

# Terrorism, Psychology, and Psychiatry

**Mohammed Ayoub**  
**Adult, Child, and Adolescent Psychiatrist**  
**Houston, TX**

Terrorism is a very complex phenomenon. What causes humans to resort to such extreme acts of killing members of their own community still eludes us. Psychologists and psychiatrists are just beginning to understand the causes of such aggression. We can create psychological profiles of terrorist groups and individuals after the fact, but it is impossible to predict who or what group will commit terrorist violence and when. After a profile is created, the terrorist group can change the modus operandi, and we will be back to the square one. On the contrary, understanding human psychology will help the terrorist groups to recruit vulnerable individuals and to groom them, indoctrinate them, and use them to effectively achieve their goals. The complete elimination of terrorism seems impossible to achieve. There will always be disenfranchised people and groups who will resort to terrorism. It can however be minimized by removing the injustices and abuses that can be psychologically afflicting at the individual, family, societal, institutional, governmental, national and international levels.



**O**N JULY 22, ANDERS BEHRING BREIVIK DETONATED A bomb outside government buildings in Oslo that killed eight people. He then went to Utøya island, where the youth wing of Norway's ruling Labour party held its annual summer camp, and shot and killed sixty-nine others, plunging his country into deep shock and grief. The

world had witnessed yet another terrorist attack. Before any facts emerged, some experts began to speculate that Muslim terrorists were responsible. They suggested that the killings had been organized by cells of Al-Qaeda or other Islamic groups in Norway. But then the facts emerged. Before executing his plans, Breivik had posted a 1500 page

manifesto online that described his hatred of Islam and Muslims, as well as his anger towards the growing multiculturalism of Europe. The world was reminded yet again, as the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11 approaches, that terrorism has no religion and no moral authority; it is simply terrorism.

### **Nature of Terrorism**

Terrorism is an act of aggression. By killing innocent civilians and destroying property, terrorists attempt to impose their own political, religious, or ideological points of view on society. Unfortunately, such aggression is not new; terrorist acts have been and will continue to be committed throughout human history. Various thinkers, philosophers, and psychologists have advanced possible explanations of human aggression in their attempts to make sense of such extreme behavior. Recent developments in psychiatry and in the understanding of neurotransmitters, the chemicals produced by our body which affect our behavior, have provided a great deal of insight into aggressive human behavior. What follows is a brief summary of the various concepts with which scientists try to explain human aggression.

### **Freud's Concept of Aggression**

According to Freud, aggression stems from the life and death forces. The life force (Eros) and the death force (Thanatos) should be in balance. When a threat is perceived, the organism tries to create a balance by directing the Thanatos outward toward others. There is a relationship between life, sex and death. Sex is associated with procreation and the preservation of life, while death is the destruction of it. Aggression is used to maintain the balance and protect life. If we observe animal life, it is easy to understand this concept. Animals preserve and protect their offspring by fighting for dominance. In human terms, this behavior can be seen in the accumulation of wealth, education, and status that is intended to provide the best chance of survival and continuation of a given family. The same principle applies to groups as well. Each ethnic, religious, secular or any other ideological group tries to promote its own survival in competition with others. Darwin's concept of natural selection and survival of the fittest describes similar principles.

### **Behavioral Concept**

According to this theory, behavior is acquired. A person's life experiences, including exposure to aggression in a family environment or exposure to violent media, can inspire aggressive behavior.

Different societies have different norms for permitting and discouraging various kinds of aggression. The aggressive tendencies of individuals living in communities are shaped according to such norms.

### **Cognitive Concept**

A society's understanding of its environment shapes its actions. This understanding can be based on a true depiction of reality or on a perception which might not be true. But whatever is perceived to be dictates how a certain group will act in response.

### **Frustration-aggression Concept**

This theory states that frustration always produces aggression, and aggression is always followed by frustration. This is not necessarily true, because frustration can also lead to problem solving and better coping mechanisms.

### **Psychiatric Disorders Causing Aggression**

There are many psychiatric disorders which predispose people to aggression. These disorders have certain characteristics which can change a person's perception of reality. Paranoid schizophrenia can make a person extremely paranoid about their environment and can lead to aggression. Bipolar Disorder can make a person very irritable, angry, and aggressive. It can also make people feel grandiose and give them the drive and energy to act on their impulses. Brain injury can cause angry outbursts, as is the case with Intermittent Explosive Disorder, and can cause sudden and unpredictable anger and aggression. Alcohol and substance abuse can also lead to aggression.

### **Personality Traits**

Antisocial personality disorder, commonly termed psychopathy, is particularly significant in terms of aggression. People with this condition demonstrate a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others. Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behavior leads to repeated offenses and arrests. Deceitfulness, lying, aggression, repeated fighting, the lack of remorse, and the lack of any responsibility to obligations

are some of the features present in psychopathic individuals.

Paranoid personality disorder can give a person a pervasive sense of suspiciousness and distrust. A paranoiac may think, without sufficient basis, that others are exploiting, deceiving, or purposefully harming him.

Narcissism is also a significant trait in the discussion of aggression, for it gives a person an over-valued sense of self and a devalued sense of others. Narcissism can be expressed as a feeling of entitlement, and when this entitlement is threatened, such narcissistic injury can motivate aggressive behavior.

### **Neurochemical and Hormonal Factors**

Low levels of Serotonin have been suggested to cause aggression. Testosterone, the male hormone, has also been thought to be a factor in male aggression, although this has not been substantiated by evidence.

### **Can these models be applied to terrorism?**

Terrorism is a very complex phenomenon. Terrorist acts are meticulously planned, organized, financed, and executed. They involve long periods of research and brainstorming and are not impulsive acts. Most of the concepts described above are relevant for explaining impulsive acts of individual violence in society. But they fail to explain the complex nature of premeditated terrorism. The Virginia Tech shooter had psychiatric disorder and was bullied when he was young, but he nevertheless extensively planned and executed his shooting. His disorder could account for a changed perception of reality, but the shooting of innocent people is by no means the result of a psychiatric disorder alone. Some terrorists may exhibit some of the traits mentioned above, especially the psychopathic tendency to kill without remorse, but not every act can be explained by psychiatric causes.

### **Major Factors Predisposing a Person to Terrorism**

Severe psychological and emotional trauma and abuse in the formative years of an individual's life can lead to severe injury to that person's self esteem. This can cause anger and bitterness

towards society, instill a desire for revenge, and make a person very vulnerable to the message being offered by terrorist groups. Such abuse could include family violence, violence in the community, bullying in schools etc. A sense of deprivation and desperation, a lack of opportunities for advancement, and the feeling of disadvantage also aggravate an individual's feeling of vulnerability. The identification of a perceived or real injustice that one is unable to correct may also lead a person to extremist organizations. An extreme ideological upbringing or tendency to see things in black and white, normally present in younger generations, can also lead to enrollment in extremist organizations. Of all these individuals who are vulnerable, an extremely small minority resorts to violence and killing. Group dynamics are the most important factor in determining whether such feelings will be translated into action. A very charismatic group leader, an extreme level of group cohesion, indoctrination, the displacement of the responsibility for violent acts from the individual to the group, the dehumanization of victims, and the promotion of a higher goal are all methods used by terrorist groups to achieve their desired ends.

### **Role of Politics and the Media**

The current atmosphere of Islamophobia in Europe that denounces multiculturalism has been created by the irresponsible speech of certain public figures. Such an atmosphere will give credence to the claims of some extremist groups and perpetrate acts of terrorism. In his manifesto, Breivik alluded to these public statements of Islamophobia. Likewise, the injustices performed by colonial powers in the third world, including the persecution and dehumanization of indigenous people, have produced political leaders and media outlets that promote anti-west propaganda. This culture of propaganda seems to legitimate the violent actions of extremist groups. Different ideologies have been used by different groups to achieve their goals, producing local brands of terrorism in Central and South America, Africa, and Far East. In the Middle East, Islam has been used by terrorist groups to realize their anti-west agenda.

### **Turkey as a Case Study**

Terrorism can also involve actors hijacking state institutions to promote their evil agenda, as we have recently witnessed in Turkey. The military ruled Turkey by proxy for the several decades until the current regime came into power. A small fraction of military generals took charge of the country and imposed an ultra-secularist ideology by force. They repeatedly removed democratically elected governments from power, persecuted and killed their leaders, and banned political parties that did not conform to their ultra-secularist agenda. They changed the civilian constitution in favor of the military and used the judiciary to persecute any opposition. Media was taken over and used as propaganda, and any media outlet which went against their policies was oppressed or banned. Journalists were persecuted. Extrajudicial killings and disappearance of people who opposed them was a common place. After the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came into power in 2002, this clandestine wing of the military, the so-called Ergenekon, masterminded a massive terrorist operation named "Sledgehammer." In this operation, they planned to bomb two big mosques in the country when they would be full of innocent people for Friday prayer. They also planned to create bomb blasts in major cities throughout the country in order to create chaos and unrest, as well as to bring down a Greek military jet and blame the attack on the Turkish government. The chaos created would give them a reason to take over the government. Decades of state sponsored terrorism produced widespread resentment in the country. The majority of the people were marginalized for ideological reasons. People and groups which did not conform to the military ideology were deprived of opportunities. Various groups fought this monster differently. The majority of the Turkish Muslim population resisted by legitimate democratic means. A small Kurdish minority, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), resorted to terrorism and violence in their fight against this state force. The evolution of terrorist activities in the PKK as a result of the military sponsored terrorism has been a source of chronic trouble that still haunts Turkey.

### **Conclusion**

Terrorism is a very complex phenomenon. What causes humans to resort to such extreme acts of killing members of their own community still eludes us. Psychologists and psychiatrists are just beginning to understand the causes of such aggression. We can create psychological profiles of terrorist groups and individuals after the fact, but it is impossible to predict who or what group will commit terrorist violence and when. After a profile is created, the terrorist group can change the modus operandi, and we will be back to the square one. On the contrary, understanding human psychology will help the terrorist groups to recruit vulnerable individuals and to groom them, indoctrinate them, and use them to effectively achieve their goals. The complete elimination of terrorism seems impossible to achieve. There will always be disenfranchised people and groups who will resort to terrorism. It can however be minimized by removing the injustices and abuses that can be psychologically afflicting at the individual, family, societal, institutional, governmental, national and international levels.

### **References**

- *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV-TR* by American Psychiatric Association, 2000.
- John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, Plume, 2006.
- Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It*, University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Today's Zaman, "Sledgehammer Trial" at [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=229774&link=229774](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=229774&link=229774).