



Reading a Crooked Mind

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Abstract:

Terrorism is a buzz word of our times. With the coming and now the prevalence of these global phenomena researchers, policy makers, anti-terror groups and the common people, all are willing to get an answer to “what makes someone be a TERRORIST?” In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, policymakers, scholars, and ordinary citizens asked a key question: What would make people willing to give up their lives to wreak mass destruction in a foreign land? In short, what makes a terrorist? The hypothesis to this question are innumerable, but none is more convincing than the others due to the lack of primary information, whether in the form of interviews of “terrorists” themselves or a close study of their recruitment process etc. This question gains pertinence in my view, also for the reason that it would be a major lead to shape the contours of the counter-terrorism efforts of the various states. Otherwise what we have been observing for a while now, the states with the faceless enemy, gets into indiscriminate use of violence, giving rise to a vicious cycle of a mutual war. Another problem with such a ‘war on terror’ is that the government becomes a hateful, wicked authority in the eyes of its own people(for example the US war on terror in Afghanistan made its people go in rebel against the state decision). To put it precisely, unless we understand what drives these people, we’ll have no hope of stopping the menace.

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1. Introduction

What makes a terrorist?

People have been pondering over this question for quite some time now. A popular explanation is that economic deprivation and a lack of education causes people to adopt extreme views and turn to terrorism. For example, in July 2005, after the bombings of the London transit system, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said, “Ultimately what we now know, if we did not before, is that where there is extremism, fanaticism or acute and appalling forms of poverty in one continent, the consequences no longer stay fixed in that continent.” Bill Clinton, Al Gore, King Abdullah of Jordan, and terrorism experts like Jessica Stern of Harvard’s Kennedy School also argue that poverty or lack of education were significant causes of terrorism.

Even President George W. Bush, who was initially reluctant to associate terrorism with poverty after September 11, eventually argued, “We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror.” Laura Bush added, “A lasting victory in the war against terror depends on educating the world’s children.”

The dominant 9/11 narrative, which emerged almost before the dust settled in lower Manhattan and persists today, depicts the attackers as crazed fanatics. But such a view does not help as many are rationally and constantly motivated for the cause they stand for.

Economics can help to understand terrorism sometimes as participation in terrorism can just be a special application of the economics of occupational choice. Some people choose to become doctors or lawyers, and others pursue careers in terrorism.

Despite these pronouncements, however, the available evidence is nearly unanimous in rejecting either material deprivation or inadequate education as important causes of support for terrorism or participation in terrorist activities. Such explanations have been embraced almost entirely on faith, not scientific evidence.

However, there are divergences to such an understanding as biographical data of terrorists in our subcontinent reflect. For instance Ajmal kasab's confession statement (the sole survivor in 26/11 attacks) went something like this: "I went to the terrorist camp as my father could not provide me feast like food, and new clothes on festival". "We were told that our big brother India is so rich and we are dying of poverty and hunger". "I was also promised that once they knew that I was successful in my operation, they would give rs. 15, 00, 00 to my family", said kasab. It should also be noted that Kasab did not know exactly what 'jihad' meant and according to police source he did not know much about Islamic tenets. (Mumbai terrorists wanted to kill and die and become famous. ABC News, 3rdDecember, 2008)

In a study conducted by The Pew Research Centre's Global Attitudes Project public opinion surveys (in February 2004 in Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Turkey, involving about 1,000 respondents in each country). One of the questions asked was, "What about suicide bombing carried out against Americans and other Westerners in Iraq? Do you personally believe that this is justifiable or not justifiable?"

The clear finding was that people with a higher level of education are in general *more* likely to say that suicide attacks against Westerners in Iraq are justified. Support turned out to be stronger among those with a higher level of education. For example, while 26 percent of illiterates and 18 percent of those with only an elementary education opposed or strongly opposed armed attacks, the figure for those with a high school education was just 12 percent. The least supportive group turned out to be the unemployed, 74 percent of whom said they support or strongly back armed attacks. By comparison, the support level for merchants and professionals was 87 percent.

Related findings have been around for a long time. Daniel Lerner, published a book in 1958 called *The Passing of Traditional Society* in which he collected and analyzed data on extremism in six Middle Eastern countries. He concluded that "the data obviate the conventional assumption that the extremists are simply the have-nots. Poverty prevails only among the apolitical masses."

Public opinion is one thing; actual participation in terrorism is another. There is striking anecdotal evidence from Nasra Hassan, a United Nations relief worker in the West Bank and Gaza Strip who described interviews with 250 militants and their associates who were involved in the Palestinian cause in the late 1990s. Hassan concluded that "none of them were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded, or depressed. Many were middle class and, unless they were fugitives, held paying jobs. Two were the sons of millionaires.

This is also the case, apparently, with al-Qaeda. Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) case officer, has written a book titled *Understanding Terror Networks*. He found that a high proportion of members of al-Qaeda were college educated (close to 35 percent) and drawn from skilled professions (almost 45 percent. Perhaps most definitively, the Library of Congress produced a summary report for an advisory group to the CIA titled, "The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?" which had a similar conclusion.

Why are better educated, more advantaged individuals more likely than others to join terrorist groups? Terrorism can be thought as a market, with a supply side and a demand side. Individuals, either in small groups or on their own, supply their services to terrorist organizations.

On the supply side, the economics of crime suggests that people with low opportunity costs will become involved in terrorism. Their costs of involvement are lower—that is, they sacrifice less because their prospects of living a rich life are less.

Among Palestinians, almost 60 percent of the suicide bombers had more than a high school education, compared with less than 15 percent of the general population.

However, in the case of the supply of terrorists, while consideration of opportunity cost is not irrelevant, it is outweighed by other factors, such as a commitment to the goals of the terrorist organization and a desire to make a statement.

Political involvement requires some understanding of the issues, and learning about those issues is a less costly endeavor for those who are better educated.

On the demand side, terrorist organizations want to succeed. The costs of failure are high. So the organizations select more able participants—which again points to those who are better educated and better off economically.

One of the conclusions from the work of Laurence Iannaccone, “The Market for Martyrs,”—is that it is very difficult to effect change on the supply side. People who are willing to sacrifice themselves for a cause have diverse motivations. Some are motivated by nationalism, some by religious fanaticism, some by historical grievances, and so on. If we address one motivation and thus reduce one source on the supply side, there remain other motivations that will incite other people to terror. Terrorists show an aversion to compromise because “organizational survival overshadows the [stated] cause.” The logic is clear but sadly familiar: “If violence is part of the identity or livelihood of participants themselves, then the likelihood of negotiations resolving a conflict is miniscule.” (Shirazi, 2010)

The Oslo accords are illustrative: By embracing them, Palestinian terrorists of all persuasions. Would have unquestionably advanced their stated territorial aims. But groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad instead ramped up their violence, helping to derail the peace process in order to ensure their organizational survival.

This suggests that it makes sense to focus on the demand side, such as by degrading terrorist organizations’ financial and technical capabilities, and by vigorously protecting and promoting peaceful means of protest, so there is less demand for pursuing grievances through violent means. Policies should be intended to dampen these grievances that try to reduce the supply side actors. But much hopes should not be made from these efforts as if the demand side is potent enough it would create reasons and basis for new grievances to come to action.

One set of factors that did consistently raise the likelihood that people from a given country will participate in terrorism—namely, the suppression of civil liberties and political rights, including freedom of the press, the freedom to assemble, and democratic rights. Using data from the Freedom House Index, for example it can be found that countries with low levels of civil liberties are more likely to be the countries of origin of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks. (Krueger, 2007). In “Political Repression and Violent Rebellion in the Muslim World,” Mohammed Hafez, of the University of Missouri–Kansas City, concludes that marginalizing internal dissent, as Middle Eastern governments do, almost invariably radicalizes it. Egypt, the source of much of radical Islam’s intellectual justification, offers a prime example.

2. Sense of Justice/ Injustice

A whole lot of terrorist mentality is shaped by how they see things and the problem arises as their way of looking at things happens to be different from ours. Thus, this deviant understanding leads to a

politics of defiance, for which they stand religious while, it remains unexplainable to us so, we end up looking at 'them' as some fanatic. So the difference in the notions and perspectives leading to an us-them dichotomy is an important point of contention which needs to be acted upon.

However, if we try to fit into their shoes even to some extent, we might be able to understand their case with a higher probability, maybe seeing a great deal of justification in their behaviour arising out of the high level of frustration they happen to go through. For instance in cases of AFSPA regions people go through constant insecurities and fears of being picked from their own houses, being labelled as terrorists, the women and girls are raped and molested. In such cases, the level of distrust and hatred against the state increases so much so, no democratic option seems feasible and more importantly of any help. (in the movie 'dil se' the female protagonist has this thought process).

Our labelling of terrorists as an ostracised community does less favour than loss, as it distances the so called terrorists more so increasing their rebellious instincts. (example: movie fiza based on the life story of a Bombay riots victim).

However, cases as shown in the 2010 movie 'Aamir' provide hopeful contrast cases wherein the way terrorist groups pressurize and compel them to follow their directives but how some people of courage and conscience defy them and stand for humanity.

3. Conclusion

The role of societal factors, in significant international terrorist attacks from 1997 to 2003, suggests that many socioeconomic indicators—are unrelated to whether people from one country become involved in terrorism.

The evidence suggests that terrorists care about influencing political outcomes. They are often motivated by geopolitical grievances. To understand who joins terrorist organizations, instead of asking who has a low salary and few opportunities, we should ask: Who holds strong political views and is confident enough to try to impose an extremist vision by violent means. Most terrorists are not so desperately poor that they have nothing to live for. Instead, they are people who care so fervently about a cause that they are willing to die for it. A battle is raging in terrorism studies. Proponents of the "**strategic model**" claim that rational people participate in terrorist groups mainly for the political return. Proponents of the "natural systems model" claim that rational people participate in terrorist groups mainly for some form of social gain. The first model argues that terrorists attack civilians for the collective benefit of coercing political concessions, whereas **the natural systems model** claims that individuals engage in terrorism for the personal, selective benefit of participating in an exciting, tight-knit, social group. (abrahms)

Serious implications for counterterrorism policy should flow from the recognition that social factors tend to trump political ones in the making and unmaking of terrorists. The question of terrorist motives is fundamental to counterterrorism because one cannot expect to cure a malady without understanding its underlying cause.

We very well need to realise the fact that there exists a "mentality of terrorism", i.e. an ideology and nexus that sees such a method and approach more helpful than any other possible peaceful, direct and open method. They feel that such a method yields more than it costs because of the underlying terror associated with it. They start seeing the utility of violence. (neumann) The most important thing we need to realise is that the 'big players' propagate and try to interpolate this mentality into the so called terrorists who come to the forefront. So, whom we happen to see are mere pawns in the hands of the actors, who remain hidden, safe and insidiously active for most of the time. (dermott, 2011). The rational terrorists always work to and succeed in thwarting government policies to directly attack them and restructure themselves to be less penetrable. (walter enders, feb 2007)

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