

Psychology of Terrorism... A review

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism is an age-old phenomenon. Mankind has witnessed acts of terrorism in some form or the other throughout history. But the ferocity of the 9/11 events in USA has totally changed the worlds' understanding of the word 'terrorism'. The day to day increase in the terrorist acts all over the world, made terrorism a global problem threatening the very existence of human race. Obviously lots of time and energies are being spent to counter and control this monster. Modern research, unlike the earlier studies that have focussed more on the political roots of terrorism, dwells on the psychological underpinnings of this menace. Present review is an attempt to briefly summarise the available information on terrorism and the related matters.

Key Words: Terrorism, Terrorist, Terrorist group, Psychology of terrorism.

Introduction

Terrorism is an ageless scourge. Raising its ugly head from time to time, it has existed all through human history, in some form or the other. Today it has reached unimaginable heights, posing a grave threat to global peace.

History

Terrorism is rooted in the past. It dates back to the first century A.D., when the Zealots of Judea secretly assassinated Roman occupation forces and collaborators because they felt that Roman rule was incompatible with Judaism.

Later Zealots and assassins in 11th century dramatically executed political figures and terrified their contemporaries.¹

David Rapoport² has outlined four major waves of terrorism. The first 'anarchist' wave began in

Russia between 1880 and 1920. The second 'anti-colonial' wave between 1920 and 1960. The third 'new left' wave between 1960 and 1980. The last 'religious' wave from 1979 to date.

Anarchists viewed society as being chained by unwanted conventions and employed acts of terror to redeem the situation. **Anti-colonials** wanted to establish military rule with more power. **New leftists** were dissatisfied with the status quo and they raised terrorist groups like Red Army Faction, Italian Red Brigades and French Action Directe to overthrow the existing governments. **Religious** wave reflected the fanaticism and fundamentalism that gave birth to suicide terrorism.¹

Today, terrorism is a much bigger and complex problem spreading its tentacles across the world. In 2014, there were 16,800 terrorist attacks all over the world of which more than 60% were concentrated in four countries Iraq (24%), Pakistan (19%), Afghanistan (12%) and India (5.8%).³ India faced 859 terrorist attacks in 2014, which is 24% more than the preceding year. As per the official reports there are around 70 to 80 proscribed or active groups and more than 120 inactive groups in India.⁴

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The recent increase in terrorist activity around the world has alarmed the nations and leaders alike prompting them to take an affirmative and concerted action. The same sentiment is reflected in the words of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, when he said that terrorism is heinous and anti-human and there is nothing like good or bad terrorism. It is high time all countries come together to fight this monster.⁵ French politician Jacques Chirac opined and echoed that today terrorism has become the systematic weapon of war that knows no borders and seldom has a face.⁶

Psychology of terrorism

Psychologists do not have an easy access to terrorists or their organisations and hence research literature regarding psychology of terrorism is small in quantity. Though terrorists are usually elusive figures, a few studies on imprisoned terrorists have given us some insight into this phenomenon. For a better understanding, one should be conversant with some important words.

Semantics

Terror- Derived from a Latin word 'terrere', meaning "to frighten"

Terrorism- Derived from a Latin word 'terrere' and French word 'ism', meaning a system, principle, or ideological movement.

Terrorist- A person who uses terrorism in the pursuit of political aims.

Terrorist organisation- A group that uses terror as a weapon to achieve its goals.

Terrorist act- Calculated use of violence against civilians in order to attain goals that are political or religious or ideological in nature.

Terrorist ideology- A system of ideas and ideals, especially forming the basis of terrorist policy.^{7, 8}

Counter terrorism- Also known as anti-terrorism, including all measures employed to combat and prevent terrorism.⁹

What is terrorism

There are many definitions.

As per the dictionary terrorism stands for "The unofficial or unauthorized use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims".⁹

"Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly or selectively from a target population, which serves as a message generator. Threat and violence based communication processes between terrorist organisation, victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target, turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought" - **Alex Schmid** and **Albert Jongman**.¹⁰

Supreme Court of India adopted this definition in a 2003 ruling, defining acts of terrorism veritably as peacetime equivalents of war crimes.¹¹

Simply put, terrorism in most of the cases is an act of violence against the innocent and unarmed civilians, perpetrated by an individual or a group to realise their goals and further their ideology.

Perhaps all terrorist acts are high degree criminal acts while the reverse may not be true.

Types of terrorism

The goals and objectives of terrorist groups vary. The nature and type of terrorism depends on the primary objectives.¹²

1. **Ethno-nationalist terrorism:** Violence by subnational ethnic groups to advance their cause. The focus is on creation of a separate state or elevation of one ethnic group over others.
2. **Religious terrorism:** Motivated by ultra-

religious undertones, considering violence as a sacred duty to achieve the goals. Currently it is the most prevalent type both independently and in combination.

3. **Ideology oriented terrorism:** Driven by an ideology for their cause, it is further divided into... Left-wing terrorism- Motivated by leftist ideologies and targeted against the haves by the have-nots. Leftist ideologies believe in equitable distribution of wealth and consider the capitalist societies are exploitative in nature and rely on revolution to bring about the change. Right-wing terrorism- Motivated by conservative ideologies, with a romance for the past and apathy to change. Nazism in Germany and Fascism in Italy are examples.
4. **State-Sponsored terrorism:** Perpetrated by some states with the help of proxies to attain geo-political goals. Once rampant in 1960s and 70s, coupled with religious terrorism it is creating havoc.
5. **Narco terrorism:** Attempts by narcotic traffickers to destabilise and influence the policies of the governments by threat and violence. Initially described and reported from South America.
6. **Cyber terrorism:** Use of information technology, cyber space and social networks by terrorist groups to further their agenda.¹³
7. **Bio-terrorism:** Terrorist acts involving the use of harmful agents and products of biological origin, such as disease producing micro-organisms or toxins.⁹

Dynamics of terrorism

Terrorism is the most violent form of psychological warfare and its mental impact is far greater than the physical effects.¹⁴

To understand the genesis of terrorism there are three approaches

Sociological: Intends to study the influence

of various anomalies in social system, such as unemployment and poverty, religious and cultural practices, social inequality. However the evidence is inconclusive to establish a cause and effect relationship.

Psychological: Lays stress on psychic features like impulsivity to inflict violence, inability to experience guilt and dissocial behaviour as the basic contributors. But there is no evidence to support this psychological profiling.

Psychosocial: Explains terrorism as an outcome of combination of several factors and interactions that take place in both inter and intra group environments. This is heavily influenced by the prevailing socio-political climate, shared by friends and relatives.¹⁵ Of the various psychological motives of terrorism the following need special mention

- Desire to be something special.
- Aligning with ideological, religious convictions.
- To be with others of like mind.
- Social and psychological isolation.
- Vengeance¹⁶

By and large terrorism is essentially a group activity involving effective organisation and management of individuals.

Terrorist organisation and groups

Terrorist groups are relatively smaller outfits working under a big umbrella organisation. They share common ideology and work in tandem.

Acts of terrorism give an impression that, they are committed by insane and mentally sick people. But most of the studies till date are not able to support this view. In fact a successful terrorist plot requires a mixture of abilities ranging from planning, logistics, funding and recruiting. Each of these abilities requires expertise in that particular area. Gathering such mixture of abilities requires a greater ability to understand an individual in depth.¹⁷

What actually motivates these groups to carry out such inhuman acts?

Probable explanation could be that it builds up the esteem of oppressed group, which in turn helps in enforcing power over others. Other explanation could be, the involved people consider themselves as elite vanguards and by establishing a group they think they could achieve cohesion and focus to realise the cherished goal.¹⁴

A few experiments in psychology tried to explain the working of a terrorist organisation or group. Though considered ethically infamous, "Obedience experiment" by Stanley Milgram and "Stanford Prison experiment" by Philip Zimbardo did well in understanding the underlying psychology of humans. Milgram's experiment on a teacher-student scenario showed that "Often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act".¹⁸ Philip Zimbardo's experiment on a prison like setting where students were randomly assigned to play roles of prison guards and prisoners, showed that "Only few person were able to resist the situational temptations of power and dominance while maintaining some semblance of morality and decency".¹⁹

The same principles can be applied to the working of terrorist groups where they remove emotional component attached to the targets and substitute with a symbolic meaning. This makes it easy for them to expand their organisation by recruiting new soldiers, train and use them, in committing the heinous acts.²⁰

Terrorist organisations work on key principles like 1. Recruitment, 2. Group dynamics, 3. Motivation, 4. Decision making, 5. Attrition and rebellion.

The interesting and most researched topic is how these groups successfully recruit young talented individuals. Terrorist organisations run a formidable and effective "Propaganda machine" for recruitment of young people. They produce seductively toxic videos that reach a global audience. This helps in recruiting young soldiers for continuation of their

activities. Usually university serves as the reach ground for recruiting into these groups. Newly formed terror groups have franchises for the purpose of recruitment. They employ sophisticated brainwashing techniques.¹⁶

There is a parasitic relationship between the terrorist group and the sheltering communities. For large scale terror cult recruitment, they depend on "home-grown", In-between countries, communities and youths because they are most vulnerable. Examples are turbulent spots like Afghanistan, Middle east and some North African counties²¹. By catering to the various needs of the local people, they barter new recruits in return. Thus they attain a mythical status among the sheltering community, where the local people passively join the group and mutely succumb to their dictates. This creates a viable option to sustain within sheltering communities.¹⁷

A curious thought arises as to why young people leave their family and friends to join these radical groups?

Researchers have given various explanations. Haque and colleagues concluded that, these radical groups provide existential fast foods to people. For the spiritually hungry people these are big enticements amidst a barren wasteland of existence.

Who actually join these groups?

It is not the psychopaths or the brainwashed, but rather normal young people on the margins of the society and in social transition with identity crisis.²⁰

Ideological and religious fanaticism also help in driving people to the extreme forms of terrorism like suicide bombings.

The group ideologies need to be instilled into the naive recruits, which require a planned, time tested program. For this various group dynamic methods like brainwashing, thought reform and coercive persuasion are employed. This happens in steps for removing the previous held beliefs and inserting new set of values suiting the needs of the group. They take full care not to include mentally ill

people into the group, as they may jeopardise the whole system.

Singer (1982)²² has mentioned conditions conducive for brainwashing, which include

1. Keeping the recruits in unawareness of the logistics of operation;
2. Controlling their environment;
3. Creating a sense of powerlessness, fear and dependency;
4. Suppressing old behaviours and attitudes;
5. Instilling new behaviours and attitudes; and
6. Putting forward a closed system of logic.

Schein (1961)²³ has described a process of changing attitudes by thought reforms. He described it in three stages. Unfreezing, the first stage aims at destabilising the past attitudes, choices, and behaviour. Many terrorist groups use a 'hot seat' technique or other methods of criticism to attain this goal. Changing is the second stage, in which the person starts feeling that the group provides a path to solution. Here peer pressure is very contributing. Refreezing is the last stage, where the group reinforces the desired behaviour with social and psychological rewards, and punishes unwanted attitudes and behaviours with group disapproval and social ostracism.

Terrorist organisations do not have exit policy. The rebellion and attrition in the group are never tolerated but dealt with an iron hand as they may create a trend.

Intolerant to independent views, they stress the need for group cohesion and demand unanimity and loyalty.

This is how the terrorist organisations operate and successfully carry out their nefarious designs. Of the various means at the disposal of terrorists, psychologists consider the following as vital:

1. Presence of a superior authority.
2. Sponsorship from a big name
3. Hierarchy
4. Brainwashing

Terrorist

Psychological studies in the past tried to sketch a personality profile of a terrorist. Later it was found that there is no personality or profile for a terrorist or any known stereotypes.

Earlier views of mental sickness in terrorists have also been discounted. Most terrorists do not demonstrate a serious psychopathology and there is no single personality type which is identifiable. Analysis of the socio demographic profiles of many terrorists' can be summarised as a single male aged in twenties, with a partial university education, with high incidence of fragmented families, severe interpersonal conflicts; especially with parents, and juvenile delinquency. Generally they hail from a middle or upper class family with a social prestige and usually from a technical or law background.²¹ This view stands in contrast to the earlier belief that terrorist belong to poor, illiterate and impoverished families.

Earlier studies on psychology of terrorist were based largely on clinical speculations and theoretical formulations. Terrorist acts were considered to be a manifestation of psychological and behavioural deviance. Different views of these earlier studies include psychoanalytic, psychodynamic and typology theories.²⁴

Psychoanalytic postulates borrow from Freudian concepts of motives that are largely unconscious and arise from hostility towards parents; also there is abuse and maltreatment in early life.

Psychodynamic framework reflects the Neo-Freudian thinking focusing on the traits of narcissism as a driving factor. The premise is that terrorist behaviour roots in a personality defect resulting in a damaged sense of self. Essence of pathological narcissism is an overvaluing of self and devaluing of others, a grandiose 'Me' versus devalued 'Not Me'.

Typologies are based on the diversity of motivations. Frederick Hacker, a psychiatrist introduced new terms like Crusaders, Criminals and Crazies. Crusaders were inspired by Ideologies and act according to higher cause. Criminals were those

who simply use terrorism for their personal gain. Crazies were those spurred by the underlying psychic morbidity.

Jerrold Post, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) psychiatrist explained behaviour of terrorist as a personality defect or arising out of psychopathology. Based on the family dynamics he categorised two types of terrorists. The Anarchic-Ideologues were the victims of severe abuse and maltreatment from their parents and hence hostile towards them. The Nationalist-Secessionists were not hostile, but motivated to retaliate or avenge the 'state' for the wrongs done to their parents.

It can be concluded that terrorists represent a psychologically heterogeneous population. Various factors may be responsible for terrorism, but no single factor can be implicated.

Terrorist ideology

Ideology is a system of extremist beliefs and values that are shared by a terrorist group and its allies. Ideology when strongly rooted in tradition can attract more like minded people into the fold with a greater potential for violence.¹⁰ The aim of the group involves in spreading of ideology. Activities are based on subjective interpretation of the world rather than objective reality. Reality is distorted based on the ideology, so that the crooked facts seem the reality. Perceptions of the political and social environment are filtered through beliefs and attitudes that reflect experiences and memories. This ideology is propagated by the leader or the role model of the terrorist group. Charismatic leadership plays an important role in convincing people to embrace the expansive goals of terrorism.²⁴ They are called the proactive terrorists and the passive followers are called the reactive terrorists. Depending on the roles they play and missions they carry, terrorists are also classified as masterminds, ring leaders, pilots and suicide bombers and foot soldiers.¹⁶ There exists a strong hierarchy in the group with a zero tolerance to dissidence and indiscipline.

Impact of terrorism

Personality of the individual determines the

impact of terrorism. The emotional response may range from anger and anguish²⁵ to dourness and determination.²⁶

Victims can have devastating effects in both physical and psychological realms with consequences of short and long term concern.

Physical defects include organ loss and a gamut of other disabilities, having a serious negative impact on the psyche and socio economic status of the victims.

Short term psychological problems include acute stress reaction, Adjustment disorder, Emotional shock, Panic attacks, Dissociative reactions and Acute Psychotic breakdowns. Long term problems include Depressive disorders, Anxiety disorders, Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Substance abuse.

Both physical and psychic morbidities, warrant long term medical care increasing the burden and hence impact the quality of life.

Impact can also be understood in terms of direct and indirect exposures. Direct exposure includes victims in the line of terror attacks. They show more adverse psychological reactions, such as higher rates of PTSD, anxiety, functional impairment and substance abuse besides their physical disability. Indirect exposure means knowledge of terrorism is either through Media or close people.

In this context the role of media and the rumour mills needs a special mention. Thanks to technology, today information spreads like a wildfire. So people and media should resist the temptation of sensationalism and exercise control while reporting.

Knowing a victim of terror attack is a special risk factor for children or adolescents as they are more vulnerable. Severe mental health problems occur in relatives of terror victims. Subjective exposure may act as a significant predictor of mental health outcomes.²⁷

Gender and age also play an important role. Females report more PTSD and internalising difficulties while males report more of externalising

problems and risk taking behaviour. Younger people appear to exhibit more psychopathology than old people. Cognitive and emotional dynamics that trigger the coping mechanisms help us in understanding how young people deal with the experience of persistent exposure to terror.²⁸

Social support and effective rehabilitation hold the key for good recovery and improvement.

Conclusions

It is sheer utopia to think of wiping out terrorism from the face of earth. But it can be effectively tackled with some imaginative thinking and proactive intervention. Impact of nature versus nurture is the key determinant in personality development. Targeting this area to build personalities with insulation to the environmental vagaries may go a long way in building a totally different generation for the future. This can be achieved by value added education and life style modification with emphases on human values of compassion and tolerance. Ends never justify the means, means are as important as ends. This message should be the basic premise, both in domestic and scholastic milieus, to impart the right kind of moral education.

Regarding the future research into the psychological factors of terrorism, it should maintain a behaviour based focus with analyses of incident related behaviour. Cultural factors should also be given due importance.²⁴

Psychological sciences may not offer quick fix solutions to a problem like terrorism, but with studies on personalities and dynamics, they can certainly expand the horizons of our understanding of terrorism. After all we have to live and cope with terrorism.

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