Inside the Terrorist Mind

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To the targets of terrorism, the perpetrators may often appear as the incarnation of **evil** deserving the utmost punishment. However, labeling terrorism as evil, though cathartically gratifying from the victims' perspective, and perhaps an effective rallying cry in the "war on terrorism", may not suffice to counter the phenomenon. To do so effectively we need to understand terrorism, identify its roots, its strengths and its vulnerabilities. Different social sciences may offer varied insights into the ways terrorism "ticks". Today, I would like to offer a psychological perspective, and attempt a glimpse into the terrorist mind.

Pathology? What does it feel like to be a terrorist? It certainly isn't a life on the "easy street". Rather, it is life "on the edge", rife with violence against others and a near certainty of a meeting a violent death oneself (that turns into full certainty in the case of suicide terrorism ). What kind of person would want this for her or himself ? A crazy person, perhaps ? In the seventies and the eighties-- this possibility was entertained quite seriously by psychologists and psychiatrists. Extensive research conducted on the Baader Meinhof Group, the Italian Red Army Brigades, the Basque ETA, and the various Palestinian organizations, among others, came out empty, however.

The terrorists, as a group, are **no psychopaths**, and they show no

systematic signs of mental pathology. If anything, they appear to be "disturbingly" normal. **Yes**, there were indications that Western European terrorists tended to come from broken homes (Post, 1990), or that the Basque ETA terrorists tended to come from mixed Basque and Spanish heritage. No one would argue, however, that having come from a broken home, or a mixed family background is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for a career in terrorism. Equally likely, under the same conditions one could became a garden-variety criminal, a suffering artist, even a selfless humanitarian.

Ideology. What enables terrorists to endure the hardships of their precarious existence is **ideology** NOT **pathology**. It is the utopian, millenarian, irredentist (choose your own term) belief system that inspires them, transforms them into heroes in their own eyes, and those of their comrades, and sets lofty goals for themselves that justify virtually all means, including the killing of others and facing an assured demise themselves.

By "ideology" I mean a coordinated set of convictions about **how things are** versus **how they ought to be** from the standpoint of a group, or a category of people (fellow believers, fellow nationals, fellow workers). An ideology refers to collectivist objectives rather than individualist ones. It sets the welfare of the group above the individual's personal welfare. It contrasts

starkly with egoism, hedonism, or greed. One might be motivated to **kill** for greed, even risk **one's life** or personal liberty for greed, but one wouldn't **commit suicide** for greed (this wouldn't make any sense at all); one would, however, do so for ideological reasons, as we commonly see these days.

Consistent with the collectivist nature of terrorism, indoctrination into the terrorist ranks has to do with extreme forms of group influence. Studies of brain washing, religious conversion, cults , as well as of terrorist groups per se illuminate the process that turns "normal community members" to vicious terrorists. It involves an isolation from alternative belief systems, delegitimation and dehumanization of potential targets, intolerance of doubt or dissent, adoration of the leader, in short the creation of a separate close-minded "social reality" at odds with the social reality of alternative, more moderate belief-systems.

Ariel Merari an Israeli expert on suicide terrorism writes "The key to creating a terrorist suicide is the group process.  Terrorist suicide is an organizational rather than an individual phenomenon. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been a single case of suicide terrorism which was done on the suicide's personal whim. In all cases, it was an organization that decided to embark on this tactic, recruited candidates, chose the target and the time, prepared the candidate for the mission, and made sure that he/she

would carry it out (occasionally via a back-up detonation device activated via remote control in case the would be terrorist got cold feet after all). The three critical elements in the preparation are: boosting motivation, group pressure (e.g. mutual commitment) and creating a point of no return (public personal commitment) by videotaping the candidate declaring that he is going to do it, and having him write last letters to family and friends..''

Ideological strength. Let us hark back to the topic of ideology for a moment. Not all ideologies were born equal, and some ideologies are more powerful sources of inspiration than other ideologies. Two major factors affect the strength of an ideology. (1) its **base of support** within a community, (2) the degree to which community members are **motivated** to accept the ideology. **Socio-political** ideologies are often "weaker" than **ethno-nationalist** or **religious** ideologies because their base of support is narrower**.** Ethno-national and religious ideologies are populist, and hence are deeply rooted in the group's history and traditions;  their base of support is typically broader than the base of socio-political  ideologies that derive from abstract academic arguments , (viz. Marxism; Leninism, or Maoism), that "turn on" only the select few (usually "egg heads", professional philosophers, or other intellectual types). The broader the base of support, the more is the ideology perceived as the objective, undeniable Truth,  or a

"social reality", serving as a powerful guide to action no less so than the "objective" or the physical reality (Festinger, 1954).

Occasionally, however, even a narrowly supported terrorist ideology can be extremely compelling, if those exposed to it are strongly **motivated** to accept it. Several different motivations may prompt the embracement of an ideology, some relating to its **style**, other—to its **substance**. As concerns style, many ideologies are formulated in clear-cut, definitive terms of considerable appeal to persons in whom an intolerance of ambiguity (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1946) or the need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996) were aroused. Such craving for clarity and closure may arise as a psychological response to social-economic modernization with its aftermaths of urbanization, alienation and dislocation that often provoke an acute sense of uncertainty and an identity crisis (Huntington, 1996, p. 129).

As concerns substance, the appeal of ideologies frequently stems from their identification of a collective **grievance** which resolute confrontation offers an opportunity for **glory**. The grievance component refers to a real or imagined injustice suffered by a group or a category of people (denial of respect, of dignity, of rights, of land, of religious or national freedom, etc.). This may bring about frustration, anger and a sense of hopelessness motivating those who perceive themselves as victims to embrace an

ideology promising to redress the grievance. Palestinians in refugee-camps, Moslem or South American youths under oppressive regimes, and others lacking  proper education, respectable trade, a place of their own and prospects in life more generally, may feel a strong sense of frustration disposing them to be converts to extremism and ready recruits to terrorism. Rita Giacaman, a Palestinian public health worker and researcher from Ramallah who is studying attitudes of students at Bir Zeit University, the leading Palestinian institute of higher learning, recently summarized her research as follows: "**We found that our students generally have an inability to dream, or to visualize a better future than their miserable current lilfe.**" (cited in the Washington Post, 3/23, p. A17).

Of course, not all terrorists or extremists are disadvantaged. In fact, the leading ones often are quite well off. Osama Bin Laden, the Saudi billionaire certainly is no destitute youth. Nor were the 9/11 terrorists. Mohammed Atta (as we know) came from a middle-class family in Egypt, studied architecture in Cairo, traveled to Germany for graduate studies and held a part-time job doing architectural drawings for a German firm. Several others of the 9/11 perpetrators came from similar middle class backgrounds with similar markers of personal success. The Baader Meinhoff Group in Germany, the Weatherman Underground in the US, and many other post

WWII terrorist groups were made up mostly of individuals with middle class origins and middle class skills, honed by at least some university education. Why do such individuals choose the precarious, violent and deadly existence that terrorism has to offer ?

A possible answer is **glory** that comes from devoting one's life to the cause of the suffering group, hence acting not on behalf of one's self interest but on behalf of an ideology. Ideologically motivated actions lend one a sense of immortality (paradoxically, perhaps, even as one is about to perish for the cause), both **personal immortality** by earning the status of a hero or a martyr, whose name is engraved forever in the group's collective memory, and **impersonal immortality** that comes from dissolving one's individual identity within the de-personalized, group identity whose existence, unlike the individual's existence, may continue indefinitely.

In summary, to become a terrorist it takes both the accessibility of an ideology that condones terrorism and the motivation to accept it; both these elements are **singularly necessary and jointly sufficient** to commit to terrorism. Furthermore, the stronger these elements --the stronger the commitment. Thus, the Palestinian Hamas or the Lebanese Hezbollah, or the el Quaeda network—all are possessed of a broadly based fundamentalist ideology, and a strong motivation (within the society) to accept it based on a

profound sense of grievance (with regard to the Israeli occupation, the US

presence in the Mid East, the Western corruption of Moslem values, etc.).

By contrast, for the Baader Meinhoff gang in Germany in the 1970s, or for

the Red Brigades in Italy of that period--both the credibility of the grievance

(hence, the motivation) and the community-support for terrorism  were

weaker and indeed both these movements were defeated, at least

temporarily, by governmental forces (Italian Red Brigade terrorism is

rearing its head recently with the assassination on March 20th, 2002 of

Professor Marco Biagi in Bologna, and three years ago in Rome of Professor

Massimo D'Antona (20 May, 1999).

The combination of a broadly based (ethno-nationalist) ideology and a

relatively weak motivational base (limited perceived grievance) is

exemplified, arguably, by the IRA, and the combination of a strong

motivational base (misery of the Russian people) and a narrowly based,

socio-political, ideology is exemplified, perhaps by the $19^{th}$ century

anticsarist **Narodnaya Wolya** (Figure here)**.**

Implications of ideological strength. The strength with which an

extremist ideology is held has a number of important implications. **First**, it

determines the extremism of the terrorist activity itself. **The more extreme**

**the ideology the more extreme the terrorist activity**. One does not readily

massacre innocents, or sacrifice one's own life unless one had an unshakeable belief in an ideology that legitimizes and requires this. Political terrorists have been typically more circumscribed in their violence than ethno-nationalist or religious terrorists, and their targets have been more precisely symbolic of the systemic ills they imagined themselves to be fighting. A motto of the Narodnaya Volya in Russia was '**not one drop of superfluous blood**' (in Hoffman, 1998, p. 18). To this day, the targets of political terrorism in Italy or Germany, for example, are rather carefully selected as emblematic of the objectionable government or establishment. By contrast, strongly held ethno-nationalist, or religious ideologies often provide a legitimation for extreme and indiscriminate terrorism against innocents. Examples are the Aum Shinrikyo 1995 cult nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway, the repeated bombing of Israeli cafes, pitzerias, and discothecs or indeed the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers.

**Secondly**, definitional matters aside, the greater the ideological strength the more difficult (or less convincing) it is to portray terrorism as a **crime**, and the more fitting it seems to view it as an aspect of an inter group **conflict**. The fervor, tenacity, self-sacrifice and breadth of popular support some terrorist groups boast seem a far cry from the material self interest, greed, and disregard for ethical principles that one normally associates with

criminal activity. Terrorism, to reiterate, is not carried out for one's own sake, but rather for the benefit of one's group. In that regard terrorism **can be** and **occasionally is** part and parcel of other communally oriented activities including education, social services, religious worship, caring for the sick, etc. It has often been remarked that Hamas, for example, or Hezbollah, are not "really" terrorist organizations but rather are community associations involved in a broad array of communal functions and services. Unlike those who view this as an indication of mildness and tractability—it is possible to view it as a portend of the opposite potentialities, namely, ones of intransigence and relentlessness.

**Thirdly**, and relatedly, the stronger are the terrorist group's ideological underpinnings—the **less effective** will be a "war on terrorism" that is exclusively focused on military action and deterrence. Instead, dealing with strongly ideological terrorism may need to take a broadly based, "conflict management" approach. It is possible, perhaps, by force alone to temporarily quell or even totally eradicate the likes of the Baader Meinhof Group, the Red Brigades, or the Weatherman underground here in the US; it is somewhat doubtful, however, that the same approach would work with strongly ideological Islamic terrorism enjoying a wide base of popular support. Coping with the latter may need to include multifaceted

efforts consisting not only of the pursuit, apprehension and trial of terrorists but also of comprehensive diplomatic, foreign policy, and cultural/educational activities designed to rearrange their priorities. Admittedly, the fight against strongly ideological terrorism will not be resolved momentarily, and it must be viewed within a relatively extended time-scale. Ideological debates, media campaigns, nation-building activities, diplomacy all take time. It seems unlikely, however, that military and law enforcement efforts **alone** will eradicate widely based terrorism unless these long term measures also were successfully implemented, and the ideologies upon which terrorism feeds were discredited, and replaced by alternative belief systems.

What might such alternative belief-systems consist of? A two-pronged approach might be effective including (1) a reinstatement for potential recruits to terrorism of **individualist goals**, and (2) offering ways to redress collective grievances in non belligerent ways. The individualist goals may relate to universal human needs of personal development, marriage and the family, economic advancement, etc. Interviews with parents of Palestinian youths reveals their efforts to uphold such individualistic goals, and keep them away from life-threatening participation in anti-Israel violence. The father of Noura Shalhoub, a 15 year old who attacked a soldier at a

checkpoint and was killed in the process, recounts how he lectured to his children on **the need to keep studying** during the conflict; her mother recounts how she tried to show her **the new bedroom** she would have in the house her father was building. (Washington Post, 3/23, 2002, p. A17). In the case of Noura—the parents' attempts to rekindle her individualist interests were tragically unsuccessful. If she and other Palestinian youths see no future for themselves highlighting individualistic goals might not work because such goals may appear unattainable.

Highlighting individualistic goals might work, however, if means to their attainment were also provided. Bruce Hoffman, in a recent article published in the Atlantic Monthly (Dec., 2001) recounts how in 1973 the Black September group, among the most ruthless and feared terrorist organizations that carried out the assassination of Jordan's Prime Minister Wasfi al-Tal, and the seizure and killing of Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972—was dismantled by the PLO (to whose purposes it became superfluous at the time) through marrying off its members to beautiful young women especially gathered for that purpose, and giving each newly wed couple $3,000 (with the promise of additional $5,000 if a baby was born within a year), an apartment in Beirut with a gas stove, a refrigerator, and a television as well as an employment by the PLO in a nonviolent capacity.

Other successful attempts to reinstate individualist goals for terrorists,

include parole and vocational training programs for IRA terrorists, and

"repentance" laws in Italy credited with ending a wave of Red Brigades'

terrorism in the 1980s (Ferracuti, 1990). The moral of the story is that the

reinstatement of individualist goals may be effective if one could also

provide credible means for their attainment.

In addition to the revival of individualism, extremist collectivist

ideologies should be replaced by more moderate and tolerant ideologies that

reduce the sense of inter group conflict and promise to restore group dignity

without resorting to violence. Diplomacy, negotiations, nation-building and

education would be required to occasion such an ideological shift.

Undoubtedly, this could not be imposed from without and would require the

cooperation of moderate opinion leaders in populations currently prone to

terrorism. Jointly, the reinstatement of attainable individual goals, and the

moderation of collectivist rhetoric may lower individuals' motivations to

accept extremist interpretations of collective **grievances**, and attenuate the

sense of **glory** that extremist ideologies promise.

**Fourthly,** the stronger the terrorism's ideological base the greater the

need for **differentiation and selectivity** in the use of force against the

terrorists. By this I mean well-aimed, "surgical" strikes that truly minimize

the hurting of innocents. While the hurting of innocents is morally repugnant in general, in the case of strongly ideological terrorism it may be vastly counterproductive as well. For in such a case, large numbers of community members, constituting a "sentiment pool" sympathetic to the terrorist cause to begin with, might be pushed over the brink, and moved to join the terrorist ranks. "Collateral damage" inflicted on the Palestinians by the Israelis, the sanctions imposed on Irak and reputed to have caused the starvation deaths of hundreds of thousands of children, the prospects of ethnic profiling in the US, are all examples of a woeful lack of differentiation between the guilty and the innocents, that in the case of a strongly ideological terrorism may only contribute to its resilience and resolve.

None of this is meant to imply that military campaigns against terrorism aren't effective or necessary. To the contrary, successful military action can be quite useful in demonstrating that terrorism fails to enhance the terrorist group's collective dignity, and that it actually undermines it in bringing humiliating defeats upon the group. Successful military action also increases the credibility of deterrence that may dampen the terrorists' motivation to challenge the victorious party. Yet, if waged against strongly ideological terrorism, military and other punitive actions ought to be

conducted with the utmost circumspection, and they may need to be

complemented by a wide range of non-military activities and programs

designed to take the wind out of the terrorists' sails and to point them in an

alternative, more constructive, direction.