditions that must be in place for a charismatic leader to successfully establish a following. Indicators 3 to 8 address the various dynamics and mechanisms present during the social construction and management of the charismatic bond between leaders and followers. Lastly, the remaining indicators deal with the conditions which lead to the routinization of charismatic authority, and the practices employed by charismatic leaders to combat attempts to bureaucratize their authority – an act which is seen as an unacceptable diminution of their own power. The fourteen indicators for measuring the presence of charismatic authority in terrorist groups, broken down into their related sub-groups, are as follows (see table 1):

**TABLE 1: INDICATORS OF THE PRESENCE OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY WITHIN TERRORIST GROUPS AND POTENTIAL SOURCES OF EVIDENCE**

INDICATORS	POTENTIAL SOURCES OF EVIDENCE
<b>THE CONDITIONS GIVING RISE TO CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY</b>	
<b>(1)</b> Is the authority of the leader interpreted in terms of ingrained and traditional conceptions of charismatic authority in the broader society and culture?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background information on the leader; statements by members; stories recorded or circulated by the group.</li> </ul>
<b>(2)</b> Is authority attributed to the leader on the basis of the perception that there is an impending or current crisis, one associated with the bankruptcy of existing forms of traditional and/or rational-legal forms of authority?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statements by the leader and followers; media accounts; group communications and documents.</li> </ul>
<b>THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE CHARISMATIC BOND</b>	
<b>(3)</b> Are attributions of power to the leader based on the followers' perception of the leader's supernatural or superhuman and/or exceptional powers and qualities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statements by the members; statements by the leader; media accounts.</li> </ul>
<b>(4)</b> Is the authority attributed to the leader associated with any physical impairment or suffering which is viewed positively by the followers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical/anthropological/sociological information on the society and culture; statements by members; inspirational stories used by members.</li> </ul>
<b>(5)</b> Does the leader legitimate their authority through reference to a higher source of authority, either divine or some other transcendent source (i.e., a supreme ideology)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical/anthropological/sociological accounts of the society; media accounts.</li> </ul>
<b>(6)</b> Are grandiose and exaggerated claims made about the nature and scope of the leader's authority and importance?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statements by members; group communications and documents.</li> </ul>
<b>(7)</b> Are new members socialized into recognizing the special powers and authority of the leader?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member statements about intra-group discussions, meetings, and training; propaganda and promotional literature and statements by the group.</li> </ul>
<b>(8)</b> Does the leader figure prominently in the folklore of the group and the representation of its 'story'?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical accounts; statements by members; propaganda and promotional literature and statements by the group.</li> </ul>
<b>CONDITIONS AND MOTIVATIONS WHICH LEAD TO THE ROUTINIZATION OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY</b>	
<b>(9)</b> Are organizational decisions highly centralized and reliant on the will of the leader?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical accounts; media accounts; statements by members; group communications and documents.</li> </ul>
<b>(10)</b> Is the leader intolerant of alternative sources of power and authority, both internal and external to the group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical accounts; media accounts; statements by members.</li> </ul>
<b>(11)</b> Does the leader introduce sudden and /or seemingly arbitrary changes in the practices and policies of the group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical accounts; media accounts; statements by members; group communications and documents.</li> </ul>
<b>(12)</b> Do followers readily accept these sudden and/or seemingly arbitrary changes in the practices and policies of the group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence of intra-group strife and power struggles just prior to policy/strategic shifts and acts of terrorism.</li> </ul>
<b>(13)</b> Is the delegation of authority highly centralized and reliant on the will of the leader?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statements by members; group communications and documents.</li> </ul>
<b>(14)</b> Does the legitimacy of subordinate leaders in the group depend on the nature of their personal relationship with the leader?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical accounts; media accounts; statements by members; group communications and documents.</li> </ul>



### **The conditions giving rise to charismatic authority**

(1) Is the authority of the leader interpreted in terms of ingrained and traditional conceptions of charismatic authority in the broader society and culture?

(2) Is authority attributed to the leader on the basis of the perception that there is an impending or current crisis, one associated with the bankruptcy of existing forms of traditional and/or rational-legal forms of authority?

The charismatic bond is not created in a social vacuum. It is primarily established through repeated interactions between leaders and followers, but is also invariably affected by broader societal factors.<sup>35</sup> Charismatic leaders often arise during times of transition and crisis, particularly when traditional and rational legal-forms of authority are seen to have failed.<sup>36</sup> Crises must be perceived as either acute (short term but extremely intense) or chronic (long term with no resolution in sight), and as a part of some form of “ultimate” struggle which threatens to bring about irrevocable change.<sup>37</sup> When a crisis remains unresolved, people can become “charisma hungry” in their search for psychic relief.<sup>38</sup> Leaders may have an active hand in the framing and creation of crises, or they may seize upon sudden or long standing conflicts or grievances to establish their authority.

Charismatic leaders are also much more likely to arise in cultures that have long standing traditions of hero-prophets, messiahs, and saviours.<sup>39</sup> While most societies have deeply rooted eschatological beliefs, they may manifest in varying degrees from culture to culture. For example, it is not an alien concept for god-like charismatic figures to emerge in areas like rural India, where there is a commonplace belief that there is routine divine involvement in mortal affairs.<sup>40</sup> Certain cultures and societies can therefore be expected to be more conducive to the emergence of charismatic leaders. Hence, unresolved social crises and long standing messianic expectations involving national and/or religious saviors are important in setting the stage for emergent charismatic leaders, who may seize upon cultural and societal norms to cast themselves in a salvationist leadership role.



## The social construction and management of the charismatic bond

(3) Are attributions of power to the leader based on the followers' perception of the leader's supernatural or superhuman and/or exceptional powers and qualities?

One of the defining characteristics of charismatic authority is the perception of some form of supernatural or exceptional abilities in a leader, whether they are oratorical skills, attributions of superhuman capabilities (clairvoyance, immortality, warrior prowess, etc.), or even quasi or overtly divine characteristics.<sup>41</sup> A charismatic individual is someone who is seen as different from the vast majority of other people, and by this virtue is inherently "greater" than everyone else. The leader's actual abilities are important, but secondary.<sup>42</sup> What is crucial to the attribution of charismatic authority is the *perception* of some exceptional trait, ability or mannerism by followers, who then accord authority to that leader based on these perceptions.

(4) Is the authority attributed to the leader associated with any physical impairment or suffering which is viewed positively by the followers?

In "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," Weber discusses the role of "suffering" in the establishment of charismatic authority.<sup>43</sup> Certain individuals throughout history have been capable of turning physical and/or emotional suffering into a form of social capital within their movement or group. Rather than letting physical impairment or deformities shunt them away to the margins of society, shrewd people like witch-doctors, shamans, sorcerers, and prophets have historically been capable of using their suffering to establish a measure of charismatic authority over others. In other words, suffering has been socially constructed as a way that facilitates interaction with the sacred, supernatural, or divine. Examples of this include the ascetic lifestyle of Christian monastic orders during the Middle Ages, or the Buddha meditating under a fig tree for seven weeks. These types of individuals are not recognized as deficient due to their physical impairments and suffering, but rather are granted special recognition, in part, *because* of them. A prominent example is Aum Shinrykyo's charismatic leader, Shoko Asahara, who suffers from blindness due to a childhood illness. Other paradigmatic examples are Mullah Omar of the Taliban (partial blindness from a combat wound), Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman of al-Gama'at al-Is-



lamiyya (blindness from illness), and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin of Hamas (quadriplegia and blindness). Tied into the concept that charismatic individuals are seen to possess superhuman, divine, or exceptional abilities, these particular individuals are perceived to be special because they are capable of overcoming and even rising above impairments that would limit a “normal” person.

(5) Does the leader legitimate their authority through reference to a higher source of authority, either divine or some other transcendent source (i.e., a supreme ideology)?

Weber notes that pure charismatic leaders view their mission as a “call” or “spiritual duty” on behalf of a deity or a supreme ideology (the Ummah, the environment, communism, the disenfranchised poor, etc.).<sup>44</sup> They, and by extension their followers, view themselves as an agent, avatar, or messenger of some higher power. The divine or ideological mission takes primacy over other concerns, and recognition of the leader and their cause by followers becomes a *duty*, rather than choice. For Weber, then, the ideal-type of charismatic authority is inherently religious in nature. Whether their group is overtly religious or not, charismatic leaders’ deeds and words are typically cast in a manner that invokes the divine and sacred.<sup>45</sup> Similar to most religiously or ideologically-based conflicts,<sup>46</sup> the invocation of a transcendent power by a charismatic leader has the effect of creating a black-and-white scenario for them and their followers: “In principle only one side can be in the right in such a conflict; the other must be guilty of a wrong which has to be expiated.”<sup>47</sup>

(6) Are grandiose and exaggerated claims made about the nature and scope of the leader’s authority and importance?

(7) Are new members socialized into recognizing the special powers and authority of the leader?

(8) Does the leader figure prominently in the folklore of the group and the representation of its “story”?

The creation of the charismatic bond and the attribution of charismatic authority to a leader is akin to the “slippery slope” of terrorist radicalization which involves a gradual process of increasing devotion to the leader (or group) that is facilitated by a mixture of existing social ties and small-group socialization processes.<sup>48</sup> The socialization component involved in the attribu-

tion of charismatic authority is a process that Eileen Barker terms as “charismatization,” where members of NRMs and other similarly closed groups are gradually socialized into perceiving the charismatic qualities of the leader.<sup>49</sup> In other words, new group members do not necessarily recognize the charismatic authority of a leader prior to joining the group, but rather, are gradually *taught to recognize* the charisma of a leader and thereby come to venerate them and accord them authority.

In closed-group environments, which are conducive to the charismatization process, new members are slowly exposed to images, stories, myths and claims about the leader that grant him or her special status or qualities.<sup>50</sup> A mimetic “echo chamber” effect then occurs where members share claims about the leader’s authority and importance with each other in an endless feedback loop. The lack of external criticism and the continual repetition of the leader’s charismatic qualifications contributes to the overall charismatization process. The charismatic leader becomes central to the folklore or story of the group, and members may even compete with each other to bear witness to the extraordinary qualities of the leader, further contributing to his or her aggrandizing mythology.

### **Conditions and motivations which lead to the routinization of charismatic authority**

(9) Are organizational decisions highly centralized and reliant on the will of the leader?

One of Weber’s focal concerns with charismatic authority is how it eventually routinizes (or bureaucratizes) into more stable and permanent forms of traditional and rational-legal authority.<sup>51</sup> Since charismatic authority is vested in a single individual rather than in long-held customs, institutions, or bureaucracy, it tends to be precarious and impermanent. This precariousness ensures that leaders are faced with a constant challenge to negotiate and validate their charismatic qualifications to their followers. One of these problems is negotiating the challenges of the routinization of charisma. Routinization occurs because followers have both ideological and material interest in seeing the group continue beyond the immediate charisma of their leader.<sup>52</sup> Charismatic movements that persist beyond the death or removal of their leader are ones who have successfully negotiated the routinization process. This push from followers towards bu-



reaucratization creates a challenge for the charismatic leader:

The very success of a charismatic leader's movement can pose problems for the leader. As the group survives and grows in size, it often becomes more bureaucratic, and charismatic leaders are inclined to resist this process of institutionalization. They seem to fear the "routinization" of their charismatic authority, to use Weber's well-known term... [and] this shift toward a more rational-legal mode of authority often is experienced by charismatic leaders as an unacceptable diminution of their own power.<sup>53</sup>

Charismatic terrorist leaders who successfully negotiate the challenges of the routinization of charisma are those who centralize power and authority within themselves. It is their will alone that dictates the direction of the group. Centralized authority based on the whims and idiosyncrasies of a single charismatic leader is antithetical to traditional and rational-legal forms of authority, who rely on offices, bureaucracy and an established hierarchy in order to govern.

(10) Is the leader intolerant of alternative sources of power and authority, both internal and external to the group?

(11) Does the leader introduce sudden and /or seemingly arbitrary changes in the practices and policies of the group?

(12) Do followers readily accept these sudden and/or seemingly arbitrary changes in the practices and policies of the group?

Dawson notes that there are six common strategies used by charismatic leaders of NRMs to combat the routinization of charisma within their groups: (1) sudden and dramatic alterations of doctrine and policies, (2) an escalation of demands placed on members for personal service and sacrifice to the group, (3) the invention of newer and greater enemies and engagement in crisis mongering, (4) careful intra-group control and stifling of internal dissent, (5) the execution of loyalty tests, and (6) changing the location or operating environment of the group.<sup>54</sup>

The second, third and fifth strategies are common across most, if not all, terrorist groups, who by their very nature demand a series of escalating commitments for personal service and sacrifice for the group<sup>55</sup> and frame their conflict as an existential struggle against powerful and evil enemies.<sup>56</sup> The execution and success of the remaining three strategies can vary across dif-

ferent leaders and terrorist groups. Dramatic and sudden shifts in doctrine and policy (e.g., new revelations, changes in dress and ideology) can shake up the group and refocus the members' attention onto the will of the leader. It also has a culling effect, as older members are shifted to the margins of the group while newer members are elevated to positions of power. Since ideal-typical charismatic leaders cannot abide a loss in their authority, internal dissent and challenges to the leader's authority are dealt with quickly and decisively through shaming, exile and peer pressure. Given the heightened need for security among terrorist groups, dealing with internal dissent may involve the overt use of lethal force to prevent cooperation between dissidents and governmental forces hostile to the group. Lastly, sudden and wholesale relocation of the group can be a failsafe tactic in order to stave off both external and internal influences that threaten to diminish the special status of the leader. This has an effect of further isolating the group from corrupting influences and consolidates the leader's power by ensuring followers have no one to rely on except the group itself, and by extension, the leader.<sup>57</sup>

Terrorist groups where charismatic authority is present and prevalent will most likely face issues involving routinization, as members seek to continue the movement's goals, success and ideology beyond the immediate influence of their leader. These or other similar strategies can be used by charismatic terrorist leaders to solidify power over their group and combat attempts to diminish their authority. The rapidity and degree with which followers accede to these destabilizing techniques is indicative of the magnitude to which a leader is capable of exerting charismatic authority over his or her group.

**(13)** Is the delegation of authority highly centralized and reliant on the will of the leader? **(14)**

Does the legitimacy of subordinate leaders in the group depend on the nature of their personal relationship with the leader?

As opposed to traditional and rational-legal forms of authority, power within a charismatically-led group emanates solely from the leader themselves and is wholly dependent on his or her whims and desires. Ideal-typical charismatically-led groups therefore do not function with formal positions or established hierarchies. Weber explains this at length:

The corporate group which is subject to charismatic authority is based on an emotional form



of communal relationship [*gemeinde*]. The administrative staff of a charismatic leader does not consist of “officials”; at least its members are not technically trained. It is not chosen on the basis of social privilege nor from the point of view of domestic or personal dependency. It is rather chosen in terms of the charismatic qualities of its members. The prophet has his disciples; the warlord his selected henchmen; the leader, generally, his followers. There is no such thing as “appointment” or “dismissal,” no career, no promotion. There is only a “call” at the instance of the leader on the basis of the charismatic qualifications of those he summons. There is no hierarchy; the leader merely intervenes in general or in individual cases when he considers the members of his staff inadequate to a task with which they have been entrusted... There are no established administrative organs. In their place are agents who have been provided with charismatic authority by their chief or who possess charisma of their own.<sup>58</sup>

Building upon Weber’s concept of the *gemeinde*, Roy Wallis notes that the “inner circle” within charismatically-led groups gain prestige from their close association with the leader. They become invested in propagating the leader’s charisma because “to secure recognition for the leader is thus to secure – in attenuated form – recognition for themselves.”<sup>59</sup> The legitimacy of subordinates in pure charismatically-led groups is therefore tied wholly to personal relationships with the leader.

In sum, ideal-typical charismatically-led groups will present with an informal and impermanent organizational structure, and prestige within the group will be based solely on social or affective proximity to the leader. Furthermore, the charismatic leader will typically have an inner circle of close confidants who actively work to spread the leader’s message and authority because their own power within the group is tied to the continued success and apparent charisma of the leader.

### **CASE STUDY: THE COVENANT, THE SWORD, AND THE ARM OF THE LORD**

The following section is an illustrative case study that applies the theoretical framework presented above to the issue of terrorist radicalization. It explores the relationship between the establishment, construction, and maintenance of charismatic authority and the progressive radicalization towards violence of the far-right terrorist group The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA). Space constraints limit the analysis to the first two social processes involved in the

attribution and maintenance of the charismatic bond (see table 1). While issues involving the routinization of charismatic authority were a likely contributor, they do not provide sufficient depth and insight into how and why the CSA radicalized. As a result, the analysis only takes the first eight indicators from the proposed framework into consideration.

Findings from a singular case study are insufficient to make broad generalizations about the causal relationship between charismatic authority and the radicalization of terrorists. While preliminary observations based upon the research findings are discussed in the subsequent section, it is not the primary intention of this exercise. Rather, this case study should be taken as an example of the deductive and heuristic strengths of the proposed framework. The section begins with a consideration of the data used in this study. This is then followed by a brief background on the CSA. Lastly, it discusses the relationship between pre-existing conditions conducive to the development of charismatic authority and the social construction and management of the charismatic bond with the radicalization towards violence of the CSA.

## **Data**

Data on the CSA were taken from the autobiographical accounts of Kerry Noble (CSA's second-in-command) and Danny Coulson (a federal agent assigned to negotiate with the CSA),<sup>60</sup> primary source documents written by the group, scholarly studies of the CSA,<sup>61</sup> and unsealed court documents and legal exhibits. Supplemental and confirmatory data were taken from an in-depth analysis of federal court cases against the core leadership of the CSA, interrogation transcripts with former CSA members, legal affidavits, criminal records of certain CSA members, and open-source media documents found using the Lexis-Nexis and Factiva databases.

## **Background on the CSA**

The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord was a far-right terrorist group that operated from 1976-1985. They espoused an apocalyptic survivalist ideology blended with conspiratorial, anti-government, racist, and anti-Semitic themes taken from Christian Identity. The CSA was initially founded as a Charismatic Christian (e.g., Pentecostal) movement by fundamentalist preach-



er James D. Ellison. By 1976, Ellison had gathered a small following of adherents on a secluded compound in the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas. In 1978, Ellison received a vision from God that prophesized the end of the world. At this point, the community embraced a catastrophic millenarian ideology that forecasted the imminent collapse of the American economy prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ. In order to prepare for the trials and tribulations associated with the apocalypse, Ellison directed his followers to begin stockpiling food, weapons, ammunition, and supplies so that they would be able to accept and shelter the inevitable flood of refuge seekers. Shortly after Ellison's divine revelation, the church spent approximately \$52,000 on weapons and military equipment, and began to practice military-style drills.

In 1979, Ellison returned from a work assignment in Missouri and introduced Christian Identity to his group. As a result, his followers gradually adopted a virulent racist, anti-government, and anti-Semitic worldview. This caused a shift in group ideology from passively awaiting for the apocalypse, to actively hastening its arrival. By 1982, the CSA began strengthening its ties to other right-wing survivalist movements, and even hosted a gathering of right-wing hate groups at their compound. They also became heavily involved in the gun show circuit, where they bought and sold weapons as a means of sustenance. In addition to stockpiling weapons, CSA members started to illegally convert weapons to automatic firing, manufacture grenades and ammunition, and craft silencers for their weapons.

In December of 1982, the CSA suffered a crisis of leadership that led to a schism where two-thirds of its members left the group. A three-year power-struggle between Ellison and one of his lieutenants, Randall Rader, culminated with a disagreement over the adoption of polygamy. Ellison's adamant stance on the matter, coupled with a long standing disagreement on the military direction of the group, caused Rader, his followers, and those that disagreed with the practice of polygamy to leave the CSA.<sup>62</sup> It was shortly after this event that the CSA began actively planning and executing terrorist attacks. This included the fire-bombing of a LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) church in Kansas City and a Jewish community centre in Indiana, the murder of pawnshop owner Bill Stumpp (who was mistaken as Jewish), the attempted bombing of a natural gas pipeline, and a plan to use a 30 gallon drum of cyanide to poison the water supplies

of major cities. The CSA also reportedly scouted out the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma as a potential target, but aborted the mission when the missile being constructed for the attack exploded prematurely.

During the summer of 1984, CSA member Wayne Snell shot and killed a black Arkansas state trooper during a routine traffic stop. When Snell was stopped during the ensuing roadblock and arrested, weapons were found in his car that were traced back to the CSA. Around the same time, two former CSA members turned state's evidence and provided information on the CSA's weapons manufacturing. They also indicated that several wanted members of The Order were hiding on the CSA compound.<sup>63</sup> Equipped with enough evidence, an arrest warrant was issued for Ellison on racketeering and a variety of weapons charges. In April 1985, a three-day siege of the CSA compound resulted in the peaceful surrender of Ellison and his followers. Despite efforts to continue the movement by some of the remaining members, the CSA disbanded shortly after Ellison's arrest.

### **Conditions giving rise to Ellison's charismatic authority**

Unsurprisingly, Charismatic Christian movements like the CSA are extremely fertile grounds for the emergence of charismatic leaders.<sup>64</sup> Most of, if not all, the major liturgical and theological beliefs of Charismatic Christianity (e.g., divine healing, prophecy, miracles, figurative reading of the bible) socialize members into believing that divine and extraordinary acts can and do occur on a regular basis. It provides credence to emergent charismatic leaders who claim to have an intimate knowledge of God's will, since adherents believe that He is involved in the daily lives of the faithful. However, whether or not these emergent leaders are successful in gaining a measure of charismatic authority over others is contingent on their capability of gathering a following. This is what differentiated Ellison from a multitude of other "wannabe" preachers and spiritual leaders within the larger Charismatic Christian movement.

Charismatic Christianity's focus on the imminent apocalypse and on conservative Christian values also created an environment conducive to the emergence of charismatic leaders. Much like other Charismatic Christian movements, the CSA believed that the end of days was nigh,



and would be followed by a period of trials and tribulations prior to God's judgement.<sup>65</sup> The landmark abortion case of *Roe vs. Wade*, drug use, and other immoral behaviours were pointed to as signs that God's judgement was inevitable. As the CSA became increasingly enmeshed in Christian Identity culture, this list of societal evils expanded to include race mixing, Jewish influence in America, and the evils of the federal government and the New World Order. Ellison was shrewd enough to encourage this crisis mindset among his followers, thereby helping pave the way for their acceptance of his charismatic authority. To Ellison and his followers, the world had gone mad and the only solution was to fortify themselves in their compound and await God's judgement.

### **The social construction and management of Ellison's charismatic authority**

The qualitative data suggest that Ellison was clearly perceived as extraordinary by his followers. A recurring theme during praise meetings, personal conversations between members, and in court testimony by both the group's leadership and membership was the notion that God had chosen Ellison, and by extension his followers, for a higher purpose.<sup>66</sup> Due to his perceived extraordinary nature, followers both consciously and unconsciously tried to curry favor with Ellison, most often through recitation of prophecies during praise meetings aimed at curbing dissent within the group or reinforcing his special status.<sup>67</sup> Even after Ellison's arrest, many members of the CSA fervently believed that God would intervene and miraculously release him from prison to continue serving His will.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to the recognition of Ellison's extraordinary nature, there was a clear charismatization process in the CSA that focused on educating new members about his special powers and authority. Much of this process hinged on the semi-regular commission of miracles by Ellison and the recitation of stories about his supernatural powers among the group's membership. For example, Ellison claimed to have resurrected his son from the dead after he had been hit by a car in 1977. Witnessing this miracle was a crucial turning point in Kerry Noble's acceptance of Ellison's charismatic authority:

Almost everyone seemed to take what happened with Joseph [Ellison's son] being raised from the



dead like it was a normal everyday occurrence... It seemed God had now confirmed with signs and wonders that He was indeed active in these people's lives. I believed God was definitely moving in this place and now I was really convinced Kay [Noble's wife] and I were meant to be here.<sup>69</sup>

These semi-regular miracles were accompanied by claims of Ellison's supernatural abilities and prowess, such as the supposed ability to turn into a mouse to escape danger, and the ability to chew poison ivy leaves with no ill effects.<sup>70</sup> The isolationist nature of the CSA also contributed to a closed echo chamber effect that magnified the impact of the grandiose stories about Ellison's importance and divinely-chosen status. These included a claim by Ellison that he was resurrected by God after a building collapsed on him during a workplace accident in 1970,<sup>71</sup> tales of his superhuman capacity for kindness and forgiveness,<sup>72</sup> and how God spoke to him on a regular basis.<sup>73</sup> Members who overtly challenged Ellison's authority were rapidly expelled from the group.<sup>74</sup> With no outside feedback to challenge members' assumptions of these claims, the charismatic process within the CSA was effective at teaching new members to recognize Ellison's charismatic authority.

Ellison's perceived extraordinariness undoubtedly played a significant role in the progressive radicalization of the CSA. He figured prominently in much of the CSA's folklore. His personality, will, and whims were clearly stamped upon the communal identity of his followers, who looked to him as a temporal prophet of the Lord. It is therefore unsurprising that the CSA rapidly adopted Christian Identity ideology at Ellison's behest. By framing the world as a dualistic struggle of us (White Christians) vs. them (Blacks, Jews, the New World Order, etc.), Christian Identity provided a comprehensible framework for the CSA to interpret Ellison's prophecies about the coming apocalypse. More importantly, the adoption of a Christian Identity worldview gave Ellison a cause with which to legitimate his "chosen" status by providing a visible enemy which he and his followers were tasked to defeat. To use Mark Juergensmeyer's term, the CSA envisioned an imminent symbolic "cosmic war" that consisted of a divine struggle between the forces of good and evil.<sup>75</sup> This allowed Ellison to cast himself as the leader of the faithful during the rapidly approaching time of tribulations. This is exactly what he did in 1983, when he



crowned himself as “King of the Ozarks” during an elaborate ceremony. As a divinely-ordained ruler, any criticism of Ellison could be interpreted as criticism of God’s will. Whatever individual doubts members may have had about the direction of Ellison’s leadership were likely quashed by their sincere faith in God’s plan, fear of social repercussions (e.g., expulsion or being branded a non-believer), genuine loyalty to their fellow group members and to Ellison, or some combination of the three.

A turning point in the radicalization towards violence of the CSA was Ellison’s failure to maintain his charismatic authority during the aftermath of the 1982 defection of nearly two-thirds of the group’s membership. Even though only the most fervent of his followers remained, Ellison’s image of extraordinariness had been significantly shaken.<sup>76</sup> Noble recounts that it was during this time Ellison became obsessed with his legacy and how history would remember him.<sup>77</sup> At Ellison’s urging, the CSA began to plan and execute violent attacks against their perceived enemies. A similar spiral towards violence has been empirically observed in certain cults and new religious movements whose leaders failed to maintain their charismatic authority.<sup>78</sup> As Dawson argues, the act of striking out against a demonized enemy serves to reinforce the goals of the group, vents rage and frustration, and strengthens the bond between leader and followers.<sup>79</sup> Violence becomes “the ultimate act of charismatic legitimation” for a leader with very few options left.<sup>80</sup> This appears to have been the case for the CSA. Reflecting on why he agreed to participate in an aborted attempt to blow up an adult bookstore in Kansas City, Noble recalls that his “desperation to earn a place in Ellison’s kingdom now outweighed any value for human life.”<sup>81</sup> The violent struggle against the enemy (who symbolized all that was wrong with the world) became an all-encompassing unifying factor for the CSA. Expending the effort to strike at the enemies of the CSA further legitimated Ellison’s divinely-inspired mission and diverted attention away from the crisis that threatened his charismatic authority.

## DISCUSSION

This case study is a useful example of how the theoretical framework presented above can operationalize charismatic authority for use during empirical analyses of terrorist leadership. When using the framework as a heuristic device, it is clear that Ellison was an extremely charismatic leader who exercised an atypically strong form of influence over his followers. The CSA's roots in Charismatic Christianity provided a fertile ground for the emergence of charismatic leaders. This presented Ellison with an appropriate setting with which to begin establishing the charismatic bond with his followers and to cement their perceptions of his extraordinary nature. After he had succeeded in gathering a following who recognized and legitimated his charismatic authority, Ellison's status as God's chosen made it difficult to repudiate his will. Those that challenged his authority were quickly culled from the group. This gave Ellison a disproportionate amount of clout in deciding the ideological direction of his followers. As a result, he had a central role in directing them towards violence by blending his prophetic apocalyptic visions with core concepts taken from Christian Identity. Ellison's promotion of a dualistic world-view replete with racism, anti-federalism, conspiracy theories, and anti-Semitism set the stage for a progressive slide towards violence by providing ideological justification. It also served to buoy his charismatic authority by placing himself and his followers at the centre of an impending spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil. Perhaps most importantly, a pivotal turning point in the CSA's radicalization towards violence can be linked directly to Ellison's failure to maintain the charismatic bond. The escalation towards violence was a tool used by Ellison to legitimate his charismatic authority, unify his followers under his banner and establish his legacy, all while diverting attention away from the cataclysmic defection of close to two-thirds of his adherents.

When tracing both processes throughout the lifespan of the CSA, it appears that the relationship between charismatization and radicalization was not causal in a purely straightforward manner (e.g., charismatization solely influenced the radicalization process). Rather, the data suggest that there was a complex interplay between the charismatization and radicalization processes within the CSA. Ellison's progressive establishment of the charismatic bond with his followers



coincided with a gradual slide towards increased radicalism and violence. Both processes operated concurrently and fed off of one another. The CSA's increased radicalism provided Ellison and his followers with a framework to cast themselves as key players in the coming apocalypse, and singled out "demonic" enemies which they were tasked to defeat. This served to strengthen the charismatization process, but it also set the CSA on a gradual and perhaps inevitable path towards the commission of acts of religiously-inspired terrorism. The group's rhetoric and ideology eventually escalated to a point where violent action was all but necessary to maintain Ellison's authority, particularly during the aftermath of a serious blow to followers' perceptions of Ellison's charisma. In crude terms, after years of talking about the fighting the enemy it was time for Ellison and the CSA to "put up, or shut up." Rather than admit the failures of their leader and his divine mission, the members of the CSA opted to further legitimize Ellison's charisma by planning and executing terrorist attacks. This suggests that, as in the cases of violent NRMs,<sup>82</sup> the failure to maintain the charismatic bond within terrorists groups with high levels of charismatic authority may be a major precipitant to acts of violence.<sup>83</sup>

It should be noted that the presence of strong charismatic leadership is not a sufficient condition by itself to propel a group towards violent action. In his discussion of how NRMs become violent and its applicability to the context of terrorism studies, Dawson points to three important factors: (1) apocalyptic or world-rejecting beliefs, (2) the presence of strong charismatic leadership, and (3) social isolation or encapsulation.<sup>84</sup> All three of these factors are present in the case of the CSA, and each feasibly contributed to the radicalization process. The extent to which apocalyptic beliefs and social encapsulation contribute to the interplay between the charismatization and radicalization processes within terrorist groups needs to be explored in more detail in future research. Future research should also seek to discern if a similar relationship between the charismatization and radicalization processes can be found within other types of terrorist groups (e.g., Salafist jihadist, left-wing, or ethno-nationalist groups) and in groups with varying levels of charismatic authority. If this relationship is indeed substantiated by additional nuanced and comparative research, findings suggest that extremely charismatic leaders may play a pivotal role in directing and influencing the radicalization process within terrorist groups.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, this

suggests that radical and fringe groups where a strong charismatization process is present may be at increased risk of committing acts of terrorism, particularly if they are socially encapsulated and hold apocalyptic beliefs. This has operational implications for counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes. The identification of potentially violent groups where a strong charismatization process is present may be a red flag for security agencies. Paying close attention to the development of the charismatization process and the maintenance of the charismatic bond within radical social, political, and religious movements can possibly provide early warning that an at-risk group may be slipping towards the commission of a terrorist act. Early identification also grants opportunities for CVE programmes to intervene and attempt to combat the process of radicalization, although the de-legitimization of a highly charismatic leader is a daunting task given the commonly found environmental factors and social dynamics involved in the attribution of charismatic authority. The current findings are promising, however, much more research of this nature needs to be conducted before crafting any practical intervention and counter-terrorism measures aimed at disrupting or dissolving charismatically-led terrorist groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

Scholars have repeatedly noted the probable significance of charismatic leaders in the recruitment,<sup>86</sup> radicalization,<sup>87</sup> strategic operation,<sup>88</sup> and dissolution of terrorist groups.<sup>89</sup> This article does not seek to authoritatively test these claims. Rather, as argued, the literature requires a sound methodological foundation with which to begin measuring and developing a sense of the nature, relative presence, and impact of charismatic terrorist leaders. The justification, creation, and application of the theoretical framework for measuring the presence of charismatic authority presented in this article is a first step towards the production of additional research on charismatic terrorist leadership. It provides methodological and theoretical grounding for future empirical research interested in investigating the various claims made by terrorism scholars about charismatic terrorist leadership. As partially surveyed in Hofmann and Dawson,<sup>90</sup> and discussed further here, there are at least six ways in which the theoretical framework presented in this article



can be pertinent to future empirical analyses of charismatic terrorist leadership:

- (1) Recruitment and mobilization: As suggested by the robust literature on charismatic authority in management sciences, the study of new religious movements, and other social scientific disciplines, charismatic leaders play an important role in the creation and operation of their organizations.<sup>91</sup> Is this also the case in terrorist movements? Furthermore, once they have gathered a following, how exactly do charismatic terrorist leaders influence the mobilization of financial, strategic, and social capital in the pursuit of organizational goals?<sup>92</sup>
- (2) Explanation of ideological appeal: Can the presence of charismatic leadership explain why certain terrorist ideologies have more appeal than others?<sup>93</sup> With many different terrorist groups competing for members from the same base of supporters (e.g., Hamas, Fatah, Al-Aqsa's Martyrs Brigade), a better understanding of the dynamics of charismatic authority may help explain why some choose to join or support one terrorist group over another.
- (3) Legitimation of terrorism: Does the establishment of the charismatic bond help legitimize the actions of terrorist movements? In other words, does the avid acceptance of a charismatic leader's authority by followers pave the way for the acceptance of a radical, violent, or world-rejecting ideological viewpoint? The current literature points to the importance of followers' perceptions of a leader's sacred authority, credibility and trustworthiness in the gradual adoption of a radical world-view or ideology, but these assumptions have yet to be rigorously tested with empirical and comparative research.<sup>94</sup>
- (4) Promotion of violence: Does the presence of extreme forms of charismatic authority catalyze violence within terrorist groups? The new religious movement literature points to a dysfunctional dynamic between charismatic authority, apocalypticism, and social encapsulation as the primary cause of violence.<sup>95</sup> Is this also the case in certain charismatically-led terrorist groups, as suggested by the illustrative case study presented above?
- (5) Operational efficiency and tactical choices: Is strong charismatic leadership an important component in determining the strategic choices and efficacy of terrorist groups? The charismatic qualities of leaders are often pointed to in the terrorism literature as a partial explanation for operational efficiency<sup>96</sup> or the choice of certain targets and tactics.<sup>97</sup> But, the exact reason as to *why* and *how* charismatic authority may influence strategic choices and efficiency within terrorist groups has yet to be explored in any detail.
- (6) The effectiveness of leadership decapitation strategies: For the most part, the existing litera-

ture on leadership decapitation<sup>98</sup> relies overmuch on macro-level statistical analyses, and fails to account for the *quality* of leadership when analyzing the effectiveness of the leadership removal strategies. In other words, little of the current research on leadership decapitation takes into account the relative importance of differing styles of leadership to the ideological and strategic well-being of terrorist groups.<sup>99</sup> A better understanding of the dynamics of charismatic and other forms of terrorist leadership (e.g., grass-roots, operational, transactional) may help provide some resolution in the ongoing debate over whether or not the coercive removal or arrest of leaders is an effective counter-terrorism strategy.

Considering the probable importance of pure charismatic terrorist leaders to the formation, operation, and demise of groups engaged in terrorism, each of these areas of future research have obvious implications for counterterrorism policies and practices. At this stage we are still a long way from seeing the real benefits of actively pursuing many of these lines of inquiry. But a necessary first step is to effect the operationalization of our conception of charismatic leadership and authority. This study indicates the feasibility of doing so, and how we might best proceed.



## ENDNOTES

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  10. Hofmann and Dawson, "The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority," 355-360.
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  12. Jordan, "When Heads Roll", 727.
  13. For example: Jordan, "When Heads Roll," 727; Lisa Langdon, Alexander Sarapu and Matthew Wells, "Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements: Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy Makers," *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 15 (2004): 63-65.
  14. For example: Freeman, "A Theory of Terrorist Leadership (and its Consequences for Leadership Targeting)," 2; Jerrold Post, "When Hatred is Bred in the Bone: Psycho-cultural Foundations of Contemporary Terrorism," *Political Psychology* 26 (2005): 632; Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, 45.
  15. The definition of terrorism used in this article borrows core concepts from definitions presented in: Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Paige Deckert, "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 59 (2014): 425-426; Alex P. Schmid, "The Definition of Terrorism," in A.P. Schmid (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London: Routledge, 2013), 39-98.
  16. Hofmann and Dawson, "The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority in the Study of Terrorist Groups and Radicalization," 360-363.
  17. For example see: Bernard M. Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (New York: The Free Press, 1985); J. Bryan Fuller, Coleman E.P. Patterson, Kim Hester, and Donna Y. Stringer, "A Quantitative Review of Research on Charismatic Leadership," *Psychological Reports* 78, (1996): 271-287; Robert J. House, William D. Spangler, and James Woycke, "Personality and Charisma in the U.S. Presidency: A Psychological Theory of Leader Effectiveness," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36 (1991): 348-368. Schbley and McCauley, "Political, Religious, and Psychological characteristics of Muslim Protest Marchers in Eight European Cities," 569-570.
  18. Lorne Dawson, "Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements," in C. Wessinger (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 119; Gardner and Avolio, "The Charismatic Relationship", 40; Aldon Morris and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Leadership in Social Movements," in D.A. Snow, S.A. Soule and H. Kriesi (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 172; Bryan Wilson, *The Noble Savages: The Primitive Origins of Charisma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 4.
  19. An "ideal-type" in sociological theory is a typological device used often by Weber and social scientists influenced by his methodology. An ideal-type is a nuanced construction of hypothetical and abstract concepts that results in the creation of a "pure" type of social phenomenon. "Ideal" or "pure" types do not exist in reality in their entirety, but act as an essential objective reference for social scientists interested in particular social phenomena. This suggests that Weber conceived of authority as capable of manifesting in differing magnitudes.
  20. Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 48.



21. Robert Tucker, "The Theory of Charismatic Leadership," in D.A. Rustow (ed.), *Philosophers and Kings: Studies in Leadership* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), 70.
22. Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 25.
23. Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* 135-165. See also: Eileen Barker, "Charismatization: The Social Production of 'an Ethos Propitious to the Mobilisation of Sentiments'," in Eileen Barker, J.A. Beckford and Karel Dobbelaere (eds.), *Secularization, Rationalism and Sectarianism: Essays in Honour of Bryan R. Wilson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993): 182-183; Hofmann and Dawson, "The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority," 351-355; Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 54-58.
24. Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 48.
25. Wilson, *The Noble Savages*, 7.
26. For example Barker, "Charismatization" 182-183; Jane M. Howell and Boas Shamir, "The Role of Followers in the Charismatic Leadership Process: Relationships and their Consequences," *Academy of Management Review* 30, no. 1 (2005), 96-112; Douglas Madsen and Peter Snow, *The Charismatic Bond: Political Behavior in Time of Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
27. Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 48; Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford Press, 1946), 267-302.
28. For example: Barker, "Charismatization" 182-183; David Bromley and J.G. Melton (eds.), *Cults, Religion & Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy," 80-101; Lorne Dawson, "Psychopathologies and the Attribution of Charisma: A Critical Introduction to the Psychology of Charisma and the Explanation of Violence in New Religious Movements," *Nova Religio* 10 (2006): 3-28; Dawson, "Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements," 119; Roy Wallis, "The Social Construction of Charisma," *Social Compass* 29 (1982): 25-39.
29. In contrast to terrorist groups, only a minority of NRMs progress towards violent action. See: Lorne Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 14-38.
30. Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994): 247-249; Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements," 1; Marc Galanter and James J.F. Forest, "Cults, Charismatic Groups, and Social Systems: Understanding the Transformation of Terrorist Recruits," in James J.F. Forest, ed., *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training, and Root Causes* (Westport: Praeger, 2006): 51-70; Massimo Introvigne, "Of 'Cultists' and 'Martyrs': The Study of New Religious Movements and Suicide Terrorism in Conversation," in M. Al-Rasheed and M. Shterin (eds.), *Dying for Faith: Religious Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009): 43-48; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 84.
31. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements," 18.
32. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 21.
33. There inevitable exceptions to this case, such as when some terrorist groups slowly evolve into criminal-like for-profit organizations. It can be argued, however, that these types of terrorist groups shed the need for charismatic leadership as their goals shift from ideological aims to routinized bureaucratic aims. See: Chris Dishman, "Terrorism, Crime, and Transformation," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24, (2001): 43-58.
34. See: Dawson, "Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements," 114.



35. Dawson, "Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements," 121-123.
36. Conger and Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership*, 329; Dawson, "Study of New Religious Movements," 119-120; Wilson, *The Noble Savages*, 26.
37. Dawson, "Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements," 121.
38. Dawson, "Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements," 120; Conger and Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership*, 329-333.
39. Peter Berger, "Charisma and Religious Innovation: The Social Location of Israelite Prophecy," *American Sociological Review* 28, (1963): 940-950; Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
40. A recent example is Lakshmi Tatma, a baby born in 2005 with eight limbs who was worshipped as a deity by members of her rural Indian village.
41. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 48.
42. Dawson, "Psychopathologies," 19-20; Gardner and Avolio, "The Charismatic Relationship" 33-34.
43. Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946): 267-322.
44. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 49-52.
45. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements," 15.
46. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 152-158; Stuart Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 191.
47. Weber, "Charisma and Institution Building," 51.
48. For example: John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2005): 19; McCauley and Moskaleiko, *Friction* 35-48; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 137-178; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008): 71-88; Silber and Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West" 36-42.
49. Barker, "Charismatization," 182-186.
50. Barker, "Charismatization," 193; Wallis, "The Social Construction of Charisma," 34.
51. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 54-61.
52. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 54.
53. Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy," 91.
54. Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy," 92-94.
55. For example: Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* 95-96; Vertigans, *The Sociology of Terrorism* 71-74; Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising* 19, 167, 208.
56. For example: Randy Borum, "Understanding the Terrorist Mindset," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (July 2003), pp. 7-10; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* 174-181; Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* 34-37.
57. Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy," 92-94.
58. Weber, *Charisma and Institution Building*, 50-51.
59. Wallis, "The Social Construction of Charisma," 38.



60. Danny Coulson and Elaine Shannon, *No Heroes: Inside the FBI's Secret Counter-Terror Force* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999); Kerry Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate: Seduction into Right-Wing Extremism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010).
61. Michael Barkun, "Millenarian Aspects of 'White Supremacist' Movements," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 1, (1989): 409-434; Michael Barkun, "Religion, Militias and Oklahoma City: The Mind of Conspiratorialists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8, (1996): 50-64; James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America's Racist Underground* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1989); Mark S. Hamm, *In Bad Company: America's Terrorist Underground* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002); Brent Smith, Kelly Damphousse, and Paxton Roberts, "The Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord," in *Pre-Incident Indicators of Terrorist Incidents: The Identification of Behavioral, Geographic, and Temporal Patterns of Preparatory Conduct*, eds. Brent Smith, Kelly Damphousse, and Paxton Roberts (Washington: US Department of Justice); Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
62. Ellison overplayed his hand when trying to introduce polygamy into the group, and as a result received "pushback" from competing sources of leadership. This type of dynamic is common when strong charismatic leaders achieve extreme levels of success, which lead them to believe that their exercise of power is limitless. Due to the nature of charismatic authority, leaders like Ellison cannot accept compromise when challenged. As a result, these types of intra-group crises often result in the expulsion, demonization, and/or discrediting of the dissenting members.
63. The Order was a right-wing group with similar goals to the CSA.
64. Joel Robbins, "The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, (2004): 130-131.
65. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 73.
66. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 49, 65; Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, 25-26; Testimony of James Ellison before Grand Jury, September 26, 1984, Eastern District of Oklahoma; *United States of America vs. James D. Ellison and William Thomas*, 85-20006-01/02, (W.D. Ark, 1985); *United States of America vs. Kerry Noble*, 85-20017-04, (W.D. Ark, 1985).
67. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 50-53, 97-98.
68. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 229.
69. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 49-50.
70. Coulson and Shannon, *No Heroes*, 299, 310.
71. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 28, 65.
72. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 56.
73. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 60, 63.
74. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 52-53.
75. Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religion as a Cause of Terrorism" in *The Roots of Terrorism*, Louise Richardson ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2006): 141.
76. In an interview with Jean Rosenfeld, Agent Danny Coulson stated that he believes Ellison spurred the CSA towards violence in order to maintain his waning leadership. See: Jean Rosenfeld, "Introduction," in *Tabernacle of Hate: Seduction into Right-Wing Extremism*, Kerry Noble (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010), xv-xvi.
77. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 155.



78. Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy"; Thomas Robbins, "Sources of Volatility in Religious Movements," in David. G. Bromley and J.G. Melton (eds.), *Cults, Religion & Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 57-79. Christine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).
79. Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy," 89-97.
80. Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy," 89-97.
81. Noble, *Tabernacle of Hate*, 171.
82. For example, see: Robbins, "Sources of Volatility in Religious Movements," 57-79.
83. While this observation needs to be substantiated by further empirical research, there are other examples of the failure to maintain the charismatic bond catalyzing violent action in groups like Aum Shinrykyo.
84. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements," 10.
85. See also: Mirra Noor Milla, Faturachman and Djameludin Ancok, "The impact of leader-follower interactions on the radicalization of terrorists: A case study of the Bali bombers," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 16, (2013): 92-100.
86. Crelinsten, *Counterterrorism*, 72; Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 25-26.
87. Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2011): 93; Hamm, *In Bad Company*, 288
88. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 137; Silber and Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West," 50.
89. Audrey K. Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009): 17-24; Seth Jones and Martin Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008): 52-54; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 38.
90. Hofmann and Dawson, "The Neglected Role of Charismatic Authority," 362-363.
91. For example, see: Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*; Alan Bryman, *Charisma & Leadership in Organizations* (London: Sage, 1992); Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy"; Morris and Staggenborg, "Leadership in Social Movements."
92. Morris and Staggenborg, "Leadership in Social Movements"; Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism* 102.
93. Darcy Noricks, "The Root Causes of Terrorism" in P.K. Davis and K. Cragin, eds., *Social Science of Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* (Arlington, VA: National Defense Research Institute, RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 52.
94. For example, see: Jonathan L. Maynard, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, p. 827; Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising*, 25-26.
95. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 142-166; Robbins, "Sources of Volatility in Religious Movements".
96. For example: Aydinli, "From Finances to Transnational Mobility," 307; Silber and Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West," 50.
97. For example: Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 98, 111-112.
98. See endnote 8 for a list of relevant studies on leadership decapitation.
99. The lone exception to this is the work done by Freeman, "A Theory of Terrorist Leadership (and its Consequences for Leadership Targeting)," 2.



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