

THE TERRORIST MINDSET AND TERRORIST DECISIONMAKING:
TWO AREAS OF IGNORANCE

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PREFACE

The following paper identifies two areas of ignorance in the current study of the phenomenon of terrorism: how terrorists think (is there such a thing as a terrorist mind?) and how terrorist groups make their decisions. The paper was one of many submitted in preparation for the International Scientific Conference on Terrorism, West Berlin, November 14-18, 1978. A selection of these papers will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Terrorism: An International Journal*.

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The organization, financing, weaponry, and tactics of terrorist groups have been studied. We have acquired a great deal of what might be called "order of battle" information about terrorist groups. In some cases, a sizable portion of their membership has been identified; we know their names. Articles, or in some cases, books have been written about a few of the more notable leaders of terrorist groups: Ulrike Meinhof, Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, Leila Khaled, Yasir Arafat. A few have written about their own experiences in terrorist groups: Sean MacStiofain about his Irish Republican Army career and Susan Stern about her experiences in the Weather Underground. Some terrorists in prison have agreed to interviews. Some terrorists still at large have even been interviewed by journalists. It has been reported that the West German Bundeskriminalamt maintains a vast file that includes information on the reading habits, dental records, and musical preferences of known terrorists.

ARE THERE "BORN" TERRORISTS?

On the basis of information about apprehended or identified members of terrorist groups, we have been able to construct a kind of census data profile of the "typical terrorist." Much of the pioneer work in this area has been done by Dr. Charles Russell, formerly of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations. A typical terrorist, according to his data base, is a male (although there are many notable exceptions) in his early twenties, single, from a middle or upper class family, well educated, with some university training, although he may be a university dropout, who often joined or was recruited into the group while at a university.*

* Charles A. Russell and Captain Bowman H. Miller (USAF), "Profile of a Terrorist," *Military Review*, August 1977, pp. 21-34.

The common psychological profile, if there is one, is far more speculative. Generally terrorists would appear to be absolutists -- "true believers" (a type of person who may switch ideologies but will always passionately cling to a particular one), uncompromising, action-prone, impatient persons who may seek instant gratification via their actions. They are quite often "gun freaks," that is, they may be abnormally fascinated with firearms and explosives, not generally suicidal, but persons who might be described as "risk seekers." One psychiatrist has stated that the terrorist also suffers from anonymity, deprivation, a sense of powerlessness, and feels his self-esteem and masculinity have been consistently assaulted. This same psychiatrist has stated that through acts of terrorism, terrorists seek not only attention but an intimacy with the powerful figures of society.

In sum, governments in the course of intelligence and investigative work appear to have acquired considerable data about terrorists, and psychiatrists as well as other students of human behavior have offered a number of hypotheses. However, we cannot say with confidence that we have penetrated the terrorist's mind. We do not know exactly why a politically or socially disaffected person goes underground, takes up arms, declares war on society, a total war that allows no innocent bystanders, whether this transformation is the result of certain predispositions on the part of the individual or largely circumstantial. Are there "born" terrorists?

We do not know whether terrorists suffer from some common psychosis or any psychosis at all. (Wilfried Rausch, a psychiatrist who has had the opportunity to observe and interview many of Germany's terrorists, believes they do not.) We do not know if there is a common terrorist personality, or a common terrorist "mindset" (meaning here a common perspective, a point of view, a way of looking at the world around them, the awareness of one's own identity in relationship to other persons and things). We do not know whether terrorists undergo some common radicalizing experience. Political circumstances alone seem to offer an inadequate explanation for terrorist behavior. Thousands of individuals may suffer similar political and social frustrations and may go through similar radicalizing experiences but only a handful become terrorists.

Why? There are also physiological explanations of terrorist behavior which range from inner ear malfunctions to diet deficiencies. With further research and more convincing statistics, the physiological approach may offer some explanations.

The task for students of the phenomenon of terrorism then might be to: examine the utility of increasing society's understanding of individual terrorist behavior (including the act of becoming a terrorist); describe current theories and research; compile all the conclusions and hypotheses regarding terrorist behavior; identify areas of uncertainty and existing sources of biographical information about terrorists and its accessibility to academic and research communities; and identify the kind of data that would be necessary to test various assertions and hypotheses, specifically:

- o What utility would the identification of a common terrorist psychosis, terrorist personality, or terrorist mindset have for society? Specifically, what kind of information could be utilized practically within the bounds of a free society? (Obviously, a government could not bar employment or access to public gatherings to the second born even if all male terrorists were found to be younger brothers. A person cannot be jailed because of an inner ear problem.) Such findings might have utility in considering ways to predict terrorist behavior, to deter terrorists from carrying out certain kinds of acts or against certain targets, in negotiating with terrorists, in "curing" terrorists.
- o Can we even talk about a typical "terrorist" at all, or is the term too imprecise, too slippery?
- o How does one become a terrorist? Do terrorists share sufficient individual attributes to suggest that there is a type of person predisposed to terrorism, or does recruitment appear to be largely circumstantial? If terrorists are found to share certain behavioral attributes, are these more a reflection of their present circumstances -- they are now terrorists -- than of their behavior before becoming terrorists?

- o Can we identify a common or prevalent psychosis among terrorists, a common or prevalent personality, or mindset?
- o What are the current theories regarding terrorist behavior? Can we sort out and describe the various assigned attributes of terrorists? To what extent are these supported by systematic and verifiable research? What work is currently going on in this area?
- o Is there perhaps a mix of types in terrorist organizations? (Tentatively, I have identified three types: the "ideologue," "the soldier," and the "thug.")
- o Are terrorist bombers and hijackers more like their nonpolitical criminal counterparts, or are terrorist bombers more like terrorist hijackers and other terrorists?
- o What are the available sources of biographical data on terrorists? To whom is it available? What type of information do we have in various files? To what extent is such material protected by law?

A note of caution: The possible categorization of terrorists as sick persons, mentally ill or physically impaired in some way, might have great appeal to those who would prefer not to face the fact of social, economic, or political injustices in the world and the sometimes understandable grievances that terrorists claim to express -- not that such grievances justify their actions. The identification of a cluster of behavioral traits common to most terrorists, a personality type predisposed to terrorist activity, ought not to preclude the recognition of contributive political or social problems. At the same time, we must not slip into the trap of defining terrorists according to a judgment of their political claims, reserving the label of terrorist for those whose causes we do not consider legitimate.

TERRORIST DECISIONMAKING

How terrorists decide to do what they do (after they are already terrorists) appears to be another area of uncertainty. We do not know why a terrorist group may decide to assassinate instead of kidnap, how they select their target, whether and when they may escalate their violence.

There do seem to be patterns. Each terrorist group has its own repertoire, its own style of operations, its own *modus operandi*. The Irish Republican Army does not engage in the hijacking of airliners or kidnapping. The Italian Red Brigades kidnap and shoot journalists and others in the legs. West German terrorists seem to be thorough planners. The New World Liberation Front, a tiny organization in California, has bombed various sites on behalf of local political issues -- utility rates, low-income housing, local jail conditions -- while the Weather Underground, another U.S. group, has carried out actions focused on national and international issues.

The particular operational pattern of a terrorist group appears to be determined by several factors. Clearly, the composition of the group -- whether they are university dropouts or ex-soldiers -- has something to do with it. Many of the Tupamaros came from the school of architecture in the University of Montevideo, a fact reflected in their elaborately constructed underground hideouts. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command favors elaborately fused bombs and other advanced gadgetry, perhaps reflecting the interest and skills of its leader Ahmed Jabril, a former Syrian army engineer.

The resources of the group also dictate their style of operations. Bombs are easier to carry out than assassinations. Assassinations are easier than kidnappings.

The size of a group also may determine the nature of its activities. It is not simply that a larger group is likely to possess greater resources. The actions of a smaller group may be determined more by the personality or idiosyncrasies of a single leader. A smaller group may feel more vulnerable to infiltration or reprisal which may constrain its activities.

Culture may determine a group's actions. Ideology may dictate its victims and targets. The idiosyncrasies of a key personality may be a factor in what a group does. Its circumstances also play a part. In our research at The Rand Corporation, we found that in seizing hostages, a popular terrorist tactic, groups operating on their home territory, with the support of an underground apparatus, generally favored conventional kidnappings while groups operating abroad, or at home but not

supported by a well-organized underground, favored seizing buildings, making the occupants as well as themselves hostages in what police have come to call barricade and hostage situations.

Finally, there also may be some universal rules. Thus far, no terrorist group has entered the domain of murder on a grand scale. That has remained the province of authentic lunatics. We are not sure why. It does not appear to be solely a matter of technical constraints. Terrorists operate well below their technology ceiling. They have already demonstrated their capacity to use conventional explosives and could, without resorting to exotic chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons, kill greater numbers of people, but they have not.

We do not know what arguments may be made inside a terrorist group for or against a certain move, what factors terrorists may consider more important than others, or even how systematic terrorist decisionmaking may be. This raises the second set of questions.

- o What are the principal elements of a terrorist group's *modus operandi*: choice of targets, repertoire of tactics, style of execution, communications with the outside world, etc.?
- o How do these relate to a terrorist group's cultural background, political circumstances, size, composition of membership, and other attributes? Are there cross-cultural similarities?
- o What factors are considered by a terrorist group in planning and executing an operation?
- o How does the decisionmaking process vary from group to group?
- o How do terrorists measure success: the success of an individual operation as well as progress toward their perceived long-range goals? Publicity appears important to terrorists, but is extensive press coverage of a terrorist operation in itself a sufficient payoff if other results or concessions do not result? If terrorists become disillusioned, do they escalate or simply vow to struggle on for decades if necessary? What are their time horizons?
- o What is our basis for knowing? What sources of information are there? Observations of past activities, interviews with captured terrorists?

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