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Roots of Terrorism: The Socio-psychological Terrorist

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The thought of terrorism generates images of bombings, mass destruction, violence, innocent victims and other depictions augmented towards creating fear in one's mind. Terrorism has existed for centuries; it is just that its form has evolved from random killings to massive organized attacks. Other countries were, and possibly are quite familiar with the problems of terrorism, but in the US, the fairly unaware general public woke up to one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in September 11, 2001, which forced them to raise a question: Who are they and why did they attack? A simple answer to the question emphasized the poor and uneducated people adopting extreme views turned to terrorism (Krueger 1). The answer appealed to most of the people ranging from scholars and public figures to general public. The popular culture disregards the origins of terrorism as coming from lower classes and mentally unstable individuals; however, the roots of terrorism lie in various social and psychological influences.

Terrorism's Social Class

Terrorism being a subjective concept holds different meanings to different groups of people. Those terrorizing may view it as a holy duty or a justifiable reaction to oppression and those being terrorized label it as a crime or inexcusable abomination. A common understanding of terrorism includes an involvement of an act of violence, an audience, the creation of a mood of fear, innocent victims, and political/religious/social goals or motives (Jackson 4). Rather than coming up with varied definitions for terrorism, the key question here is analyzing what makes individuals commit to such acts of violence.

There are no specific rules to determine who becomes a terrorist but analyzing the backgrounds of past terrorist activities and the individuals involved, clearly provides a base to

understand potential terrorists. Generally, when one envisions a terrorist, he or she blames economic deprivation and a lack of education for people to adopt extreme views and turn to terrorism. The explanation appealed to a wide range of people, from President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair to religious figures of all faiths to public intellectuals. In his book “What Makes a Terrorist”, Krueger cites:

In a major speech he gave in Monterrey, Mexico, on March 22, 2002, President Bush said, “we fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror” (12). His wife Laura Bush further claimed, “A lasting victory in the war against terror depends on educating the world’s children because educated children are much more likely to embrace the values that defeat terror” (12). On November 12, 2001, Prime Minister Tony Blair said, “The dragon’s teeth of terrorism are planted in the fertile soil of wrongs unrighted, of disputes left to fester for years or even decades, of failed states, of poverty and deprivation (13).

This popular explanation of terrorism is completely based on faith without bearing any scientific or statistical confirmation. As of today, over half of the population lives on \$2.50 a day or less (Poverty facts), and more than one billion people are illiterate (CIA fact book). If economic depravity and lack of education were to be the roots of terrorism, the world would be swarming with terrorists and shattered by terrorism. Furthermore, 9/11 commission Report clearly states, “Terrorism is not caused by poverty”. Yet the claim, that economic condition and lack of education cause terrorism, is still being made.

Contrary to the stereotype, terrorism is fueled by the upper class and the educated groups in the society. Terrorism is not a form of crime for materialistic gain; if that were the case, who

would be willing to juggle with their lives to create mass destruction. In an extensive study carried out by Berrebi regarding the Palestinian suicide bombers to Palestinian population, the suicide bombers were found to be less than half as likely to come from families that were below the poverty line. In addition, almost 60 percent of the suicide bombers had more than a high school degree, compared to less than 15 percent of the general population.

Furthermore, the 1976 study of eighteen terrorist groups revealed a typical terrorist figure to be a single male in his mid-twenties from a middle-or upper-middle-class background having some college education (Victoroff 7). One may well contend the fact that the data seems outdated and no longer bears relevancy. While the argument seems reasonable, the recent researches are even more threatening. An extensive 2003 research included in the thesis *The Mind of the Terrorist* by Jeff Victoroff claims that the late 1990s and early twenty-first century terrorists came from a wider demographic range, including university students, professionals, married men in their forties and even young women. To bolster his argument, the author also cites examples of two 9/11 pilots who were identified to be middle-aged, middle-class urban planner Mohammad Atta and Ziad Jarrah, a man from an affluent family who attended Christian Schools.

The primary goal of terrorism is to spread fear and the immediate victims are not as important as the broader message sent to the public and the government (Hudson 18). Since the terrorist activities are directed towards changes in the society/ nation rather than personal gain, the high ranking political/social/religious figures and other extremists are the ones fueling terrorism. They are often extremely wealthy and highly intellectual people. For example, Bin Laden who is the founder of the terrorist group Al Qaeda, comes from a wealthy Saudi family bearing ties to even the royal family and uses his inheritance to finance the group (CDI).

Moreover, his educational background reveals that he had received college degrees in economics and public administration from King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (Simons). Similarly, National Liberation Army (ELN) in Columbia is a Marxist insurgent group formed by urban intellectuals inspired by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara (CDI). Therefore, blaming the poor and uneducated people for instigating terrorism is baseless with regard to the wide array of evidence favoring the wealthy and the intellectuals.

Understanding terrorists from a psychological aspect

Examining terrorists from a psychological perspective gives a whole new understanding of their behavior. Understanding how individuals are motivated to commit terrorist acts is seemingly subjective; it varies from every terrorist and also depends on the acts of terrorism committed. When analyzed from a psychological ground one is forced to question whether terrorists are mentally ill. In an attempt to answer the question, a psychiatrist, David G Hubbard interviewed many aircraft hijackers in the United States during 1960s and 1970s and came to conclude that “The active terrorist is not discernibly different in psychological terms from the non-terrorist” (Milton 62). He claims that most of the terrorists being interviewed had abusive fathers and religiously zealous mothers, and had failed repeatedly in life, career and marriage. He even asserts that they were least worried about the possible consequences of execution or long term prison sentence. Furthermore, Joseph Carroll, a professor of Psychology at Colby-Sawyer College, claims the strong feelings, especially for the people who are alienated from their family, schoolmates and others around them, to be a common motivator among terrorists. It is, thus, justifiable to argue that terrorists emerge from their own traumatic past. The feelings of accomplishment emerging from their acts of terrorism possibly assuage their sense of personal failures which in turn motivate them to involve into terrorism.

Furthermore, psychologists John Horgan and Max Taylo have noted that there is rarely a conscious decision made to become a terrorist; most involvement in terrorism results from gradual exposure and socialization towards extreme behavior (Borum 24). Individuals with traumatic pasts and personal failures are in search of an opportunity for an action with its attendant risks and when they finally get a chance to act, it creates a feeling of ‘need to belong’ in a group. Consecutively, as a member of a group they seek social status. Therefore, individuals become terrorists in order to join terrorist groups and commit acts of terrorism (Borum 24). Though the individuals may follow a similar pattern in involving themselves into terrorism, their motivations and vulnerability might differ from every other person. Analyzing the two separate terrorists and their emergence into terrorism may further elucidate the point.

Enjoying an unrestricted lifestyle as a member of the German socialist student group, Baumann, often referred to as Bommi, gradually involved himself into revolutionary actions taking advantage of his power with a sense that he was changing things for better. Rod Milton best describes his motivation in his article “Psychology of Terrorism” as a mixture of adolescent rebellion, hedonism, group membership, enjoyment of the power of violence, and feeling purposeful. Similarly, Timothy McVeigh was responsible for bombing a government building in Oklahoma in 1995 killing 168 people and leaving hundreds injured. A decorated US soldier, treating his service not merely as a job but a calling, McVeigh later left the army when he was unable to meet the standards for entry to special forces. He renounced the US citizenship and planned on destroying a government building to prove himself a successful soldier against his own country (Milton 64). These are just two of the numerous motivations for a person to engage in terrorism. With every emerging terrorist, there is a new and distinct reason behind it. Contending the earlier beliefs that uneducated individuals turn into terrorists, Baumann and

McVeigh serve as just the perfect examples to show how well educated people embrace terrorism.

In an attempt to understand the origins of terrorism, three motivational factors - injustice, identity and belonging - appear to be prominent among all terrorists as suggested by Martha Crenshaw. Injustice plays a distinct role in motivating individuals towards violence. In the book *Psychology of Terrorism*, Milton cites, "Remediable injustice is the basic motivation for terrorism". Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine vengeance or revenge as the common response to the acts of injustice inflicted. He further claims that grievances related to politics, religion, ethnicity, economy, and society may be perceived as the forms of injustice.

Secondly, one's psychological identity is a developed, stable sense of self and resolved security in one's basic values, attitudes, and beliefs (Borum 25). A person's identity may develop and transform throughout his life precisely during his adolescence and adulthood. The search for one's identity may drive him or her towards extremism in variety of ways. Psychologist Jim Marcia explains one of the ways in which an individual adopts a role and set of ideas and values (an identity) without personal, critical examination (Borum 25). Another process defines a situation in which one's personal identity is merged with the group's image, thus, creating a heightened psychological identity. Similarly, sometimes the drive for the search for one's identity is such strong that one finds himself searching for a role to advance a cause. In essence, the individual resolves the difficult question "Who am I?" by simply defining him or herself as a "terrorist," a "freedom fighter," "shahid" or a similar role (Borum 25).

Furthermore, psychologists argue that among potential terrorists the real cause or psychological motivation for joining is the great need for belonging. Observations on terrorist

recruitment show that many people are influenced to join by seeking solidarity with family, friends or acquaintances and that “for the individuals who become active terrorists, the initial attraction is often to the group, or community of believers, rather than to an abstract ideology or to violence” (Borum 26). The three factors have been found to co-occur in individual’s decision to join terrorist forces. Some have even suggested that the synergistic effect of these dynamics forms the real “root cause” of terrorism (Borum 26). These concepts, when analyzed in every individual terrorist helps to identify and explain the similarities in the behavior of terrorists, thus answering the key question, why one becomes a terrorist, from the psychological aspect.

Terrorism is not a scientific problem which has definite formulae to compute the solutions. It has been going on for centuries and yet, there is no clear answer to even the basic question of what terrorism is. “Schmid (1983) compiled 109 academic definitions of terrorism, suggesting that there are roughly as many available definitions as there are published experts in the field” (Victoroff 4). When just defining the term “terrorism” has been such a debatable issue, getting to its roots and coming out with solutions is a long way through. However, researches in various fields of psychology, sociology and behavioral science have been digging deep into the roots of terrorism and analyzing the potential terrorists. Since there is no clear and single answer to who becomes a terrorist and why, researchers have begun reasoning the specific motivational factors and vulnerabilities behind individual’s decision to join, remain in and leave terrorist groups. While the sociologists suggest terrorists are not desperately poor killers but typically middle-class, and often college degree holders fueled by extreme influences, the psychologists and behavioral scientists rely on various psychological theories to describe terrorists. However, in the end, it is only up to the individual terrorist to explain how did he or she become a terrorist and why.

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