



# terrorists behind bars

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**It comes as no surprise to**

American correctional personnel that entry into custody is often a time of crisis for many prisoners. The transition from freedom to custody is inherently stressful, and even those inmates with prior incarcerations may turn to political, social, or religious radicalization to help them deal with the pain of reentry.

Radicalization during reentry and over the subsequent weeks, months, or years serves to equip prisoners with a way to rationalize their situation, to externalize blame, and to improve their perceived prospects for the future. While this change in paradigms may be helpful for some inmates, others may adopt a religiopolitical belief system that inevitably leads them to further social conflict, violence, and even the death of innocents. I am speaking here of the choice by some jail and prison inmates to convert to the takfiri-jihadist form of radical Islam, which led to the tragedy of September 11, 2001, and continues to threaten Americans worldwide.



Although correctional administrators, legislators, and a few academics (Ammar, Weaver & Saxon, 2004; Cilluffo, et al., 2006; Hannah, Clutterbuck & Rubin, 2008; Thomas & Zaitzow, 2006) have begun to address the problem of prisoner radicalization, line personnel and their immediate supervisors must be able to recognize and understand the social psychology of terrorism and how this insidious belief system takes root in the minds of those prisoners susceptible to a cultic belief system. Although the names of former and current prisoners such as José Padilla, Richard Reid, and Kevin James come to mind, similar antisocial thinking characterized the El Rukn criminal gang in Chicago as far back as the 1970s and 1980s. Jails and prisons house many agitated and alienated minds, and such minds are susceptible to an insidious and terroristic belief system of which all correctional personnel must be aware.

In order to understand the appeal of militant Islam to many jail and prison inmates in America, it is important to understand the influence of free world social dynamics on custody populations. Free individuals become inmates, and inmates usually become free once again. Many enter the criminal justice system of more than one country as we move closer to global notions of crime and justice.

### The Modern Terrorist Threat

By its very nature, terrorism involves the commission of horrific acts of violence against objectively innocent men, women, and children for political or religious reasons. Dating back almost 2000 years ago, the Sicaari of Judea murdered in a very public way not only the occupying Romans but also any of the Jewish citizenry who opposed them (Pape, 2005). Later in history a Muslim group known as the Assassins emerged from their various strongholds to openly

kill those whose version of the faith did not conform with that of these violent sectarians (Lewis, 2002). The Thuggees of India murdered by slow strangulation perhaps a million people unfortunate enough to cross their paths so that the Goddess Kali could receive sacrifices.

Early contemporary terrorists such as 19th century European and American anarchists introduced explosives into their arsenal of weaponry and thereby opened the door to weapons of mass destruction, which would eventually enable the slaughter of even greater numbers of innocents. Many more people could be killed at one time than was practical with a dagger alone.

Death came in other forms as well. Sarin gas was used by the Japanese religious terrorist group Aum Shinrikyo against Tokyo rail commuters in 1995. The State-sponsored terrorist attack against Iraqi Kurds in Halabja ordered by Saddam Hussein in 1988 utilized both sarin and mustard gases to kill as many as 5,000 people. On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda terrorists used jet fuel-laden airliners to murder 3,000 people in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. Not long after, an American former inmate traveled to

Pakistan and planned the explosion of a dirty bomb packed with radioactive waste, which would spread terror in the United States. Nuclear scenarios have been rehearsed by multiple government agencies who fear the detonation of a nuclear device in the midst of a large urban population. There is a general belief that these terrorists have no limits in their wish to murder innocents.

Modern terrorists, particularly when motivated by religious extremism, present a much greater danger to all of civilization than did their predecessors over the centuries (Dolnik, 2003; Levin & Amster, 2003). Whereas earlier generations of terrorists seemed more interested in publicity than in amassing a large number of murder victims, today's terrorists seek to maximize the number of people they kill, with publicity seen only as an additional rather than as the primary benefit. Terrorists wish not only to terrorize but also to destroy as many individuals, preferably those of unbelievers, as they possibly can, even if they must murder fellow believers in order to do so.

### Dispositional Theories

Terrorists who justify the shelling of innocent religious pilgrims as

well as the capture and murder of schoolchildren, such as in Beslan in North Ossetia-Alania, may certainly be seen as evil by rational onlookers (Giduck, 2005; Wilson, 2003). It is quite understandable that observers untrained in the social and behavioral sciences consider such terrorists as morally perverse, mentally unbalanced, criminal psychopaths. Such pathological descriptions of terrorists are also to be found in professional and academic literature as well. In essence, these theories assume that a terrorist possesses a personality that predisposes him or her to violence. The horrific acts of violence characteristic of terrorists spring from this profound flaw, or disposition.

For example, soon after the September 2001 attacks, several prominent American psychologists described terrorists as pathologically envious, dependent personalities with narcissistic strains. They are also seen as paranoid as well as grandiose, and manifest a callous disregard for the rights of others (Meloy, Mohandie, Hempel & Shiva, 2001). Martens (2004) argues that most terrorists possess many of the traits of antisocial, narcissistic, and/or paranoid personality disorders even if they do not possess the actual clinical disorders. Some psychohistorians argue that terrorists develop a pathological rage during their childhood as the result of abusive child-rearing practices at the hands of their mistreated and, therefore, reactively aggressive mothers (deMause, 2002). Post (2005) describes members of Islamist terrorist groups in terms suggestive of the "authoritarian" personality while Weatherston and Moran (2003) believe the stresses of engaging in terrorism ultimately lead to mental disorders.

Based on what he refers to as current psychological insight into personality theory, Miller (2006) argues that terrorist leaders possess some combination of paranoid and narcissistic personality disorders. Lower-level operatives possess avoidant, borderline, or dependent

disorders. Others are described as having histrionic, schizoid, or schizotypal personalities. Additional psychopathological and psychoanalytic theories, as well as cognitive theories, are summarized in a comprehensive review of the psychological literature on terrorism by Victoroff (2005). While the correctional officer will certainly encounter such inmates ostensibly identifying with extremist Islamist groups, their personality disturbances are likely to make them somewhat unpalatable to more "adjusted" inmate extremists.

### **A Social Psychological Explanation**

Notwithstanding the appeal of dispositional theories, observed assessments of the militant personality do not consistently indicate clear pathological trends that are significantly different than the general inmate population. Personality assessments generally reveal a distribution of traits similar to that found within nonterrorist populations (McCauley, 1991). Several leading terrorism researchers (Corrado, 1981; Crenshaw, 2000; Horgan, 2005) would agree with Silke (1998) that terrorists are essentially normal individuals or, in this case, conventional criminals, who sometimes do unusually horrible things. Herein lies the confusion. How can conventional criminals commit such terrible crimes, beyond the pale even for lifelong criminals? If not because they are unusually evil or mentally deranged, what then? A social psychological response to this question entails an examination of the tremendous influence people have on each other: the power of the jail or prison social group. In order to fully understand how group membership may lead a person to do abnormal things, an attribution bias known as the "fundamental attribution error" first must be considered. Succinctly stated, the fundamental attribution error asserts that observers tend to overestimate the dispositional influence and underestimate the situational influence on others' actions.

When explaining their own behavior, however, the influence of situational variables becomes more prominent (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Vander Zanden, 1987). When applied to terrorist behavior, the fundamental attribution error leads observers to believe the terrorist is guided more by personality traits than by group influences when, in fact, the reverse is true. Although group dynamics influence the behavior of terrorist organizations around the world, group influence on individual thinking and motives may be even more pronounced in the collectivistic societies of the Middle East and second or third generation products of those cultures (Kwantes, Bergeron & Kaushal, 2005; Triandis, 1995; however, see Gregg, 2005, for a critique of collectivistic generalizations about Middle Eastern societies).

In highly collectivistic societies, children are socialized to subvert their own interests to that of the family and to their broader social network. Senior males in a family occupy a dominant authority position over all members, and socialization practices clearly identify who is a member of the in-group and who is a member of the out-group. Palestinian youth, for example, are taught early on that Israelis are their enemies and that terrorist acts directed against Israeli citizens are honorable deeds. Shame is also a major form of social control, and one can avoid shame by becoming a martyr (Khosrokhavar, 2005; Oliver & Steinberg, 2005; Pedahzur, 2005). Extreme ethnocentrism and hatred of an out-group can be the "normal" outcome of a socialization process that constantly exposes children to such antipathy (Simpson & Yinger, 1972). According to identity theory, many terrorists are socialized to assume the role of aggrieved victim and to view a martial response as the just solution to their untenable status (Arena & Arrigo, 2006).

Jails and prisons have historically contained significant percentages of minority group members; some of



whom are particularly susceptible to this perspective. Thus, terrorist acts directed against a dehumanized and demonized enemy may not reflect individual pathology as much as a programmed response to a preselected threat. It should be noted, however, that some terrorists may also be driven by secondary or tertiary motives that are more pathological in nature (Lester, Yang & Lindsay, 2004).

### **Expatriate and Second-Generation Terrorists**

The explanatory power of social psychology becomes apparent when applied to the analysis of expatriate and second-generation native terrorists. Terrorist attacks and the planning of mass casualty disasters have been conducted by Islamist groups resident in Western countries and by second- and third-generation French, American, Canadian, British, and Spanish nationals with ethnic origins in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Unlike Palestinian terrorists, these individuals are not living in a society openly hostile toward and fully supportive of attacks against Israeli and Western interests. They do not find support for their terrorist plans in the daily newspapers and electronic media or in the coffee shops and markets they may visit. Instead, they find themselves distinct political or social minorities in the countries to which they chose to relocate or in which they were born. Their path to murder and extremism can be explained as a form of collective violence (Barkan & Snowden, 2001) determined by group dynamics (Pynchon & Borum, 1999).

The concept of “marginal man” describes those individuals who identify partially with two distinct cultures but do not believe themselves fully integrated into either (Stonequist, 1937). For example, the French colonial experience in North Africa left many Maghreb Arabs with ambivalent feelings toward Europeans. When these native North Africans became immersed in French language and culture, they compared their own more traditional and less technologically developed societies rather unfavorably. On the other hand, they were also aware they could never “truly” be French and were not allowed to forget their origins. The frustration of not being part of one reference group, while at the same time partially rejecting another, led to intense anti-Western feelings (Patai, 2002; Rivlin, 1956). In the United States, many inmates feel alienated from their own community, and their convict status often precludes entry or reentry into “mainstream” society. Militant Islam becomes a community of which they can become a part, both behind bars and in the general community upon release.

In contemporary Europe, many second-generation British and French citizens of Pakistani and Arab Muslim origins are culturally assimilated into these Western cultures, but are not structurally assimilated. In other words, while they may be intimate with the language and culture of their countries of birth, a social distance remains between them and their countrymen of



European extraction (Gordon, 1964). While a second- or third-generation, British-Pakistani youth might speak and dress as an Englishman and work the same job as an Englishman, he may never have a close social friend or intermarry with the family of an Englishman. Whether due to physical appearance, religion, or vestigial cultural practices, many European Muslims believe themselves to be victims of prejudice who are treated perennially as outsiders in the land of their adoption or birth (Ahmed, 2005; Giry, 2006; Phillips, 2006).

In both Western and Middle Eastern societies, many young Muslims are experiencing an identity problem that leaves unanswered the most important question: "What sort of person am I?" Moderate political and religious leaders have been unable to satisfy this need for an authentic identity among many of their young constituents (Moghaddam, 2006). It is no secret that similar social processes can explain the decision by small numbers of African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and European-Americans to reject mainstream America and join the jihadist cause.

In order to meet their affiliation needs and as a reaction to their perceived rejection by mainstream society, many prisoners turn to each other for support, companionship, and inspiration. Militant Islam has existed in American correctional institutions long before the current wave of religious terrorism that plagues the world (Baykan, 2007). Given the central place of the mosque in Islam, the social activities of many alienated youth will center on their places of worship. Campus organizations or social clubs may also serve as places of interaction. Correctional institutions bring together large numbers of disaffected individuals with sufficient time on their hands to explore religiopolitical options.

Religious freedom in American custody settings provides ample opportunity for the formation of reli-

gious interest groups. It is in a group context that, for some, the road to radicalization and terrorism may begin. Whether recruited through friendship, kinship, worship, or discipleship (Bell, 2005), terrorists and terrorism should be thought of as a group phenomenon subject to the same social dynamics as other groups (Sageman, 2004). Although "lone wolf" terrorist attacks occur worldwide from time to time, their spontaneity and small scale render them generally less harmful than the product of a group effort. While most forms of collective behavior are benign, as are most groups centering on religion, under certain circumstances a group can devolve into a terrorist cell.

### Groupthink and Risky Shift

The concept of "groupthink" refers to the decision-making processes of a group whose members are determined to maintain solidarity at all costs. Thus, group members go along with what they believe is the group consensus on virtually any subject for fear of upsetting the cohesion of the group (Janis, 1982; Towson, 2005). Groupthink can cause each inmate member of a group to support essentially irrational decisions rather than be perceived as one who brings dissent to a group or, worse yet, one who thinks like a member of the out-group. Because the members of some groups need so desperately to remain members, they will do nothing to jeopardize their standings within these groups. Many members value not only the camaraderie available in militant groups but also the protection afforded its members from physical attack by prison predators. They will thus support virtually any decision the group has made and will avoid cognitive dissonance through rationalization of the group's otherwise irrational decisions (Festinger, 1957; Weber, 1992).

Unfortunately, the "risky shift" phenomenon may occur wherein a group's decisions may collectively become more irrational than any

decision an individual member may make on his/her own. Because a group member becomes de-individualized as a result of the need to be part of a group, he/she is able to diffuse personal responsibility for the taking of life during acts of terrorism among all the members of his group. Thus, any individual residual culpability for the death of innocents is diminished while, at the same time, the "appeal to higher loyalties" (Sykes & Matza, 1957) can draw a group member toward murderous actions. Should any individual feel initially inclined to back away from anticipated violent acts, his prior commitment to the group would precipitate strong feelings of cowardice and shame (Hafez, 2006).

Although groupthink may also lead to a "cautious shift," with group decisions favoring more conservative choices, the rise of al Qaeda and its philosophy of "Istishhad," or martyrdom for Allah, has strongly influenced expatriate, second-generation, and jail and prison groups toward violence. The ability of the mass media to instigate suicide contagion is well documented (Coleman, 1987, 2004; Phillips, 1974) and there is no reason to believe that the mass media has not contributed to the epidemiology of suicide terrorism as well. As radicalized Muslim youth or inmate converts sense individual or collective humiliation worldwide (Moghaddam, 2005), their sense of injustice, spurred on by a militant theology (Habeck, 2006; Phares, 2005), leads inexorably to acts of violence. Adding to these motives for terrorism may be a conscious or subconscious fear that their own terrorist group members may brand them as "takfir," or apostates, should objections to terrorism be raised. The penalty for such apostasy is death (Gabriel, 2002; Hamid, 2005).

Similarly, many young men in Middle Eastern societies and perhaps in some segments of American society are denied opportunities for educational and economic advancement. Such a blocked status leads




to questions about self-worth and related identity problems. These frustrated young men often meet their affiliative needs in male-only groups and their identity needs by becoming devout Muslims. Unfortunately, many such indigenous groups are susceptible to the violent teachings of charismatic jihadists and radical prison “imams” because Westernized Muslims and national African-American leaders are not seen as authentic role models (Moghaddam, 2006). Jail and prison inmates often consider themselves victims of society, and conversion to militant Islam provides them with not only an explanation of their failures, but a course of action which allows them to strike back.

## Conclusion

In summary, terrorism may more robustly be described as the product of group dynamics. While certain individual terrorists may be developmentally disabled, psychotic, or psychopathic, these afflictions do not explain the vast majority of terrorist acts. The developmentally disabled are not true terrorists but, in fact, may be more victim than victimizer. Psychopaths are simply too unpredictable to be of much use to a terrorist group. Psychopaths are generally unable to form the intense interpersonal bonds that enable terrorists to attack, murder, and die together. Until the social and theological conditions that spawn conversion to religious terrorism are modified, social psychology remains the best discipline through which this and other forms of terrorism can be understood.

The vast majority of prisoners radicalized in prisons and jails will one day be released into the free community. Some of them certainly may develop into the homegrown terrorists (Kennedy, Homant and Barnes, 2008; Vidino, 2009) who many homeland security experts believe will constitute a greater threat to America’s citizens than al Qaeda operatives from abroad. To the extent American corrections offi-



cers are able to recognize the signs and symptoms of conversion to a jihadist ideology, antiterrorist and counterterrorism measures may be implemented. Although only a small percentage of converts turn radical beliefs into terrorist action (Hamm, 2008), America must be prepared to respond to those who do. 

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