

Profiling of terrorist personality as a predictor of terrorist behavior: a comprehensive study

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Abstract

Terrorist are generally people who feel alienated from society and have a grievance or regard themselves as victims of an injustice. They are devoted to their political or religious cause and do not regard their violent actions as criminal. They are loyal to each other but will deal with an unfaithful member more harshly than with the enemy. They are people with cunning, skill and initiative, as well as ruthlessness. Some studies suggest that there are many essential characteristics of a terrorist like dedication, personal bravery, a lack of feelings of pity or remorse, a fairly high standard intelligence etc. With a number of exceptions, most researchers agree that although latent personality traits can certainly contribute to the decision to turn to violence, there is no single set of psychic attributes that explains terrorist behavior. Some systematic differences may be distinguished between those who engage in terrorism and those who do not: yet most of the researches lead to the conclusion that the active terrorist is not there are any special qualities that characterize the terrorist. In profiling the terrorist, some generalizations can be made on the basis on the examination of the literature on the psychology and sociology of terrorism published over the past three decades. The personalities of terrorists may be as diverse as the personalities of people of any lawful profession. But psychologists are trying hard to find out the profile of terrorist to predict terrorist behavior and the present study is about exploring the possible profiles of terrorists.

INTRODUCTION

Reich said, “Even the briefest review of the history of terrorism reveals how varied and complex a phenomenon it is, and therefore how futile it is to attribute simple, global, and general psychological characteristics to all terrorists.” (Reich, 1990). There is no terrorist personality, nor is there any accurate profile – psychologically or otherwise- of the terrorist. Moreover personality traits alone tend not to be very good predictors of behavior. The quest of understand terrorism by studying terrorist personality traits is likely to be an unproductive area for further investigation and inquiry of some psychologists and a very challenging field for other. Nearly a decade later psychologist John Horgan (2003) again examined the cumulative research evidence on the search for a terrorist personality, and concluded that in the context of a scientific study of behavior such attempts to assert the presence of a terrorist personality, or profile, are . Further complicating the effort is the fact that terrorist can assume many different roles – only a few will actually fire the weapon or detonate the bomb. The “personality” of a financier, may be different from that of an administrator or strategist or an assassin. Taylor and Quayle’s research (1994) explored whether some systematic differences might be discerned between those who engage in terrorism and those who do not ; yet their search led them to the conclusion that “the active terrorist is not discernibly different in psychological terms from the non-terrorist; in psychological terms, there are no special qualities that characterize the terrorist.”

This appears to be a conclusion of consensus among most researchers who study terrorist behavior. “With a number of exceptions most observers agree that although latent personality traits can certainly contribute to the decision to turn to violence, there is no single set of psychic attributes that explains terrorist behavior” (McCormick, 2003). Nevertheless, Marsella (2003) is still hopeful that “early classical psychological studies of authoritarianism, dogmatism, tolerance or ambiguity, prejudice, trust, alienation,

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conformity, and empirical foundation for contemporary efforts.” This is not to deny, however, that certain psychological types of people may be attracted to terrorism. In his examination of autobiographies, court records, and rare interviews, Jerrold M. Post (1984) found that “people with particular personality traits and tendencies are drawn disproportionately to terrorist careers.”

The Terrorist Profile

The term and concept of “profiling” has come to have many different meanings. In the context of the following discussion, the term “profiling” is not used to refer to the type of criminal in investigative analysis that was refined by members of the investigating agencies. That kind of investigative profiling seeks to examine physical and behavioral evidence of an offense after it has occurred and, based on that information, draw inferences about potential characteristics of the person who committed the crime. Counterterrorism intelligence, however, is primarily concerned with the identification and interruption of terrorist activity before an attack occurs. This poses a very different kind of operational challenge.

One of the best known, most comprehensive, and most often cited of these efforts is a profile developed by Russell and Miller (1977) based on a compilation of published data regarding over 350 individual terrorist cadres and leaders across 18 different Palestinian, Japanese, German, Italian, Turkish, Irish, Spanish, Iranian, Argentinean, Brazilian, and Uruguayan terrorist groups active during the 1966-1976 time span. The prototype derived from their composite described a young, unmarried male who is an urban resident, from middle – upper class family, has some university education and probably held an extremist political philosophy.

Even the briefest reflection should reveal the problem that most individuals who fit that general description are not terrorists and will never commit an act of terrorist aggression. The problem of equally grave significance that could result from its use, however, is that there are and will be people who are planning and preparing to mount a terrorist attack, who do not fit that profile (Borum, et al. 2003). Silke warns “the belief that profiling can provide an effective defense also seriously underestimates the intelligence of terrorist organizations” (Silke, 2003). Indeed sophisticated terrorist groups, such as al Qaeda, actively seek to know the “type” of person who will attract suspicion and then scout and use operators who defy that preconception. Al-Qa’ida expert, Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, has documented that the organization recruits members from 74 different countries and among at least 40 different nationalities. If the profile is the gatekeeper of who poses a threat, defenders will be soundly defeated by a known, but unfamiliar looking enemy.

Profiles of terrorists have included a profile constructed by Charles A. Russell Bowman H. Miller (1977), which has been widely mentioned in terrorism-related studies, despite its limitations, and another study that involved systematically analyzing biographical and social data on about 250 German terrorists, both leftwing right-right. Russell and Bowman attempt to draw a sociological portrait or profile of the modern urban terrorist based on a compilation and analysis of more than 350 individual terrorist cadres and leaders from Argentinean, Brazilian, German, Iranian, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Palestinian, Spanish, Turkish, and Uruguayan terrorist groups active during the 1966-1976 period, the first decade of the contemporary terrorist era.

Age

Russell and Miller found that the average age of an active terrorist member (as opposed to a leader) was between 22 and 25, except for Palestinian, German, and Japanese terrorists, who were between 20 and 25 years old. Another source explains that the first generation of RAF terrorists went underground at approximately 22 to 23 years of age, and that the average age shifted to 28 to 30 years for second generation terrorists. In summarizing the literature about international terrorists in the 1980’s, Taylor (1988) characterizes their demography as being in their early twenties and unmarried, but he notes that there is considerable variability from group to groups, such as the LTTE, having many members in the 16 to 17 year old age level and even members who were preteens. Laqueur notes that Arab and Iranian groups tend to use boys aged 14 to 15 for dangerous missions, in part because they

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are less likely to question instructions and in **Educational, Occupational, and Socioeconomic Background**

Terrorists in general have more than average education, and very few Western terrorists are uneducated or illiterate. Russell and Miller found that about two thirds of terrorist group members had some form of university training. The occupations of terrorist recruits have varied widely, and there does not appear to be any occupation in particular that produces terrorists, other than the ranks of the unemployed and students. Between 50 and 70 percent of the younger members of Latin American urban terrorist groups were students. Highly educated recruits were normally given leadership positions, whether at the cell level or national level. The occupations of terrorist leaders have likewise varied. Older members and leaders frequently were professionals such as doctors, bankers, lawyers, engineers, journalists, university professors, and mid level government executives. It may be somewhat misleading to regard terrorists in general as former professionals. Many terrorists who have been able to remain anonymous probably continue to practice their legitimate professions and moonlight as terrorists only when they receive instructions to carry out a mission. Major exceptions to the middle and upper class origins of terrorist groups in general include three large organizations examined in this study—the FARC, the LTTE, and the PKK—as well as the paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.

Martial Status:-

In the past, most terrorists have been unmarried. Russell and Miller found that, according to arrest statistics, more than 75 to 80 percent of terrorists in the various regions in the late 1970's were single. Getting in the way family responsibilities are generally precluded by requirements for mobility, flexibility, initiative, security, and total dedication to a revolutionary cause. Roughly 20 percent of foreign terrorist group memberships apparently consisted of married couples. If Russell and Miller's figure on single terrorists was accurate.

Physical Appearance:-

Terrorists and healthy and strong but generally undistinguished in appearance and manner. The physical fitness of some may be enhanced by having had extensive commando training. They tend to be of medium height and build to blend easily into crowds. They tend not to have abnormal physiognomy and peculiar features, genetic or acquired that would facilitate their identification. Their dress and hair styles are inconspicuous. In addition to their normal appearance, they talk and behave like normal people. They may even be well dressed if, for example, they need to be in the first-class section of an airliner targeted for hijacking. They may resort to disguise or plastic surgery depending on whether they are on police wanted posters.

Rural and Urban:-

Guerrilla/terrorist organizations have tended to recruit members from the areas where they are expected to operate because knowing the area of operation is a basic principle of urban terrorism and guerrilla warfare. According to Russell and Miller, about 90 percent of the Argentine ERP and Montoneros came from the Greater Buenos Aires area. Most of Maighella's follower came from Recife, Rio de Janeiro, Santos and Sao Paulo. More than 70 percent of the Ruparnaros were natives of Montevideo. Most German and Italian terrorists were from urban areas: the Germans from Hamburg and West Berlin; the Italians from Genoa, Milan, and Rome.

Gender:-

Most terrorists are male. Well over 80 percent of terrorist operations in the 1966-76 periods were directed, led, and executed by males. The number of arrested female terrorists in Latin America suggested that female membership was less than 16 percent. The role of women in Latin American groups such as the Rupamaros was limited to intelligence collection, serving as couriers or nurses, maintaining safe houses, and so forth, various terrorism specialists have noted that the number of women involved in terrorism has greatly exceeded the number of women involved in crime. However, no statistics have been offered to substantiate this assertion. Considering that the number of terrorist actions perpetrated worldwide in any

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given year is probably “minuscule in comparison with the common crimes committed in the same period, it is not clear if the assertion is correct. Nevertheless, it indeed seems as if more women are involved in terrorism than actually are, perhaps because they tend to get more attention than women involved in common crime. Although Russell and Miller’s profile is more of a sociological than a psychological profile; some of their conclusions raise psychological issues, such as why women played a more prominent role in left-wing terrorism in the 1966-76 period than in violent crime in general. Russell and Miller’s data suggest that the terrorists examined were largely males, but the authors also note the secondary support role played by women in most terrorist organizations.

In brief, in profiling the terrorist, some generalizations can be made on the basis on their examination of the literature on the psychology and sociology of terrorism published over the past three decades. One finding is that, unfortunately for profiling purposes, there does not appear to be a single terrorist personality. This seems to be the consensus among terrorism psychologists as well as political scientists and sociologists. The personalities of terrorist may be as diverse as the personalities of people in any lawful profession. There do not appear to be any visibly detectable personality traits that would allow authorities to identify a terrorist. Personality traits consistently have failed to explain most types of human behaviors, including violent behaviors. Certainly they have been shown repeatedly to contribute less to an explanation than situational and contextual factors. Most analysts of terrorism do not think that personality factors account for terrorist behavior, or do they see significant gender differences. One of the basic research findings of the field is that terrorism is primarily a group activity. It is typically not the result of psychopathology or a single personality type. Crenshaw, M. (2001). Stated that Shared ideological commitment and group solidarity are much more important determinants of terrorist behavior than individual characteristics.

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