The Psychology of Terrorists: The Fourth Floor of the Staircase

Move up to the fourth floor. The main psychological process that shifts on the fourth floor is categorical thinking. The "us versus them" thinking. "We are right, they are wrong" thinking.

And categorical thinking allows the other, the outgroup to be labeled as non-human, as sinful, as anything that justifies exterminating them. Categorical thinking allows an individual or a group to place the other group in a category that can be treated in inhumane ways. And we see this not only in terrorism, but also in atrocities throughout history where the other is labeled as vermin, as cockroaches, as non-human in many different ways.

Again, this does not mean that inevitably it will lead to terrorist action. It does not mean that having an attitude that is labeling the other group as non-human will inevitably lead you to try to destroy them, but it increases the probability. So what we have is throughout this staircase, from the ground floor moving up, each floor being characterized by particular psychological processes.

We have this gradual movement to a situation where the individual is seeing their future as closed. Their progress as limited. They are very frustrated.

They see the target of their aggression very clearly. They feel that there is moral justification for aggression. And they feel that the outgroup is non-human or a justified target in some way.