

The psychology of terrorism

Rod Milton

THE WORD “TERRORISM” comes from the French Revolution, in which “enemies of the revolution” were subjected to “The Terror” to coerce or eliminate them. Threatening certain death is a sure way to dominate people, but only in the past 100 years have leaders used it on a grand scale to establish and maintain power, with great loss of life — millions died in Europe, the USSR and China.¹ However, governing by terror is not terrorism.

Wittgenstein² warned of the risks of trying to be too precise in defining anything, but it is useful to have a working definition of terrorism, and governments engaged in counter-terrorism must incorporate a carefully worded legal definition in their legal system. The United Nations’ failure to formulate an effective policy to deal with terrorism is probably because there is no agreed legal definition. One suggested definition is “acts of violence (as opposed to threats or more general coercion) intentionally perpetrated on civilian non-combatants with the goal of furthering some ideological, religious, or political objective”.³ This definition is simple and practical, although it implies that terrorist acts have an objective, however obscure or distorted.

Early records of terrorism show that methods used then were not much different in principle from those used today. The Zealots, a Jewish sect under Roman rule in Judea in 48 AD, sought to discourage Judeans from collaborating with the Romans by assassinating those who did. They justified killing their countrymen on the basis that collaborators could not feel safe if the Romans could not protect them.⁴ These terrorist acts were purposeful; but many modern acts of terrorism appear without clear purpose, unless one accepts murder and destruction as ends in themselves — an expression of envy or spite against Western countries (sometimes called the Great Satan).⁴

A psychiatrist asked to offer comment on terrorism needs to consider whether terrorists are mentally ill, what prompts them to act as they do, and how they feel about it.

Abstract

- ◆ Although they may be emotionally disturbed, terrorists are not mentally ill. They are rational within an irrational belief system.
- ◆ Terrorists believe that they are right and all others are wrong, and the “rightness” of their cause entitles them to kill and injure in support of that cause.
- ◆ Joining a terrorist group is an irrevocable decision, and those who join must morally disengage from the wider society. This narrows their focus and blinds them to more rational views.
- ◆ The terrorist act becomes a reward for the hardships of constant training, surveillance by other group members, and fear of detection.

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Are terrorists mentally ill?

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was an outbreak of aircraft hijacking in the United States, usually in attempts to flee to Cuba; the hijackers were mostly apprehended, and received substantial prison sentences. A psychiatrist, David G Hubbard, interviewed many hijackers in prison,⁵ and came to understand them. Most had abusive fathers and religiously zealous mothers, and had failed repeatedly in life, career and marriage. He concluded that a single act of “skyjacking” represented one successful accomplishment at the end of a life of chronic failure. Beside that success, punishment — including possible execution or a long prison sentence — was of little consequence. Hubbard’s study was notable in that he became deeply familiar with his subjects, and it remains one of the most thoughtful of its kind.

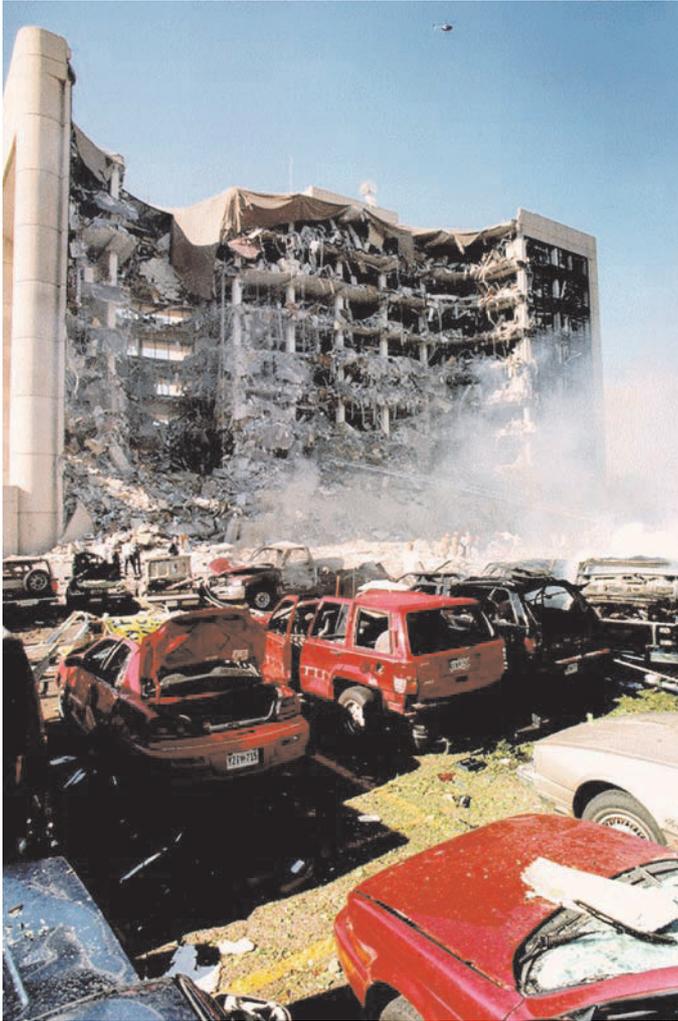
Hubbard’s findings might have limited application now, but it could be argued that carrying out a violently antisocial act might, in many terrorists, assuage a sense of personal failure, especially those forming the rank and file of terrorist groups. That is, even though terrorists in recent times might not be conspicuous failures like Hubbard’s skyjackers, they might well share a similar motivation. In 1991, at the request of the New South Wales Coroner, I made enquiries into the life of Wade Frankum, who killed seven people and injured six in a shopping centre in Strathfield on the afternoon of 17 August that year. His life was unremarkable except that he had strong aspirations and failed them all. He had no political or religious affiliations and was not a terrorist, but his motivation was analogous to that described in Hubbard’s skyjackers — achieving one successful angry act at the end of a life of failure. There might be an element of this in modern suicide bombers, even though most would deny it.



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The Alfred P Murrah Federal Building, Oklahoma City, bombed by Timothy McVeigh.

Although troubled emotionally, Hubbard's subjects were not mentally ill, especially in a legal sense, and it is generally agreed that terrorists (with rare exceptions) do not exhibit psychiatric disorders: "The active terrorist is not discernibly different in psychological terms from the non-terrorist."⁶

The terrorist mind-set

Terrorists believe they are right and all others are wrong. In 1894, Emile Henry bombed a cafe in Paris in pursuit of his revolutionary aims and when told that innocent people were hurt replied, "There are no innocent bourgeois."⁷ I heard a similar utterance by the author Han Suyin at a public meeting in Sydney many years ago. She said that widespread killing in Mao's China was necessary for the greater good and that those who died were of no consequence — a chilling example of the ruthlessness sometimes found in those imbued with social conscience.

Terrorists are not mentally ill, but they tread the path of madness. This is not because they espouse hostile polarised

beliefs and resist reason, for such behaviour is found among many people who live peacefully with others and obey the law. The difference is that the terrorist enters the world of unreason to such a degree that he becomes a fanatic, crossing the line of civilised behaviour when he believes his convictions entitle him to kill and injure others to draw attention to his cause. The terrorist believes that laws represent oppression or religious sacrilege and must be challenged. Terrorists think rationally, but do so within the confines of an irrational belief system.⁸

Motivation and gratification

There is little to be gained by looking at terrorists in terms of standard psychiatric diagnosis, but something can be learned by examining the motivation behind terrorist acts, and the gratification these acts provide to the perpetrators. The following three examples demonstrate widely different motivations and backgrounds of terrorists. They also illustrate how the community can sometimes defend terrorist acts.

"Bommi" Baumann

Baumann displayed adolescent murderous rebellion and was in the SDS, a German socialist student group, from 1967 to 1972. He migrated from East Germany to West Berlin with his working class family in his early teens. His move into terrorism was gradual, beginning with befriending those with alternative views and reading fashionable mildly revolutionary books. He quit his apprenticeship on the first day — he felt he could not stand the boredom of a routine working life.

Adopting a revolutionary existence provided many advantages for Baumann: he was a member of a group, initially enjoyed an unrestricted lifestyle, availed himself of sexual favours from schoolgirls attracted to him as a revolutionary, had the opportunity to express anger and envy at successful wealthy people through terrorist acts, and lived on the profits of crime — all with a feeling of purpose that he was changing the world for the better.⁹

Baumann's motivation in being a terrorist could be understood as a mixture of adolescent rebellion, hedonism, group membership, enjoyment of the power of violence, and feeling purposeful. His social background was different from many of the German terrorists of his time (eg, the Baader-Meinhof Gang), who came from affluent well educated backgrounds.

Compared with later terrorists, Baumann was transparent and relatively benign. His book, *Terror or love*, translated in 1979,⁹ was a vehicle for relating his wanton aggression and vandalism, and was self-centred and tedious. However, such accounts can attract the admiration of those with pronounced social awareness. The Nobel laureate, Professor Heinrich Böll, regarded it as a masterpiece and said, "This book should be read by teachers, parents, politicians, psychologists, police officers and priests to expand their insights and provide information."⁹

Shoko Asahara

Asahara's cult, Aum Shinrikyo, released Sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995 (12 killed, 5000 injured). Asahara was born in 1955 in Kumamoto Prefecture, his parents being of limited means. He was partially blind from glaucoma. He studied yoga, became absorbed in religion, visited India, and claimed to have attained enlightenment. He founded Aum Shinrikyo, accumulated many disciples, and put them through extraordinary regimens of suffering and privation. A psychiatrist described this process as an example of "ideological totalism" similar to the brainwashing practised widely in China during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰

Like many intelligent and determined cult leaders, Asahara was charismatic and had great ability to recruit people appropriate to his cause — domination of Japan and perhaps the world — and sought out and induced chemists to join his cult and manufacture chemicals, including Sarin. He was practical and merciless, and perhaps that was why a young lawyer investigating the cult, his wife and baby son disappeared, and a senior police officer in the Sarin attack inquiry was murdered.

Asahara's motivation was obscure — the pursuit of power seems likely. Like most cult leaders, he exercised power with skill and ruthlessness, and undoubtedly enjoyed doing so. He was initially silent after his arrest, and this raised the possibility of an insanity defence, but he eventually began talking and was judged sane. He provided minimal information to investigators, but some of his disciples turned against him and gave evidence leading to his conviction and eventual death sentence. The cult continues, but with reduced membership.

As with Bommi Baumann, Asahara had adherents in influential positions. Some were prominent in the law, academia and the social sciences, and a group of four of his apologists travelled from the US to Japan to warn that the Japanese police were interfering with religious freedom by investigating the cult.^{11,12}

Timothy McVeigh

McVeigh bombed a government building in Oklahoma in 1995 (168 killed, hundreds injured). A detailed biography by Michel and Herbeck¹³ described him as angrily irrational, possibly associated with a difficult relationship with his mother, bullying at school, and problems in relationships with women. Even so, he achieved well initially: he was accepted into the US armed forces, trained diligently, was a perfect shot, maintained an immaculate uniform, and played superlative poker. He served in Iraq and was awarded a commendation.

After returning from Iraq, he felt flat, kept to himself, and was critical of what he perceived as the army's lack of discipline and commitment. He was disgusted with his colleagues for treating army service as a job, not a calling. When he failed to meet the demanding physical standards for

entry to the Special Forces (Green Berets), he was deeply disappointed and left the Army.

He and his accomplice, Terry Nichols, shared a feeling of failure associated with army life. They renounced their US citizenship and "the law of the land", and proceeded with a plan to destroy a government building in Oklahoma using tons of home-made explosive in a truck. McVeigh had vague right-wing political ideas, but perhaps his main objective was to prove himself a successful soldier against his own country, from which he now felt alienated.

Unlike Baumann and Asahara, McVeigh lacked adherents or apologists. The most favourable comment about McVeigh was by the court-appointed psychiatrist, John R Smith, who interviewed him for 25 hours and described him as an essentially decent person who allowed rage to build up to the point where he lashed out in one terrible violent act. Smith added, "I've seen it many times. Nice people do really terrible things." His other supporter was the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, who met him in jail and in 2000 wrote favourably about him to Michel and Herbeck.¹³

How does the terrorist feel?

Being a terrorist is tough. Initiation into a terrorist group often involves performing a criminal act with its attendant risks. It is a full, if monochromatic, life, being directed towards one aim defined by the leader and the group's dogma, including religious beliefs. Group members exercise constantly to stay fit, and practise weaponry until the principal weapon is like part of the person and is used instinctively. They are under constant surveillance from one another to detect deviations and deal ruthlessly with members whose belief shows signs of flagging. They must constantly watch for detection by the authorities.

Terrorists view the world narrowly, governed only by their ideology, such as Marxism-Leninism, anarchism, nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, or factional rivalry. The process of belonging to a terrorist group maintains this narrow focus and blinds the member to other and more rational views of the world.

The terrorist must morally disengage from the real world, using a variety of techniques: moral justification, displacement of responsibility onto the leader, minimising or ignoring the suffering of victims, and regarding victims as non-human. For example, left-wing terrorists traditionally speak of a "pig-society".⁴

The terrorist must accept that the decision to join a group is irrevocable, and any attempt to leave will be dealt with ruthlessly. In 1972, half of the 30-member Japanese Red Army group objected to the group's strategy. The dissenters, including a pregnant woman thought "too bourgeois", were tied to stakes, whipped with wires, and left to die by exposure.⁴

The terrorist act provides the reward for, and fruition of, this exacting existence. Even though the act is intrinsically gratifying, it can involve a period of operating alone, and this

can be frightening. The Aum Shinrikyo attack in the Tokyo subway was ameliorated somewhat by some members releasing their gas canisters inefficiently, probably because of anxiety. The terrorist act is pleasurable to the person performing it, and is not attended by regret, guilt or remorse.

Schbley studied videotapes of religious Shi'a zealots recorded immediately before undertaking suicide bombing, and noted six indicators of the subjects' state of mind: a faint smile, distant look, lack of eye contact with interviewers, submissive body posture, slow reaction, and the appearance of contentment and inner peace.¹⁴ Most psychiatrists would recognise such behaviour as warning signs of imminent suicide in depressed persons, for they indicate the resignation and feeling of peace associated with the final decision to escape from the pain of existence. Schbley concluded that the zealots' behaviour was consistent with "serene disengagement" from their secular environment and with contemplation of their promised heavenly ascension. So consistent were these factors that they became known by the acronym SD.

Future trends

When I entered this field in 1978, the principal challenge was aircraft hijack. Police training was directed at regular role play in siege/hostage negotiation, often with carefully planned realistic exercises. (At the same time, terrorists were running anti-negotiation training schools.)

Terrorism increased dramatically over 30 years, and its exponents turned from hijack and siege hostage to bombing, thereby denying any opportunity for negotiation. Whereas earlier terrorists used destructive acts to attract attention to their cause, offensive action now seems to be an end in itself. This was the case in the Tokyo Sarin attack and probably in the events of 11 September 2001. Instead of seeking to influence public opinion and governments by aggressive acts, the terrorist seeks to destroy, perhaps as part of the fundamentalist doctrine that it is desirable to destroy unbelievers who cannot be converted.

The implications for the future are not reassuring. Islamic countries are not prominent in encouraging industry or trade; and, when they do, fundamentalist groups often sabotage efforts to create wealth (eg, attacks on tourists in Egypt, bombings of tourist venues in Bali used by Australians). If this practice continues, citizens in Islamic countries will remain impoverished, will increasingly envy successful countries, and will provide a fertile field for terrorist recruiting.

Bobbitt considers that the change from nation state to market state in Western countries and our dependence on technology, especially electronic communications, make for extraordinary vulnerability.¹⁵ Given the widespread emergence of extreme religious hostility and the ready supply of creative, educated terrorist leaders and their more humble suicidal followers, we must anticipate major activity and prepare accordingly. Bobbitt maintains that we need to overhaul legal provisions to deal with major emergencies.

Hudson's detailed 1999 review⁴ referred to Osama bin Laden purchasing "suitcase nuclear weapons" from Chechen rebels and concluded that he would probably not use them at that time, but added an accurate prophecy: "Whatever line an attack may take, bin Laden will most likely retaliate in a spectacular way for the cruise missile attack against his Afghan camp in August 1998."

Competing interests

None identified.

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