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# Personology, Profiling, and the Terrorist

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**Abstract.** This article identifies problems in common approaches to capturing the psychological essence of the terrorist.

There is a large literature written by psychologists on the psychology of the terrorist. This literature, however, may provide much less than one might expect from its size.

For example, one research type still focuses on psychopathology. The main assumption is that the act of terrorism is ipso facto an index of individual pathology, especially of sociopathy, psychopathy, and/or antisocial disorder. The assumption rests on the notion of terrorism as a deviant blow to a normal or normative political entity--viz., the state or society. However, terrorism may be a non-pathological response to a pathological political entity, condition, or situation. In fact, the stance on terrorism as intrinsically psychopathological may itself be psychopathological, as the psychologist supporting the stance is co-opted by or complicit with the pathological and political entity, condition, or situation.

Another research type still focuses on other psychological traits. These may be considered individual differences that vary along statistical and adaptive normativeness and even some operationally defined normality. The problem here is that specific traits do not necessarily capture the whole person making the decision to engage in terrorism and may not even be robust, causal indicators of such a person. This may be the case even with extensive correlational, experimental, and other empirical data differentiating terrorists and non-terrorists.

Yet another research type rests on the assumption that the terrorist and political context are both "normal." Terrorism then becomes a political and economic choice much as choosing to support oneself and achieve meaning and status through any other profession or endeavor. While avoiding the difficulties of the previous two research types, supporters of this type would seem to be advocating that no behavior--no matter how extreme its style, social comparison features, purpose, or consequences--requires any surplus explanation. This may be the case, but it so contravenes almost all moral and ethical models of human psychology and political philosophy as to require a surplus explanation for why this should be the case and for why most other models are so off-base.

What seems to be missing from most profiles of the terrorist are descriptions of the whole person: how various thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviors within varying social and political contexts interact or prove inert in the road to terrorist behavior. For most expert and lay psychologists alike, this approach seems to be less easy to conceptualize or employ in attributionary form when compared to "smoking gun" pathologies, traits, or assertions that there is, indeed, nothing to explain. It is for this reason that The New York Times can publish a story professing a sense of surprise that individuals apparently complicit in the bombings of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania experienced the concerns of everyday life that also concern so many people who don't engage in terrorism.

Perhaps expert and lay psychologists must console themselves with the conclusion that terrorists are no more remarkable than various random samples of people who navigate the heavens, hells, purgatories,

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

limbos, and voids that together constitute life. Perhaps, the unremarkableness of some people who can engage in extraordinary acts is itself remarkable. Perhaps, again, expert and lay psychologists might wonder what the focus on intrapsychic individuality and lack of focus on political conditions might suggest about their humanity. (See Eisler, K.R., Meyer, M., & Garcia, E.E. (2000). On hatred: With comments on the revolutionary, the saint, and the terrorist. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 55, 27-44; Johnson, P.W., & Feldmann, T.B. (1992). Personality types and terrorism: Self-psychology perspectives. *Forensic Reports*, 5, 292-303; Schbley, A.H. (2000). Torn between God, family, and money: The changing profile of Lebanon's religious terrorists. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 23, 175-196; Silke, A. (1998). Cheshire-Cat logic: The recurring theme of terrorist abnormality in psychological research. *Psychology, Crime, and Law*, 4, 51-69; Smith, B.L., & Morgan, K.D. (1994). Terrorists right and left: Empirical Issues in profiling American terrorists. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 17, 39-57; Weiser, B. (May 31, 2001). Trial poked holes in image of bin Laden's terrorist group. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Profiling, Terrorism.)