Trends. The Latest on Terrorist Motivation

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Abstract: This article examines the motivations of terrorists for becoming terrorists.

The question of why terrorists become terrorists continues to resonate within global public discourse. A better question may be why various people engage in terrorist behavior or support it—given that terrorists are not only terrorists but also people encompassing terrorist and non-terrorist psychology and behavior.

Nevertheless, a common variant of expert certitude on terrorist motivation relates to poverty and illiteracy as causal variables. Yet empirical data suggest that many terrorist acts are perpetrated, planned, and supported by individuals who by most comparisons are not poor and quite literate. Thus, poverty and illiteracy may be neither necessary nor sufficient but still could be necessary and/or sufficient in certain cases.

Then, there is the notion of humiliation as a salient motivational factor for terrorism based on a sequence of comparative analyses between putative ideal states and constructed realities of the past, present, and future. However, humiliation can take many pathways, including non-terrorist ones and others proscribing or mitigating against action at all. Yet, humiliation might be necessary and/or sufficient for terrorism in certain cases.

Other common variants of expert certitude on terrorist motivation include contact with mass media-transmitted violent actions, social learning and vicarious conditioning in a local culture related to political violence as a highly valued activity, so-called brainwashing, and sacred and secular rages based on disparities between interpretations of ideology of reality and constructions of reality. All the above may be induced by or associated with variables "outside" an individual, such as national economic isolation.