

Recruitment and Radicalization: Terrorist Profiles

From the September 11, 2001 attacks to the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, everyone asked the same questions. Why? Why do these men kill?

Why do persons become terrorists? How are these individuals radicalized? And what would impel them or what would motivate them to inflict such death and wanton destruction on their fellow human beings?

What we know from decades of studying terrorists is that there is no one path to radicalization and recruitment. The reasons why someone picks up a gun or throws a bomb are inherently idiosyncratic and highly personal. But what we can say in general is they're born of frustration and grievance, of a sense of dishonor, of religious piety, or of the desire for systematic socioeconomic change.

Also terrorists carry out their violence for reasons of nationalism or separatism or out of a commitment or a devotion to revolution. So if there's not one single reason why someone becomes a terrorist, it's also the case that there's no one single terrorist personality. No broadly applicable profile has ever been developed that applies to all terrorists everywhere.

We see the reasons why someone becomes a terrorist are in fact quite personal and very unique, yet we know that persons who become terrorists are motivated by a profound sense of albeit misguided altruism. They also feel themselves to be cast on the defensive. Reluctant warriors forced to take up arms against a predatory or aggressive enemy or a rival religious or ethnic sect.

There are also profound feelings of religious devotion that sometimes trigger or sometimes animate or motivate or inspire individuals to pick up violence. But for all these people, there's an underlying conviction that their violence is not only justified, but is also legitimate. In the case of religious terrorists that it's not only justified and legitimate. But in addition, it's divinely commanded.

All terrorists in this sense see themselves as altruists. We may see them as fanatics and the violence that they inflict is, of course, abhorred. But they themselves see the violence that they inflict as part or in foreign service of a good cause. And therefore, explain away the means as justifying the ends.

Terrorists share this sense of self-righteous commitment and self-sacrifice that draws people into terrorist groups. It helps them to justify their violence by being in a group of people who think similarly or indeed, identically to the way they do. But I think most importantly, by joining a

terrorist group or becoming part of a larger terrorist movement even if they don't actually join the group or participate in training, but nonetheless feel part of something bigger than themselves, gives their violence collective meaning and gives the force of their violence a cumulative power that they hope will achieve the fundamental changes that they seek.

But individuals will always be attracted to violence in different ways. And over the past decade, we've seen this very clearly in the backgrounds of terrorists and radicals both in the United States and the United Kingdom. They've come from places as diverse as North Africa and South Asia. From the Middle East and from the Caribbean.

They've come from overseas. They've also been home grown. They've been religiously devout. Recent converts.

They've been secular. They've been married. They've been unmarried, for example. Young, old, male, and female. What we see is that there really is no one set profile of the modern terrorist in the 21st century.

Religion though, we have indeed witnessed in recent years, has become a very powerful motivator and also serves as a profound justification for many people engaging in violence. Across all religious faiths over the past decade or more, we've seen individuals drawn to violence who justify the killing and the destruction that they commit on the basis of religious texts or sacred literature or see themselves directly responding to the demands of the calls of religious figures or clerical authorities. And in this case too, even in the realm of suicide terrorism where we've seen a tremendous increase both in this tactic and especially by people motivated by a religious imperative, we've seen a broad diversity of types.

We've seen deeply devout, lifelong, very orthodox observant individuals, as well as recent converts, who have embraced their new faith with a fervor that is, perhaps, not understandable or comprehensible to others and therefore, drives them to commit this extreme act of violence as proof of their faith and fidelity.