Terrorism and Forensic Psychiatry

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Media and news agencies often call psychiatrists and psychologists and pose questions about mental illness (a worthy topic) or some inane but catchy topic (such as the one I received from a reporter asking, with a straight face, "How do you diagnose people who talk to themselves?"). Big news about crimes, and especially terrorism, may push psychiatrist interviews from the local feature to the cover story. The favorite questions are iterations of "What makes people become terrorists?" and "What's going on in the terrorist mind?" Some of our colleagues take this opportunity to launch into a serious discussion of perpetrators and personality types, talking about leaders and followers, psychopathy, dependence, and yearnings for absent mothers. That may charm some listeners, but it is almost always a mistake.

First, there are many different kinds of terrorism and terror-violence (a term coined, or at least popularized in the field, by Professor M. Cherif Bassiouni of the Loyola School of Law, Chicago). The answers to the media questions, to the extent that anyone knows them, vary from type to type and from event to event.

Second, although everyone has a personality, and personality is important in behavior, the idea that there are archetypal terrorist personalities or mental illnesses that predispose one to what most people call terrorism is largely a myth. People want terrorists to have particular psychological characteristics, so that we might be able to "figure them out" and eliminate, mitigate, or at least define the foe. But wishing doesn't make it so. The real explanations are simpler than that, and the real solutions, unfortunately, more complex.

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The mental health professions, for the most part, should not be expected to have many answers to the vexing sociopolitical problem of transnational terrorism. Over two decades ago, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) developed a task force that worked with government agencies and produced a small volume on terrorism and its victims.[1] The consensus of the task force and the various agencies and organizations with whom we worked was that, with some highly specialized exceptions in military, law enforcement, and diplomatic consultation, the roles for and expertise of the mental health professions lie primarily in victim care and sometimes, when mental illness is a factor, in perpetrator assessment or treatment. That view has been replicated many times, in both social study and practical application.

My definition of terrorism, for purposes of this (albeit one-sided) discussion, is a pattern of sudden violent or fear-inducing action against civilians, not part of a national military action in a declared war between nations. My comments refer to terror-violence aimed at groups rather than individuals, although particular events may have one physical victim. To focus the topic, the definition omits hostage-taking during ordinary robberies and isolated incidents spawned by delusion or paranoia. It does not address wars, no matter how cruel, or states' acts against their own citizens (which kill far more people than international and nonstate actions[2]) or torture of state-held prisoners. "Revolutionary" acts organized against military targets within the revolutionary's own country are excluded; I will try to avoid the conundrum of "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," a commonly held view first expressed to me years ago by Professor J. K. Zawodny, an expert in transnational terrorism and former Polish freedom fighter.

During the 1970s, Frederick Hacker, MD, gave a thoughtful psychiatrist's view that terrorism could be divided into, as the title of his book suggested, *Crusaders, Criminals, and Crazies*.[3] He saw most events

similar to later U.S. embassy bombings and the September 11, 2001, attacks as having been carried out by "crusaders" (people working for a political or philosophical cause). He made the acts psychological by referring to things like "grandiose identification with a sacred cause and its representatives" and "giving up. . .individual responsibility, and individual interest, experience[ing] the 'high' of 'liberation' from his individual problems, guilts and anxiety." That seemed to make sense; it gave many scholars and defenders an impression, unfortunately impractical and often erroneous, of knowing what they were doing. Hacker's principle of "the three Cs" survives to this day.

Hacker's categorization and the work of a few social scholars (such as the RAND Corporation's Brian Jenkins) have some utility, but it is important to realize that most terrorists are not mentally ill and probably do not have more psychological flaws than most criminals. Their behavior is vexing and often inexcusable, but they should not be confused with people whose emotional status creates some legitimate rationalization for, much less exoneration of, their behavior. Long-term social influence of subordinate members within organizations, such as that which exploits followers who are particularly dependent or emotionally needy, are well studied and described elsewhere. Contrary to the wishes of some who write about them, those influences rarely apply to organization leaders and decision makers (who usually act from other, more practical motivations).

Even so-called "suicide" terrorists, who seem foreign to our culture and make us feel helplessly vulnerable, are not difficult to explain on practical, rather than psychological, grounds. People die in the service of some personal or political goal for many reasons, including religious promise, cultural expectation instilled from early development, and patriotic fervor. Other sources of motivation include payments to the person's family if the mission succeeds, harm to the family if the mission fails, and a quick, "meaningful" death or family payment for perpetrators with terminal illness. Intoxication and acute psychological preparation such as hypnosis, simplistic "brainwashing," or operant conditioning, so popular in films and accounts of the Japanese *kamikaze*, are best left to the movies.

Terrorism has been with us for centuries; there is little that is unique about it. Its utility overshadows social theory and journalistic wanderings, and tends to outstrip the psychological hypotheses now mostly consigned to academia, some think tanks, and opinion pieces. We have had to become more practical.

Terrorists and their organizations have always been practical. Their principles are older than any government and date to hundreds of years before Christ. If one views their goal as government overthrow or broad social change, they have almost always failed. If, however, one recognizes their goals as disruption, deflection of purpose, drain of resources, attention-gathering, and/or organization profit,[4] then their potential for success is substantial. I define these goals as follows:

Disruption: creating chaos, fear, and confusion in the target; making routine activity difficult.

Deflection of Purpose: causing the target group or population to curtail routine activities and focus on the terrorist act and related issues.

Drain of Resources: causing resources ordinarily used for other activities to be diverted to dealing with the terrorist activity or its victims.

Attention-Gathering: bringing attention, notoriety, and/or some level of validity or definition to the terrorist group, often implying a sort of "marketing" to achieve legitimacy or authority for the group (not necessarily for the espoused cause).

Organization Profit: the common practice of terrorists' cloaking themselves in a "crusade," often more accurately viewed as criminal behavior. Even groups that preach against capitalism spend much of their energy raising funds and using money from capitalist endeavors. State sponsorship is a primary source of large-organization terrorist funding and operating ability. Leaders or groups that speak loudly of social or religious purposes are often actually performing terrorism for hire, and perhaps are rationalizing their criminality and entrepreneurism with pious rhetoric. Terrorism, like organized crime, is often big business.

Controlling Terrorism and Its Damage

Control of terrorist behavior and related damage lies largely in eliminating or weakening the terrorist himself; "hardening," controlling, or eliminating routes of terrorist attack; decreasing terrorist funding and sponsorship; and/or making the terrorist's goal too expensive to pursue.

Eliminating the Terrorist

Eliminating the terrorist organization is difficult, but not always impossible. One strategy favors "cutting off the head of the viper," with the expectation that the organization will be weakened or die. Although some groups, particularly smaller ones, depend on a particular leader, older and better-developed organizations are more like a hydra (the

mythical monster who, when one of its heads was cut off, grew two more in its place) than a viper. Target states must also consider complex issues of martyrdom and the usefulness of information that may be gleaned from leaders after their capture, and thus may try not to kill them.

The "cell" structure of many terrorist organizations (a simple but effective format used by covert groups for centuries) makes it difficult to penetrate or weaken them. Such organizations support many very small groups in which the members know little about the other cells, have contact with only one or two others, and communicate with them through only one primary channel (cf., the interlocking cells of 1950s American Communism and World-War II underground organizations). This creates many layers, but the administration can operate with some efficiency and has advantages of relative impenetrability and diffusion of important tasks. There are almost no truly vital points for attack or infiltration; destruction of one cell does not irreparably damage the whole. Capture or infiltration of a terrorist cell does not usually yield comprehensive information about the overall organization.

Hardening Targets and Routes of Attack

This approach, the most common short-term government response, includes decreasing terrorist effectiveness by such measures as predicting targets, making targets more difficult to reach or damage ("hardening" them), lowering their value to the terrorist, and keeping effective weapons out of terrorist hands. Predicting targets involves determining what things or events (e.g., those with popular significance), dates (e.g., national holidays), or schedules (times of particular opportunity) have the most potential value to the terrorist purpose, then taking appropriate action. Target-hardening methods may be as simple as erecting barricades or installing local security measures, but also include complex means of broadly limiting access and information about them (e.g., through hiding, sham targets, or encryption), restricting geographic routes to them (e.g., by limiting or monitoring airspace), and creating comprehensive local or national defense systems.

Lowering target value implies making the target less interesting to terrorists (by, for example, duplicating or diluting their valuable items or information) so that disrupting or destroying one target does not have very much effect on overall operations.

Having multiple power plants, communication centers and water supplies, as well as power matrices and communication networks that do not depend on single or linear routing, means that one or two strikes will not cripple those services (cf., the relative invulnerability of the Internet to the loss of several hubs). Diluting and distributing valuable stockpiles (e.g., of food, weapons, gold, technology, and even people) decreases the target value of each (cf., the customs of separating the U.S. President and Vice President in time of danger, and keeping one cabinet member at a distant location during the State of the Union address).

Decreasing terrorists' access to weapons is a Sisyphean task. Small arms are ubiquitous in most parts of the world, although local control is feasible in some places and large shipments can be interdicted. It is arguably more important, at least on a national and international scale, to interdict and/or monitor highly destructive weapon systems, including so-called weapons of mass destruction (nuclear and other radiologic devices, chemical and biological weapon stockpiles and related materials, ballistic [missile] delivery systems, etc.)

Decreasing Funding and Sponsorship

Funding and sponsorship are very important to terrorist groups, especially large ones. It is easy to see that money is required for all levels of operations, but one often forgets that organizations with dozens, hundreds, or thousands of members cannot exist for very long without considerable help from sponsoring communities or countries. Sometimes, just as in the case of some oppressive governments and their citizens, the community help is involuntary, the result of intimidation or extortion. Larger, nongovernmental terrorist groups, however, routinely enjoy the support of at least some local people, or even entire nations. That support may arise from pragmatic issues (e.g., to protect a local coca or opium poppy economy), popular or religious preferences (cf., some environmental groups and some Islamic, Jewish, or Christian fundamentalists), or political expediency (e.g., in state-sponsored transnational terrorism, "transnational" being contrasted with a state's oppressive or terroristic actions against its own citizens).

Economic measures such as interrupting cash flow and curtailing funding and banking mechanisms are highlighted in the current U.S.-led "war on terrorism." Decreasing local and popular sponsorship

through education or propaganda, providing humanitarian aid, rewarding those who fight against the perpetrators, and/or punishing those who support or shelter them is often effective.

Increasing Terrorist Costs

This approach, making terrorist action more and more expensive, incorporates elements of the first three broad strategies but deserves separate mention. Some smaller acts of terror-violence (such as a bombing or kidnapping) cost the attacking organization little at first, but if diligent law enforcement leads to perpetrator imprisonment, loss of organization funding, or ostracism by the sheltering group or country, simple acts become much more expensive to carry out.

In another example of this approach, larger countries, such as the United States, finance substantial purchases of expensive and sophisticated weapons and weapon systems (often at inflated prices) when they become available on the "black market," then (usually) destroy them. This eliminates some weapons immediately and drives up the price for those that remain.

What Doesn't Work to Control Terrorism

Control of terrorism does not lie in meeting terrorists' demands by paying them or promising social or political change, in attempting to mollify the terrorist organization, or in being fearful of angering the perpetrators. Well-organized terrorist activity is not carried out in anger (although some of the participants may be driven by anger); it is carefully planned and executed for specific value and effect, at specific times and points of opportunity. Strategies of mollification or placation—occasionally suggested by potential victims, some commentators, or shortsighted theorists—are notoriously unreliable and virtually always lead to more (or further threats of) terror violence. They reinforce terrorist behavior and strengthen the terrorist organization's reputation and political position.

The idea that target groups and potential victims should somehow be careful not to anger terrorist perpetrators is particularly interesting, and reminiscent of frightened primitive villagers sacrificing food or more to appease some god about whom their entire "knowledge" is based in myth or coincidence. Although there is certainly reason to be cautious in the face of acute danger, some people view almost any aggressive antiterrorist action as likely to make matters worse by further inciting people who are already angry at their victims. A minority of Americans, for example, believe we should stop our current rhetoric and international deployment lest they ignite reprisals. Many more fear reprisal, but accept the need to act decisively for long-term success.

Neither history nor experience suggests that mollifying aggressors decreases their dangerous behavior. Whether one examines the unfortunately benign British and U.S. reactions to Hitler's expansion during the 1930s or the microcosm of dealing with an abusive parent or spouse, recognizing the need for definitive action and then rapidly carrying it out are critical to decreasing ultimate violence and minimizing ultimate damage. Those who express strong opposition to taking legitimately aggressive, and sometimes violent action in an effort to decrease future terrorism are, in my view, generally either ill-informed or acting out of a personal or self-serving impulse.

One can understand feelings of fear or hopelessness, including, for example, concerns about one's children being in the military and sent into harm's way. But it is a mistake to act on those feelings if such actions run counter to the need to stop a serious threat. Immediate impulses to stave off pain or danger are often far less important than the longer term consequences of running from the fray. "Hoping the crocodile will eat me last" is a poor defense. Although never to be entered into lightly, carefully considered violence is sometimes an important part of dealing with terrorism and protecting its potential victims.

References

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