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# Psychological Profiling of Terrorists: Recent Findings From Singapore on Jemaah Islamiyah

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**Abstract.** This article reviews the contemporary history of psychological profiling of terrorists and then relates this history to recent psychological profiling data on detainees who are allegedly members of a group that allegedly engages in terrorist behavior.

The contemporary history of the psychological profiling of terrorists begins in the early 1960s with a rise in publicized terrorist behavior by individuals and groups professing to be seeking variants of self-determination for collectives--e.g., yet other groups, putative nations--which these individuals also professed to represent. Even if the representativeness of these individuals as to terrorism and as to respective collectives was initially suspect or specious, the implementation of terrorist acts often enough constructed representativeness. As to terrorism, this occurred as the frequency and intensity of terrorist acts by specific individuals and groups proliferated in contrast with some set of already existing acts. As to the representativeness of collectives, the story was less successful. At times terrorist acts did, indeed, construct a representativeness between terrorist and those whom they profess to represent. At other times, the converse occurred.

In any case, an initial spate of articles and books focused on the quest for one profile fitting all terrorists. This quest often attended to the purported psychopathology--viz., psychopathy, sociopathy, psychosis--of terrorists. The focus on one profile for all terrorists probably stemmed from the stimulus value of terrorism that often induced in the profiler a response set in which the construct of terrorism enveloped and constituted the entire individual who perpetrated a terrorist act.

This taking over of an entire individual by a construct--an all expansive or omnipresent reification--was not a new phenomenon in intellectual history. For example, it mirrored the activity of many psychiatric diagnosticians of that era (and also of the present) who similarly allowed various constructs--e.g., neurotic, schizophrenic--to envelop the entirety of individuals who allegedly engaged in dysfunctional thought, emotion, motivation, and behavior.

Both profiler and psychodiagnostician seemingly did not perceive, discount, ignore, or deny that terrorist and patient engaged in much else besides that which brought them to the attention of the respective profiler and diagnostician. And this much else might have much more to do both with the essence of the individual being profiled or diagnosed as well with the terrorist or dysfunctional activities precipitating profiling and diagnosing.

Also, in the initial spate of articles and books on terrorism, the profiler also apparently did not perceive, discount, ignore, and deny that successful terrorist operations required the coherent thought, ego integrity, and at least an adequate global or overarching mental and behavioral functioning to support counterintelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, logistics, personnel management, and the many other tasks so necessary for success. And such coherence, integrity, and adequacy would be even more crucial for the success of ongoing terrorist campaigns that would be constituted by multiple operations.

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Dispersed among these articles and books were another set of profiling works on terrorism that focused not on one profile of a set of internal dynamics and traits but on a set of phenomena conceived [wrongly from an epistemological perspective] as outside the individual. These phenomena included all that was social, cultural, economic, political, historical, and so on. Of special note were disparities of power between an elite of the few and powerlessness of the many.

This perspective seemed to assume a tabula rasa notion of terrorist behavior and could not successfully explain why most people similarly situated in a host of external phenomena did not engage in terrorist behavior. Another way of stating this is that the perspective did not address the likelihood that there would be individual differences among a population proactive to and reactive to phenomena outside the individual. Yet another way of stating this is that from an epistemological perspective there may be no phenomena outside an individual.

A more contemporary perspective on the psychological profiling of terrorists is that there can be no great expectations about a unity of purpose or of psychology concerning the perpetration of terrorist acts--i.e., no one profile encompassing all who engage in terrorism. Motivations might comprise any, some, or none of combinations of the quest for material gratification, a sensation-seeking lifestyle, the quest for power, the thrill and gratification of violence, fantasies and psychodynamic conflicts to be acted out on the political stage, and legitimate political grievances legitimately shared by many people and unable to be achieved by any method short of political violence.

With the above in mind, let's turn to a White Paper Issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Republic of Singapore and entitled *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*. One section of the Paper contains subsections on Psychological Profile and on Motivations pertaining to 31 detainees alleged to be members or accomplices of Jemaah Islamiyah [JI]--a group referred to as "a radical, regional Islamic group" alleged to have engaged in terrorist behavior. And the information for these two areas is alleged to come from an "[i]ndependent teams of psychologists [who] have interviewed the detainees."

**Psychological Profile.** All except two detainees were assessed to have average or above average intelligence with one-third being above the norm and two having superior intelligence. The detainees were not "ignorant, destitute, or disenfranchised outcasts." All had received secular education with one also receiving a university degree in Islamic studies. All held "normal, respectable jobs." Most of the detainees "regarded religion as their most important personal value." Other values in descending priority were "having material comforts and material wealth" and then "concern for the well-being of others" and "being good Muslims to help the community."

**Psychological Profile--IBPP Commentary.** The data on intelligence support the hypothesis that at least adequate psychological functioning would be necessary for successful terrorist operations and campaigns. However, one might be characterized with even superior intelligence and still not be seen as manifesting at least adequate psychological functioning dependent on personality and motivation components.

The data on secular education, job history, and material comforts and wealth suggest that these individuals have the skills to function in a non-terrorist manner and some wants that also would be compatible with a non-terrorist life. The psychological key to terrorist behavior for these individuals might well lie with religion as the most important value. That is, the key to fuel terrorist acts might most easily be some way to link the value with the acts.

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Motivations. The White Paper presents this information as stages in a recruitment process. Stage 1. The detainees attended religious classes for the general population. They were identified within these classes as a possible JI operations or support cadre. They could be influenced through a manifested desire for and receptivity to a sense of Muslim fraternity and companionship. They would then become a target of JI-relevant and terrorism-philic commentary within religious lectures on the Quran, Hadith, jihad, and local Muslim suffering intended to nurture operations or support potential.

Stage 2. The detainees manifested receptivity to more information on the regional and global suffering of Muslims after religious classes. They manifested further interest and compassion in this suffering that was exploited through a recruitment pitch focusing on engaging in a number of behaviors to relieve the suffering. As recruitment continued, they were provided with a sense of exclusivity and self-esteem that was contingent on remaining within an exclusive group. A logical necessity of this exclusivity was a strongly honed sense that anyone who defected from the group would be an infidel and beyond worthlessness. And the detainees were invested with continuous dogmatic communication about the Truth and how any wavering from it would bring individual destruction (especially spiritual)

Stage 3. The detainees were provided a continuously reinforced sense of exclusivity, sharing, empowerment, and commitment through mystical rituals, special codes, language, secret practices, behavioral contracting and access to the only Truth.

Motivations--IBPP Commentary. The psychological essence of the JI recruitment process is little different than recruitment processes in general. The focus is on a symbiotic relationship between the self of an individual and the group wherein the group approximates the self. The context of the symbiosis is value--here religious value. There are individual differences in that some, but not all, combinations of so-called internal psychological components can be appropriately activated through the recruitment process. A crucial pathway to JI recruitment was the conscious or unconscious realization that the difficulty in seeking the Way to Truth was no longer present in that the group made seeking no longer necessary. Truth has been found.

IBPP Conclusion. The White Paper's information on the 31 detainees suggests that terrorism does not spring from the individual nor from the sociohistorical moment. Instead, there are a myriad of variables at different levels of analysis contributing to the terrorist act. And this myriad may be more the bailiwick of the novelist than the political psychologist. (See Glover, J. (1991). State terrorism. In R. G. Frey & C. W. Morris (Eds.). *Violence, terrorism, and justice*. Cambridge studies in philosophy and public policy. (pp. 256-275). Cambridge University Press; Gordon, H. (2002). The 'suicide' bomber: Is it a psychiatric phenomenon? *Psychiatric Bulletin*, 26, 285-287; Hutchinson, M.C. (1972). The concept of revolutionary terrorism. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 16, 383-396; Knutson, J.N. (1984). Toward a United States policy on terrorism. *Political Psychology*, 5, 287-294; Lackhar, J. (2002). The psychological make-up of a suicide bomber. *Journal of Psychohistory*, 29, 349-367 ; Margalit, A. (January 16, 2003). The suicide bombers. *The New York Review of Books*, pp. 36-39; Post, J.M. (1987). "It's us against them": The group dynamics of political terrorism. *Terrorism*, 10, 23-35; Smith, B. L., & Morgan, K. D. (1994). Terrorists right and left: Empirical Issues in profiling American terrorists. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 17, 39-57; Waldman, A. (January 14, 2003). Masters of suicide bombing: Tamil guerrillas of Sri Lanka. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A8; White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism. (January 7, 2003). Ministry of the Interior. Republic of Singapore.) (Keywords: Profile, Singapore, Terrorism.)