

# Asian Resonance

## Terrorism: Some Psychological and Behavioral aspects



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### Abstract

Terrorism has been described variously as both a method and strategy; a crime or a holy duty; a justified reaction to domination and an unforgivable disgrace. Obviously, a lot depends on whose point of view is being represented. It also said that, terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or pressurize a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.

Much of what we know about terrorist behavior is predicted on our ability to accurately attribute responsibility to terrorist performers, be they individuals or movements. Most terrorists are not mentally ill, and most do not have violent or psychopathic personalities. Regularly found psychological problem among terrorists are: poor self esteem, a sense of hopelessness, shame, a need for revenge, and a sense of vulnerability. Terrorism, by any ways, represents a high yield but low cost strategy at least in terms of short-term gains. We cannot deny the reality of the risk, but there are definite reasons why we should not give way to pessimism or helplessness. There is no trauma, which is guaranteed to cause long-term psychopathology in all those exposed to it. Most trauma specialists share the view that the psychological outcome, for individuals and communities, is resilience and not psychopathology. Moreover, trauma can create positive outcomes. These include greater community or familial cohesiveness, a more realistic appraisal of life values and priorities by individuals, as well as a greater sense of personal strength and self confidence. The present paper discusses some of the related issues.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, political motivation, psychopathology, trauma

### Introduction

Living seems to have become a risky pursuit. Terrorism poses a number of dilemmas. First, we need security without compromising civil liberties. Second, we need forewarning without inducing unnecessary alarm. Third, we need to invest in preparation for possible terrorist incidents without jeopardizing our commitment to other major responsibilities. Fourth, we need to be vigilant and cautious but without paralysis and paranoia. Unfortunately, research on terrorism is patchy but some lessons have been learned, often painfully. Moreover, the so-called 'war on terrorism', if pursued only in terms of military power and increased physical security, will fail. 'Without attention to the psychological and behavioural side of terrorism we run the risk of losing the war, because in the final analysis, the psychological and behavioral aspects of terrorism represent not merely one such battle within the war, they represent the war itself'. (Everly GS, 2003)

### Terror and the Terrorism:

The word 'terror' derives from the Latin 'terrere' meaning to 'frighten'. The widely rehearsed axiom of the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu (4th Century BCE) captures the essence of terror, '... kill one, frighten ten thousand'. 'The Anatomy of Terror' (Sinclair A, 2003) confirms that history is replete with examples of the use of terror in the pursuit of religious aims (e.g. the massacres by the Crusaders), material aims (e.g. the 'Stranglers' of Southern India who terrorized road travelers', and the Mafia), quasi-moral, and ideological aims (e.g. General Bedford's supremacist Ku Klux Klan, and the 'Shining Path'), and state and political aims (e.g. the Tzarist Okrhana and the Nazi Geheime Staatspolizei), and, in the current context, religio-political aims (e.g. al-Qa'ida and Hama's).

'Terror' is easier to define than 'terrorism'. Over 100 definitions of terrorism have been advanced (Levy BS, Sidel VW, 2003) The US

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Department of Justice (US Department of Justice, 1996) offered in 1996 the following definition: the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives'.

The word "terrorism" has been used to describe a variety of violent acts from domestic altercations to gang violence to workplace homicide. In the introduction to the Department's Patterns of Global Terrorism, terrorism is defined as politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents usually intended to influence an audience.

This definition includes three key criteria that distinguish terrorism from other forms of violence. First, *terrorism must be politically motivated*. Terrorism is directed toward goals that are political; in other words, terrorist actions are intended to guide or influence governmental policy. Thus, violent acts such as robbery, homicide, and kidnapping, which are committed in the furtherance of personal or criminal goals, are not included. This criterion emphasizes that the social and psychological antecedents of personally or criminally motivated violence are different than the antecedents of terrorist violence.

Second, *terrorist violence is directed at noncombatants*. Noncombatants are people who are not members of the military services or military members who are not actively involved in military hostilities. This criterion identifies terrorism as violence directed toward civilian populations or groups who are not prepared to defend against political violence. The third criterion is that *subnational groups or clandestine agents commit terrorist attacks*. Under this criterion, political violence by nation-states is not terrorism, even when there is a probability that noncombatants will be killed.

Different people can interpret an act differently depending on their perspective. First, some people see *terrorism as a legal issue* (Taylor (1988)). With this perspective, an act is considered terrorism only if it is illegal. Governments are likely to use this perspective to interpret terrorism; however, the determination that an act is terrorism under this perspective depends on which government is doing the interpreting. Obviously, not all nations will have the same definition of what is legal. Two governments, therefore, may view the same incident differently.

A second perspective is *moral in nature* and would consider an act to be terrorism only if it had no moral justification. Some groups are willing to commit politically motivated illegal violence but do so with the belief that it is a necessary and morally justified act.

### **The Aims and Objectives of the Terrorism act:**

The objectives of terrorism act vary but include:

- creating mass anxiety, fear, and panic
- fostering a sense of helplessness and hopelessness
- demonstrating the incompetence of the authorities
- destroying a sense of security and safety

- provoking inappropriate reactions from individuals or the authorities (e.g. repressive and/or incompetent legislation or the excessive use of violence against suspect individuals and organizations).

In addition, large-scale terrorist incidents can have adverse effects on world financial markets, travel and tourism, and may trigger xenophobic counter reactions.

Terrorist events may give rise to higher levels of psychopathology than that which follow natural disasters (e.g. tsunami and earthquakes), perhaps because terrorist incidents are preventable and are systematically targeted at civilians. Twelve months after the Oklahoma bombing in 1995, there were reports of higher levels of smoking, alcohol consumption, stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those which prevailed in a control metropolitan community (Smith DW, Christiansen EH, Vincent R, *et al* 1999). Psychopathology following a terrorist incident may largely depend on two factors. The first is the degree of personal exposure to the event and its immediate sequelae (e.g. the death or serious injury of a loved one, and exposure to gruesome sights). The second is the individual's own level of personal vulnerability (e.g. concurrent life stresses, female gender, and previous psychiatric history). Children in particular may also be more vulnerable to contaminants because of their higher respiratory rates and greater skin/surface mass ratio. Dybdahl (Dybdahl R, 2001) emphasizes how children's reactions are likely to be shaped by those of their parents.

### **Psychological and Behavioral Aspects:**

Terrorism seems to be a random and senseless form of violence committed by very disturbed people. The idea that one is susceptible to such seemingly uncontrollable and bizarre attacks certainly leads to a heightened sense of anxiety. Another important psychological aspect of terrorism is the terrorist's ideological or political motivation, making terrorism akin to war. The psychological aspects are likely to make people more sensitive to terrorism than they are to the much greater probabilities of traffic accidents or criminal victimization.

Much of what we know about terrorist behavior is predicted on our ability to accurately attribute responsibility to terrorist performers, be they individuals or movements. Most terrorists are not mentally ill, and most do not have violent or psychopathic personalities. Regularly found psychological problem among terrorists are: poor self esteem, a sense of hopelessness, shame, a need for revenge, and a sense of vulnerability.

When studying terrorist behavior one should not ignore the influence of the perpetrators' and the victims' social and cultural values. Indeed, the fact that some governments view terrorism as illegal and some groups see it as immoral will be crucial parts of any good definition. The point is that not all governments or all groups will consider a particular act illegal and/or immoral. There are numerous

examples of politically and ideologically motivated violence that does not carry the derogatory baggage terrorism does. Undoubtedly, the characteristic of terrorism that distinguishes it from these other forms of political violence (e.g., war, police actions) is that it is committed outside the rules of some society. This illegal and/or immoral aspect of terrorism says something about the mindset of those who are willing to violate those legal and moral rules, but it does not necessarily make them any more or less valid in their motivation.

**Conclusion:**

Terrorism, by any method, represents a high yield but low cost strategy at least in terms of short-term gains. We cannot deny the reality of the risk, but there are definite reasons why we should not succumb to pessimism or helplessness. We need to view terrorism dispassionately, particularly in terms of its causes.

There is no trauma, however abhorrent, which is guaranteed to cause long-term psychopathology in all those exposed to it. Most trauma specialists share the view that the psychological outcome, for individuals and communities, is resilience and not psychopathology. Moreover, trauma can create positive outcomes. These include greater community or familial cohesiveness, a more realistic appraisal of life values and priorities by individuals, as well as a greater sense of personal strength and self confidence.

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