

Chapter 2

A Violent Psyche

Bianca Canal

Abstract

The following scientific paper attempts to relay psychological triggers as well as situational factors that contribute to the formation and action of terrorist organizations. The research explores topics such as mental health, reasoning, and personality traits of terrorists. The question at hand: What qualities make a person more inclined to join a terrorist cause and carry out heinous crimes? Over several analyses, the attempt will be made in this paper to exhibit a consistent portrayal of certain characteristics seen in terrorist groups and individuals. Terrorists are rarely mentally ill and more often provoked individuals with certain personality traits encouraging behavior that resorts to radical violence for political attention. Characteristics such as a desire for clear ingroup and outgroup, harsh socioeconomic influences and a need to purify society creates an “Us vs. Them” mentality. This mentality is essential in the formation of terrorist organizations and the follow through of terrorist crimes. The arguments are divided into three sections: mental health and its impact, reasons for terrorism beyond the individual, and consistent characteristics.

Mental Health and Its Impact

Terrorism has taken on a new meaning in the last few decades with the help of technological change and the media. For the terms of the research conducted by the author, this paper will abide by the following definition supplied by the European Union. Terrorist crimes can be defined as (Spaaij, 2010, pp. 854–870):

“intentional acts that are committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any

act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.”

In the first issue of this paper, the author hopes to uncover whether mental health is a common denominator in terms of terrorist actions. Are those diagnosed with a mental illness more inclined to participate in violent, specifically terror related, crimes? Do groups target people affected by mental illness to commit heinous crimes? How can understanding and addressing this question reduce terrorism or approach it in a new way?

It is worth noting that stigmas against mental health make it difficult to gather research of this kind. First, people will rarely admit they experience symptoms of mental disorders. In fact, “[a]bout two-thirds of people suffering from mental disorders will never seek help because of discrimination and the stigma attached to such conditions” (Zuidewijn and Baker, 2016, pp. 42–49). Some cultures and groups are even more hostile to such accusations, especially right-wing or conservative extremist groups. Second, terrorism research is limited in a more obvious sense because of its nature. Terrorist organizations are underground, highly secretive and supply information in ways that will spread their ideas or benefit their cause (Gambetto and Hertog, 2016). An environment for gathering sufficient empirical data on such a topic simply does not exist. Perhaps there are undercover agents who are also social scientists gathering intel from the inside; then again, the government never shares such data with the public for reasons of “national security.” More often than not, facts covering terrorism are supplied to the public in a way that will benefit that federal agenda (Gambetto and Hertog, 2016).

Overall there is little evidence for mental disorders contributing to terror related crimes. In a case study with over 100 lone-actor terrorists, only 35% showed any sign of mental illness (Zuidewijn and Baker, 2016, pp. 42–49). Compare this to the World Health Organization’s statistic: 27% of the population suffers from a mental disorder. Presence of mental disorders among terrorists does not substantially deviate from that of the general population².

With this in mind, an important discovery amongst lone wolf terrorism depicts sufficient evidence for a correlation between school shootings and mental disorders. First, school shooters are responsible for 63% of mental health cases in the aforementioned study. Often, the mental disorder these school shooters are

² Furthermore, the case study that approximated 35% recorded “any indication of” a mental disorder. This closes the gap between the tested group and the general population even more.

prone to is a product of social isolation (Zuijdewijn and Baker, 2016, pp. 42–49). The study further reveals that school shooters with predisposed mental disorders resulting from social isolation often did so at the hands of bullying. Social isolation can lead to mental and personality disorders that contribute to lone actor terror attacks in school settings. The good news is that this progression of personality disorder to radical violence is understandable and predictable. While this does show evidence for a correlation between mental illness and lone shooters, this does not necessarily fit into the EU’s definition of terrorism. School shootings usually lack the political factor necessary to qualify as terrorism. In this case, political motives are replaced with a personal vendetta. However, the information is still useful for change regarding emotional awareness in early education.

Despite the significant findings within the field of lone actor terrorism, mental health is a widely controversial topic to attribute to any form of violence. The question creates an insensitive view of those suffering from psychiatric disease. One social scientist suggests that Western perspectives hold a lack of objectivism when interloping mental health with terrorism (Aggarwal, 2010, pp. 379–393). He says these scholars forget to consider the varying values and cultures across the world that alter social behavior. The difference in values and expectations among cultures allows Western scholars to diagnose symptoms that would not apply if they took a different perspective into consideration. Assuming mental illness must be involved in terrorist activity also suggests that the morals of the West are superior to those political thoughts and ideologies found elsewhere. Pinpointing radical violence on those suffering from mental illness is merely a coping mechanism of the public perpetuated by the media. The conclusion exists to satisfy a level of comfort denying the far more disturbing reality. Generalities have a way of simplifying complex and layered truths about humanity: “the conceptions they convey are always incomplete, [and] what is gained in extent is always lost in exactitude” (Tocqueville, edited by Mansfield and Winthrop, 2000). Believing that mental health is to blame for radical violence falls guilty of being an overgeneralized statement with little thought.

Furthermore, terrorist organizations do not seek out mentally ill recruits. In fact, “most tasks require an element of secrecy, calibrated violence, and technological know-how. Educated, psychologically healthy, and normal volunteers tend to be preferred for this particular reason” (Corner and Gill, 2015, pp. 23–34). Seeking unstable people for layered and high-risk situations could be detrimental. This means most of the time, political motives are strong enough to motivate radical violence. When acting individually, there is a stronger likelihood that someone is suffering from mental illness (Spaaij, 2010, p. 866). Mental illness is also more present in individuals who have less ideological reasoning

to back their attacks (Zuijdewijn and Baker, 2016, p. 44). This may suggest that group mentality affects “normal” people in large ways, causing them to behave in ways they wouldn’t otherwise. It appears that “a clear consensus exists that it is not individual psychology, but group, organizational and social psychology, that provides the greatest analytical power in understanding this complex phenomenon” (Corner and Gill, 2015, pp. 23–34).

Overall, it was found by the author that the connection between mental health and terrorism is weak. What, then, motivates people most when considering radical and violent political attacks? The answer to this new question, “reasoning behind radical violence in society” holds complexities that a large volume book could hardly hold. The remainder of this paper will relay the essential and rudimentary reasonings behind radical violence and terror attacks.

Reasons for Terrorism Beyond the Individual

Scientists agree that terrorist crime occurs when individuals and groups behold an active aversion towards society and the government. Radicals act when they feel the government is corrupt and simultaneously useless in creating an ideal society. A person would feel inclined to behave in active ways if they were passionate about a political cause but could not imagine addressing that cause in their own government in a civil or bureaucratic way. Another factor scientists can agree upon is that there is a plethora of reasons for terrorism that are interconnected and influence one another.

Sebastian Wojciechowski, a sociologist and author from Poland, presents data from several social scientists to further understand the current discussion at hand and develop his own take on the issue itself. The study conducted has overflowing amounts of evidence with overlapping conclusions. Wojciechowski then compares and summarizes these theories to find his own.

He argues religious and cultural zeal propagates terrorist attitudes. He states that there has been an increase in religiously motivated attacks since the 1960s. These religious and culturally conservative reactions may be in response to the increase in social movements and equality throughout this time period. When faced with change, many cultures fear their traditional values will disappear and meld into universal customs. This paired with worldwide intervention, a theme of the twentieth century, can lead to violent outbreaks for the sake of preserving identity and tradition.

This transitions us to the portion of his argument that presents socio-economic, political and historical issues. Political leadership influences terrorist

attitudes. This occurs whether these elites are combating or collaborating with said terrorist threats. Combating could result in an increase in vigor, though they attempt to eliminate the group altogether. Collaboration with terrorist organizations may also increase the importance and influence of these groups. Such situations have been seen in countries like Iraq, Iran, South Korea, and Sudan, where involvement occurred at some point to alleviate tension or inadvertently implement martial law. Additionally, migration can be the reason for an increase in terrorist attacks. Immigrants are vulnerable to recruitment by terrorist groups of similar ethnic background and ideology. On the opposite end of the spectrum, xenophobic terror attacks have been committed on immigrants and the institutions that support them. Socio-economic factors such as poverty are sometimes seen as triggers for violence and rebellion. The correlation is not sound though. Many terrorist organizations require financial support and several organizations are made up of people from middle and upper-class backgrounds. Historical patterns contribute to the rise and intensity of terror organizations as well. The memory of disenfranchisement, real or imagined, taints and motivates bodies of people to rebel. Furthermore, the collapse of communism propelled the world into radical change in the realm of international relations. This new juggling act of sovereignty has paradoxically made it possible for rebellious groups to operate.

Wojciechowski includes territorial and ethnic influences to explain the influx in terrorist attitudes. He points out that 3500 nations exist in today's world and only 195 are recognized as states (Wojciechowski, 2017, pp. 49–70). Most have accepted their lack of recognition, but much unrest exists among those who wish to gain sovereignty. These desires for establishment can translate to radical outbreaks.

Wojciechowski then speaks to the psychological aspects. He suggests the belief that one idea, even if it may be targeted towards an evil or decision about right and wrong, put above all else (even the quality of someone's life or one's own life) can be seen as evidence for psychopathy: "In many cases we encounter terrorism when a given individual or group considers a certain attitude or idea to be of the utmost importance, one which all other matters should unquestionably be subordinated to" (Zuijdewijn and Baker, 2016, p. 44). However, the author would argue that this idea is used by countries all over the world. It is a historical motivation for achieving sovereignty. It is indeed an idea America, along with several other countries with an established branch of defense, feeds its troops. It is an idea that has incited war again and again since the beginning of our existence. "Give me Liberty or Give me Death" ignited the American Revolution. Perhaps Patrick Henry was a psychopath, but if that is the case, then so is everyone who

has ever wished to rise in society. Human behavior has consistently shown that its desire for some unattainable idea of freedom and power trumps all other values, including one's own life and the lives of others. For is a life of oppression worth living? It can be argued that with the right persuasive language, a certain degree of oppression, and a culmination of experiences to shape political thought, terrorist acts and attitudes are probable for any human.

Lastly, Wojciechowski analyzes movements and ideas that implicitly add to the growth of terrorism. Globalization, specifically the spread of the "West," weakens communities, for it often introduces new economic burdens and demands social transformation (Wojciechowski, 2017, pp. 49–70). Many places feel their local identity being threatened. Challenges present themselves through cultural clashing as a result of these varying social expectations. One example of this is the introduction of progressive individual rights defined in communities with varying views of freedom and oppression. Other theories like the domino effect and the role of the media also come into play. As W. Laqueur puts it, "terrorists need the media and the media finds the components of an exciting story in terrorism" (Laqueur, cited in Wojciechowski 2017, p. 58). With the domino effect, violence usually responds to and motivates other forms of violence. This is pushed further with the media. The media latches onto the bait terrorists provide. They supply a juicy story that is reported on incongruently with reality. The threat is proliferated because of the media's desire for attention.

Wojciechowski finally narrows his data, claiming there are three main determinants in modern day terrorism: various ideas and ideologies, selected socio-economic conditions and various psychological processes and factors (Wojciechowski, 2017, p. 63). With varying ideologies, clear ingroups and outgroups are formed. This allows organizations, ethnic groups and countries to isolate themselves while dehumanizing the "outgroup." This is essential in the formation and cultivation of terrorist bodies. These groups often form when they believe they have suffered from the status quo. This usually takes shape in terms of economic and class status. The lower socioeconomic class becomes envious of the upper class, especially in societies where large gaps between the classes exist. This jealousy and feeling of unfair treatment can intensify to the point of violence. This process does not encompass all terrorist personalities. However, it does characterize a majority of prominent groups. Lastly, as analyzed before, psyche influences terrorist acts and mentality. The combination of "us vs. them" ideology and the act of placing an idea of freedom above one's quality of life can lead to a dangerous outcome.

It is listing and specification such as this that creates the never-ending reasoning behind an almost abstract issue on violence. Ultimately, Wojciechowski's conclusion

is indeed that one does not exist because “despite the multitude and diversity of the above theories, none of them comprehensively explains the emergence and escalation of terrorism. They point, however, to how numerous and different the potential factors are. These theories are frequently interdisciplinary and combine elements of psychology, as well as sociology, pedagogy, economics or philosophy” (Wojciechowski, 2017, pp. 58). Many studies attempt to uncover some “secret” or single characteristic of terrorism. Such a solution does not exist with a topic so abstract and uncontrollable. The author found this conclusion, however, to be just as comforting as it was infuriating. These discoveries still beg the question: what characteristics define the people of these groups? What characteristics make a person more inclined to join such a radical extremist group? With the help of narrowing the focus area, it is possible to gather specific conclusions that paradoxically reveal universal truths about radical violence.

Consistent Characteristics

Perhaps answering one question about a specific demographic of terrorists could inevitably uncover consistencies across several lines of characteristics and personalities. Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog unveiled helpful information using this tactic. In their book, *Engineers of Jihad*, they study the behavior of engineers in terrorist organizations. These social scientists prove the undeniable flow of engineers into radical violent groups and seek to uncover why this group exists and what it says about the average extremist. In the end they studied 4,000 individual identities, comparing different backgrounds, disciplines and ideologies to the control group: engineers. Tracking the education of terrorists offers significant insight about the individual. The individual chooses the kind of education they want, and this in turn supplies hints about their personality and socioeconomic upbringing. Studying the reasoning and psychology of political motives relays helpful information about consistent traits among terrorist group. “The evidence that political attitudes are linked to personality traits, all the way down to variations in brain structure, is mounting rapidly—whether derived from surveys, experiments, or measurable neural processes—and is just too compelling to dismiss wholesale” (Gambetta and Hertog, 2016, p. 129). Ultimately, they conclude that engineers are undeniably overrepresented in right-wing, conservative and religiously motivated terror organizations. Conservative right-wing terror attacks are often committed by people who have degrees in engineering or exhibit left-brained, attention-to-detail characteristics.

The characteristics this group shares include proneness to disgust, a need for certainty and closure and a desire to distinguish the ingroup from the outgroup. There is a correlation between right-wing ideology and a desire for social purity. Right-wing radicals “desire to keep their social environment pure and reject intrusion by alien forces perceived as corrupting” (Gambetto and Hertog, 2016, p. 130). Today this takes the form of opposing gay rights and abortion, issues that fall in line with preferring a society tightly bound to conservative tradition. Personalities of right-wing thought also seek closure. A need for cognitive closure, or NFC, is closely related to conservative thought (Gambetto and Hertog, 2016, p. 129). Those of NFC personalities often see the world in black and white and wish to live in an authoritative society operating through strict social obligations. Lastly, right-wing conservatives show an aversion towards open-minded views of others and complex categorization. This falls into the desire for ingroup and outgroup. Those of conservative thought exhibit an inability to denote the “outgroup” with simultaneously positive and negative connotations. All three aspects of right-wing extremism inform one another and follow a line of strict, conservative thought with little tolerance.

Engineers often fall into the radical right-wing parties because the personality traits that attract people to engineering fields are similar to the traits that attract people to conservative political thought. Engineers share an intolerance of ambiguity with right-wing extremists. Like mentioned in the previous paragraph, conservatives dislike complex answers to political issues often coupled with social change. Similarly, engineers desire one clear answer to technical problems. The field thrives on complex mechanical patterns with simple one answer solutions. It is no surprise that the personalities that make up the engineering field seek the comfort of singular solutions in real life.

In addition, this theory exhibits overlap with the main determinants in Wojciechowski’s conclusion, especially the desire for clear ingroups and outgroups. *Engineers of Jihad* also proves the claim “relative deprivation increases radicalization,” continuing to fall in line with another main determinant of Wojciechowski’s: selected socio-economic conditions. Lastly, the book confirms the idea that putting one idea, or mechanical solution, above all else contributes to the fuel of radical violence.

Conclusion

The complexity of terrorism mirrors the complexity of humanity over time. Both are primarily a result of technological change. When boiled down, terrorism

finds its origin in radical violence: something inevitable that occurs when humans are responding to government corruption, escalating social change and cultural clashing. Slowly chipping away at the reasoning behind it allows scholars to understand the complexities of global interaction that has exponentially challenged human interaction. The answer to these challenges could be an increased awareness of the role mental health amongst the general population, the understanding of violence and global conflict as well as the exposure to well-rounded education will best combat the characteristics that frequently lead to radical violence. Teaching what is natural, how humans are susceptible to group mentality and how to cope with violence and media, can attribute to building a more understanding and empathetic society.