

Terrorism: Psychology and Kinetics

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Purpose



- ✓ The purpose of this presentation is to succinctly analyze the research and professional literature regarding the “psychology of terrorism”.
- ✓ The psychological approach to terrorism is in many ways analogous to the psychological approach to criminal behavior.

References & Sources



All references and sources are appended at end of this brief.

Definition of Terrorism



- ✓ There is no universally accepted definition for terrorism.
- ✓ Terrorism is about one thing: Psychology. It is the psychology of fear.



Definition of Terrorism



- ✓ Marsella provides a comprehensive definition of terrorism that takes into account psychology and kinetics (i.e. violence).
- ✓ Marsella defines terrorism as the use of force or violence (i.e. kinetics), by individuals or groups that is directed toward civilian populations and intended to instill fear (i.e. psychology) as a means of coercing individuals or groups to change their political and social positions.

Study of Terrorism



- ✓ Professionals study terrorism to discover who are or may become terrorists, with aspirations of detecting, identifying, targeting, and eventually neutralizing the terrorist threat.
- ✓ Terrorism consists of complex behavior with many factors involved in the creation of a terrorist.



Misconceptions



- ✓ Terrorists are psychopaths or mentally disordered.
- ✓ Terrorists have marked personality disorders.
- ✓ Terrorist violence is the result frustration and economic deprivation.
- ✓ Terrorists are psychologically coerced by mastermind recruiters.

Terrorist Profiling



- ✓ The lack of a typical terrorist profile, set of behaviors, or diagnosable mental clusters makes it difficult to predict who will become terrorists and once having become a terrorist even more difficult to detect, identify, and target them.
- ✓ However, there have been several promising attempts to create a confluence of psychology, sociology, and criminal justice to produce profiles.

Terrorist Profile



Russell and Miller (1977) found that the following people tend to join terrorist organizations:

- 22-25 years of age
- 80% male, with women in support roles
- 75-80% single
- 66% middle or upper class background
- 66% some college or graduate work
- 42% previous participation in working class advocacy groups
- 17% unemployed
- 18% strong religious beliefs



Personality Profile



- ✓ *To date, little evidence* points to a distinct and definitive terrorist personality.

- ✓ It is difficult to understand terrorism without psychological insight:
 - Analysis of the intentions, thinking, and motivations of the terrorist; seeing things from the terrorist's perspective.

Not All Alike



- ✓ People become terrorists in many different ways and for many different reasons.
- ✓ There is a broad spectrum of terrorists, terrorist groups, and terrorist organizations, each having a different psychology, motivation, and behavior. We should not speak of a “terrorist psychology” in the singular, but rather of terrorist psychologies in the plural.
- ✓ The implication is terrorists and terrorist groups are best studied by addressing their own unique characteristics and dynamics.

No Uniqueness



- ✓ Behavior of terrorists reflect the psychological makeup and motivations of people in general.
- ✓ There are no unique portfolios of behaviors that characterize the motivations and processes by which people become terrorists and commit terrorist acts.
- ✓ *Terrorism is a heterogeneous phenomenon.*

Normalcy Feature



- ✓ Crenshaw identifies *normalcy* as the characteristic feature of terrorists rather than psychopathology or personality disturbance.
- ✓ *Terrorists, it seems, are disturbingly normal.*
- ✓ Heskin in his work did not find IRA members to be mentally or emotionally disturbed.
- ✓ Taylor concludes mental illness has little utility with respect to most terrorists.

Psychology of Terrorism Factors



- ✓ Motivation
- ✓ Cognitive Restructuring
- ✓ Psychopathology
- ✓ Frustration-Aggression
- ✓ Group Dynamics
- ✓ Socialization
- ✓ Moral Disengagement
- ✓ Goal Directed Behavior
- ✓ Terrorist Self-Perception
- ✓ Dehumanization



Motivation



- ✓ There is no single motive for engaging in terrorism.
- ✓ Motives are multiple and complex, ranging from revenge and anger to a quest for paradise, status, and respect.
- ✓ Suicide terrorists almost always have at least one relative or close friend who has been killed, maimed, or abused by an enemy.

Cognitive Restructuring



- ✓ Cognitive restructuring involves moral justifications, euphemistic language, and advantageous comparisons.
- ✓ Terrorists justify their horrific acts by cognitively redefining the morality of killing so that it can be done free from self-censuring restraints.
- ✓ Most terrorists feel that they are doing nothing wrong when they use violent means to kill and injure.

Psychopathology



- ✓ Many terrorists seem to share a feature of a psychological condition known as *anti-social personality disorder* or *psychopathic personality disorder*, which is an absence of empathy for the suffering of others – they don't feel other people's pain.
- ✓ However, they do not appear unstable or mentally ill.

Frustration-Aggression Theory



- ✓ Frustration-aggression theory applied to terrorist behavior.
- ✓ Terrorist behavior is a response to the frustration of various political, economic, and personal needs.
- ✓ Disenfranchised third world youth struggle with frustration and exclusion.



Group Dynamics & Socialization



- ✓ Terrorists rely on groups and networks for logistics, social, and psychological support.
- ✓ They may gravitate to a local prayer group or mosque to find emotional warmth and solidarity.



Group Dynamics & Recruitment



- ✓ Recruitment into terrorist groups will often be done by peers and by members of virtual groups.
- ✓ The likelihood of joining a particular group can depend strongly on personal connections, family ties, school friendships, chance encounters, etc.
- ✓ Internet, chat rooms and other virtual groups appear to becoming more important as recruitment sources.

Goal-Directed Behavior



- ✓ Terrorism is usually goal-directed behavior.
- ✓ Understanding the political/social goals being pursued by terrorists and terror groups is central to understanding terrorism.
- ✓ Political, social and ideological goals drive the decisions of individuals and groups. Also, strategic and tactical decisions are influenced by organizational goals: support your group, gain individual prestige, strike back at hated targets.

How Terrorists See Themselves



- ✓ Understanding how terrorists perceive themselves offers insight into their behavior and thought process.
- ✓ Few terrorists think of themselves as terrorists.
- ✓ They see themselves as heroic freedom fighters.



Dehumanization



- ✓ Dehumanized enemies are no longer viewed as people with feelings, hopes, and concerns but seen as savages, unwashed masses, evil cowards, and so on.
- ✓ *It is easier to kill strangers divested of human qualities*



Dehumanization



- ✓ Terrorist ideologies often provide a set of beliefs or perceptions that justify attacks on civilians
- ✓ These belief systems, therefore, justify terrorism
- ✓ Cognitive reconstruction and dehumanization are interactive



Dehumanization



- ✓ Terrorist organizations use moral disengagement and dehumanization to desensitize their recruits for terrorist missions involving heinous acts.
- ✓ Moral disengagement is the process of engaging in activities detrimental towards others while furthering your own self-interests.
- ✓ Terrorists use dehumanization, and moral disengagement to help them view certain situations as justifiable.



Wrap Up

There is no single profile of suicide terrorists.

For example most, but not all, suicide terrorists are aged between 16 and 28. Most are male, but 15% are female and that proportion is rising. Many come from poor backgrounds and have limited education, but some have university degrees and come from wealthy families.

This stereotype is struggling to fit suicide terrorists more and more in recent years.



**Suicide Bomber
64-Year-Old Grandmother**

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