COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: HATRED BRED IN THE BONE

Jerrold Post

Jerrold Post, MD, is a professor of psychiatry, political psychology, and international affairs and director of the Political Psychology Program at The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

There is a widespread assumption that the ranks of terrorists are filled with seriously psychologically disturbed individuals. Who, after all, but a crazed fanatic, would kill innocent victims in the name of a cause, would willingly become a human bomb?

Pakistani boys hold a toy gun and an Osama bin Laden poster at a rally organized by Jamat-e-Islami (Party of Islam) in Karachi, Pakistan. ©AP Images/Athat HussainIn

In fact, the consensus view of the committee on the psychological roots of terrorism, which I organized for the International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism, and Security held in Madrid in March 2005,[1] was that the search for individual psychopathology in understanding why people become involved in terrorism was doomed to failure, that explanations at the level of individual psychology were insufficient.

Indeed, we concluded, it is not going too far to assert that terrorists are psychologically "normal" in the sense of not being clinically psychotic. They are neither depressed nor severely emotionally disturbed, nor are they crazed fanatics. In fact, terrorist groups and organizations screen out emotionally unstable individuals—who represent, after all, a security risk.

There is a multiplicity of individual motivations. For some, it is to give a sense of power to the powerless; for others, revenge is a primary motivation; for still others, to gain a sense of significance.

Rather than individual psychology, then, what emerges as the most

powerful lens through which to understand terrorist behavior is that of group, organizational, and social psychology, with a particular emphasis on "collective identity."

Collective Identity

For some groups, especially nationalist/terrorist groups, collective identity is established extremely early, so that hatred is bred in the bone. The importance of collective identities and the processes of forming and transforming them cannot be overemphasized. Terrorists have subordinated their individual identity to the collective identity, so that what serves the group, organization, or network is of primary importance.

Now, how is that collective identity shaped? Interviews with incarcerated Middle East terrorists[2] suggest that it begins very early, as evidenced by representative quotes from nationalist-separatist terrorists in Fatah and the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine:

> *I came from a religious family which used to observe all the Islamic traditions. My initial political awareness came during the prayers at the mosque. That's where I was also asked to join religious classes. In the context of these studies, the sheik used to inject some historical background in which he would tell us how we were effectively evicted from Palestine.*

And:

> *The sheik used to explain to us the significance of the fact that there was an IDF [Israel Defense Forces] military outpost in the heart of the camp. He compared it to a cancer in the human body, which was threatening its very existence.*

Nor was joining the group an unusual experience. In fact, when we asked why they joined, we were told that everyone was joining, that anyone who didn't enlist during that period (*intifada*) would have been ostracized.

The cause was passed on early in childhood. There was a generational transmission of hatred between "us" and "them." The children had heard from their parents, whether in the pubs of Northern Ireland or the coffeehouses of Beirut and the occupied territories, what "they" had done to "us," how "they" had stolen our lands, had humiliated "us." Loyal to their parents, who had been damaged by the regime, they were carrying out acts of revenge against "them."

How did these terrorists justify the extremity of their actions in pursuit of their cause? One answer was especially telling:

April 2006, Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams speaks at a ceremony marking the 90th anniversary of the beginning of the uprising of the Irish rebels against the British in Northern Ireland. ©AP Images

One year later, on May 8, 2007, Northern Ireland's First Minister Ian Paisley (left) and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein were sworn in as power-sharing executive ministers of the Northern Ireland Assembly at the Stormont Parliamentary Building in Belfast. ©AP Images/Niall Carson

> *An armed action proclaims that I am here, I exist, I am strong, I am in control, I am in the field, I am on the map.*

So it is power for the powerless, significance for the insignificant. This helps explain why it is so difficult to leave the path of terrorism.

Religious Fundamentalism and Suicide Terrorism

The above represents understandings of nationalist-separatist terrorist psychology. What of religious fundamentalist terrorist psychology? Here we have individuals who are "killing in the name of God." Their acts have been given sacred significance by the radical cleric, be he an ayatollah, rabbi, minister, or priest. And because they are "true believers" who accept uncritically the radical cleric's interpretation of scripture, they do not have the same ambivalence about the extent of violence that the nationalist-separatists do.

One of the questions we posed to the militant Islamist terrorists from Hezbollah and Hamas whom we interviewed concerned their justification for their acts of suicide terrorism, since the Quran specifically proscribes suicide. One respondent became quite angry:

> *This is not suicide. Suicide is weak, it is selfish, it is mentally disturbed. This is* istishad *[martyrdom or self-*

sacrifice in the name of Allah.]

Portraits of Palestinian suicide bombers on a wall above pictures of Israeli victims and destroyed Israeli buses at an exhibit at the Birzeit University on the outskirts of the West Bank town of Ramallah. Some Palestinian children collect photos of the bombers. ©AP Images/Muhammed Muheisen

Noted terrorism scholar Ariel Merari made a remarkable observation in the fall of 2004, indicating just how "normal" suicide terrorism was. He indicated that, as he walked around Harvard Square (in Massachusetts), he was struck that teenagers are teenagers the world around. When I asked him what he meant, he told me that:

> *When I walked into a pizza parlor in Cambridge, the teenagers would be gossiping about their favorite [football] team, the New England Patriots (this was during their run-up to the Super Bowl), about their heroes on the team such as the quarterback, Tom Brady, and how some day, when they grew up, they wanted to be a professional football star like their heroes. Same thing in the refugee camps in the occupied territories; only their favorite team was Hamas, their heroes were the shahids (martyrs), and someday, when they grew up, they wanted to be a shahid like their heroes. It was chillingly normal.*

Hassan Salame, a prolific Palestinian suicide bomb commander, has stated:

> *A martyrdom operation is the highest level of jihad, and highlights the depth of our faith. The bombers are holy fighters who carry out one of the more important articles of faith.*

There is not a mono-causal explanation for the psychology of suicide terrorism. Mohammad Hafez, in his *Manufacturing Human Bombs*,[3] identifies three conditions as prerequisites: a culture of martyrdom,

strategic deacons to employ this tactic, and a supply of willing volunteers. In fact, for two of the groups that were most prolific in employing this technique, the Tamil Tigers and the PKK (the Kurdish separatist group), there was no relation to Islamist fundamentalism.

Israeli social scientists developed biographical postmortems of a sample of 93 Palestinian suicide bombers. Seventeen-to-22-year-old young men, they were uneducated, unemployed, unmarried. In fact, they were unformed youth who were told by the suicide bomb commanders when they entered the safe house: "You have a worthless life ahead of you (the unemployment statistics in the camps were 40 to 70 percent, especially for those who had not completed high school), you can do something significant with your life, you will be enrolled in the hall of martyrs, your family will gain prestige, they will be proud of you, and they will get financial benefits." From the time they entered the safe house, they were not alone, with someone sleeping in the same room with them the night before the action to ensure that they did not backslide, and being physically escorted to the site of the "martyrdom operation."

In contrast, the suicide hijackers of September11, 2001, were older (28 to 33 years of age); the ringleader, Mohammad Atta, who was 33, and two of his colleagues were in graduate school in the Technological University in Hamburg. They came from comfortable middle-class Saudi and Egyptian families. They were fully formed adults who had subordinated their individuality to the destructive charismatic leadership of Osama bin Laden. His cause became the primary mission for his followers. Interestingly, unlike the Palestinian suicide bombers, they had been on their own for upwards of seven years in the West, subjected to the opportunities and temptations of Western democracy, and they simulated blending in while keeping an internal laser-beam focus on their mission to die while taking thousands of innocent casualties.

New Challenges

A particularly alarming development in terms of the social psychology of terrorism, especially intense in Western Europe, is the radicalization of second-generation Muslim immigrants. Their parents had come to Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain to find a better life, but remained culturally separate, and the second generation became secondarily radicalized, as exemplified by the Madrid train station bombing of March 11, 2004, and the London transit bombings of July 7, 2005.

A particularly daunting challenge is posed by the "new media," both the continuous cable news channels like Al Jazeera, and especially the Internet. Gabriel Weimann estimated in *Terror on the Internet*[4] that in 2006 there were some 4,800 radical Islamist Web sites spinning out their message of anti-Western hatred, contributing to the collective identities of tomorrow's terrorists.

What are the implications for counterterrorism? If one accepts the premise that terrorism is a vicious species of psychological warfare,

waged through the media, one doesn't counter it with smart bombs and missiles but with counter-psychological warfare.[5] This suggests four elements of an information operations program:

- Inhibit potential terrorists from joining the group

- Produce dissension in the group

- Facilitate exit from the group

- Reduce support for the group and delegitimate its leaders

But, as noted in one of the conclusions of the Madrid summit working group: "It will require decades to change the culture of hatred and violence. In this struggle, the moral high ground needs to be maintained, for example, by strengthening the rule of law and exemplifying good governance and social justice. To depart from these standards is to lower ourselves to the level of the terrorists and to damage liberal democracy."[6]

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

Endnotes

(**1**) Jerrold Post, "The Psychological Roots of Terrorism," in *Addressing the Causes of Terrorism: The Club de Madrid Series on Democracy and Terrorism*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2005).

(**2**) Jerrold Post, E. Sprinzak, and L. Denny, "The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews With 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2003): pp. 171-184.

(**3**) Mohammed Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2006).

(**4**) Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2006).

(**5**) For an expansion of the manner in which psychological operations should play a central role in countering terrorism, see Jerrold Post, "Psychological Operations and Counter-terrorism," *Joint Force Quarterly*, issue 37 (Spring 2005): pp. 105-110.

(**6**) Jerrold Post, "The Psychological Roots of Terrorism," in *Addressing the Causes of Terrorism: The Club de Madrid Series on Democracy and Terrorism*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2005), p. 11.