

## **Why Do People Join Terrorist Organizations?**

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Both Psychology in general and Psychoanalysis in particular, have taken a lot of flak from the other social sciences for looking at terrorism through their very limited prisms and typical paradigms. As a result, it seems that the question of why people join terrorist organizations is far more useful since it throws light on the social and environmental factors that govern an individual's decision to join a terrorist organization. As has already been indicated elsewhere in this paper, terrorism is by no means just an Islamist or Muslim phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is true that in the last decade or so, we have been witnessing and will continue to witness a deluge of large scale violence perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalist groups that have networked all over the world. Intensive sociological work has therefore been done on these groups in order to identify the psycho-social and environmental conditions and processes that give rise to terrorism. Some of the cardinal perspectives are outlined below.

### **Social and Political Grievances**

A number of thinkers have looked at terrorism as an expression of large-scale, deep rooted social grievances within the Muslim population. Indeed, this approach regards terrorism not as a manifestation of psychopathology but as a strategy to remove the sources of their grievances and re-order the politics of the world in that direction. Silke (2004) for example, has noted that young males who have been marginalized from mainstream society are more likely to seek refuge in militant ideologies. Common grievances regarding their social and economic position bring them together and once

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they become a part of a terrorist organization they become even more alienated from their societies as a result of which their identification with the group ideology becomes even more rigid. There is nothing from the outside that challenges their beliefs anymore and soon they see themselves only in relation to the terrorist group. Such a scenario has been persistently found in organizations with separatist/nationalist agendas wherein individuals with a continued sense of discrimination come together as a group to redress the social system. Palestinian terrorist organizations are typical examples of such groups and for most Palestinians joining these organizations is a natural progression given the fact that they have large-scale societal acceptance for their ideas and actions. Post, Sprinzak and Denny (2003) through their interviews with incarcerated Hamas (Palestinian terrorist organization) terrorists have also reiterated that severe feelings of being victimized by being thrown away from their homes and the despair and helplessness that the situation engendered in them influenced them completely to join the terrorist group. For most of these groups, terrorism is a justified holy war or jihad for the sake of their causes. By engaging in violence and creating a fear or dread of that violence, terrorists seek to gain attention for their causes and recognition of their rights (Hoffman, 1998). The Black September attacks at the Olympics in Munich in 1972 by Palestinian terrorists are a classic example of the idea that terrorism is a way of attracting the world's attention to marginalized groups and their struggles. Stern (2003) through her intensive study of cults such as the CSA (Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord), has also emphasized that cult leaders harness feelings of alienation, humiliation and marginalization to indoctrinate members into the group's ideology. Individuals who join cults are lost beings who struggle with a profuse sense of meaninglessness in their lives. They lack a sense of

purpose in life, live at the fringes of society and so, are especially likely to join cults to rescue them from their extreme sense of alienation and provide a definition of life. Cults function primarily because their members are cut-off from the rest of the world in a way that not only facilitates a strong fusion in between the members and the leader but also mesmerizes them into believing the delusional apocalyptic visions of the cult. Although an extrapolation of an understanding of cults to terrorist organizations is questionable, it can be concluded that long-standing social grievances have the capacity to violate individuals in very profoundly destructive ways, the reprisal of which can only be sought by destroying those who are held responsible.

#### Humiliation, Vengeance and Revenge

Perhaps, the most over-arching rationale that has been discerned by most scholars in the field, and correctly so, is the significance of humiliation in motivating thousands of individuals to join terrorist organizations. Human beings have a strong sense of justice and in many ways almost all conflict is a way of rectifying injustice by the parties involved.

Through his study of terrorists belonging to the IRA (Irish Republican Army) Silke (2004) has concluded that the personal histories of terrorists are full of accounts of humiliation and injustice by rival groups. Frequently, these terrorists have witnessed family members and friends being assaulted and killed and these experiences played a pivotal role in their joining terrorist groups.

The theme of humiliation also dominates the experiences of a whole nation of people, such as the Palestinians. Although not all Palestinians have joined the Intifada, Palestinian terrorist organizations have the support and approval of the common man in

Palestine, for the whole country shares a history of humiliation that binds them in their nationalism. Studies have also suggested that popular support for suicide bombings is highly positively correlated with the frequency of the Israeli checkpoints that the Palestinians have to go through at a daily basis (Atran, 2004). Instances of strip-searches and other such humiliating acts while going through these checkpoints on their way home, is a common occurrence for most people in Palestinian who silently bear the torture that increases their travel time from a few minutes to hours together. As Silke (2004) has noted, for most of these Palestinians joining a terrorist organization is simply following a family tradition and it is something that everyone does. According to them, they are waging a holy war against this humiliation and restoring their honor and pride. They do not consider their actions to be terrorist violence but an answer to a higher spiritual calling that every Muslim must respond to. It is every Palestinian's prime duty to protect himself and his people from any form of injustice. Terrorism from this stand point, then, is an expression of revenge and vengeance against real or perceived injustice and an attempt at reinstating one's dignity and self-worth. For cultures that place a heavy premium on shame and honor like in the Arab world, humiliation is like death and an annihilation of the self. No wonder it can mobilize the most pernicious kinds of reactions that can range from killing the other to killing oneself rather than leading a dishonored life. Stern (2003) has very aptly quoted Juergensmeyer in saying that suicide bombing is a way to "dehumiliate" (p.54).

Terrorist organizations in other parts of the world, like the Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, also resound with the theme of humiliation as a major catalyst to resorting to terrorism. For them, American presence in Saudi Arabia and the Middle-East in

general is highly unjust and humiliating. The relative deprivation theory has been called upon many times to explain that the terrorism originating from the middle-east represents a cry against colossal economic deprivation when brought on by the West. Lindner (2003) however, has remarked and correctly so, that deprivation in itself does not lead to large-scale conflicts, but that it is deprivation within the context of humiliation and one that is perceived as intentionally degrading or lowering, that leads to those conflicts. Based on the ideas presented above, it can be concluded that humiliation as a psychological experience has an irrefutable connection to terrorism and that dealing with this aspect of terrorism is a must if we wish to grapple with it in a sound way.