

The Psychological Effects of Terrorism

Last year, the number of people killed by acts of terrorism increased by eighty percent, reaching 33,000 people (Cassidy). Terrorism causes families to be torn apart, children to be left orphaned, and pits friend against friend. It causes destruction in both the physical and emotional sense. Refugees are now fleeing from countries like Syria and moving into European countries, sometimes leaving friends and family behind in their home countries. The massive immigration from Middle Eastern countries affects not only the individuals immigrating, but the individuals living in the countries they're immigrating to. European countries are trying to prepare for the massive number of immigrants that will be traveling either through or into their countries, but problems have arisen with countries that weren't prepared. Even in the U.S., terrorists' attacks are still prevalent such as the Boston Bombing and other attempts at bombing schools. With the amount of terrorism going on in the world today, the time has come to discuss what really makes a terrorist, a terrorist. One of the most important aspects of analyzing a terrorist, is the psychological aspect. The actions of terrorist groups create a stereotype that psychologically destroys every individual who fits the race or religion that a terrorist group identifies with. Psychologists have attempted to explain what type of person becomes a terrorist and why.

Many people have chosen to believe that all terrorists come from poor families, with terrible role models, but this is inaccurate. In fact, "With half of the world's population living on \$2 per day or less and with more than one billion people with a primary school education or less, there would be many more terrorists if poverty and poor education were sufficient

causes” (Krueger). If people who come from low-income families aren’t joining terrorist organizations, then who is? Researchers compared the stereotype to the backgrounds of 48 suicide bombers. Thirteen percent of the suicide bombers were considered to be in poverty, compared to the 33% of the Palestinian population, who are below the poverty line. To dispute this general consensus even more, researchers also discovered that 60% of suicide bombers had some form of college education, in opposition to the population, where only 15% of the population has a college education (Krueger). It appears, as though the individuals who join terrorist groups predominantly come from backgrounds of higher education and from affluent families. When terrorists recruit individuals, they tend to single people with higher education. This is due primarily to the fact that terrorist groups believe that people who are experienced and ambitious will get the job done and possibly have an impact on other types of individuals that join (Krueger). It should not be a surprise that terrorists want educated people, like large companies, terrorist groups look for intelligent, driven people to lead their organizations, even though it tends to be for more malicious purposes.

The next objective of studying the minds of terrorists, is evaluating why a terrorist becomes radicalized. From a psychological standpoint, there is ordinarily no mental health issues with individuals who join terrorist groups. The majority of terrorists do not join because they want to become mass murderers; they join because it’s a cause they believe in. Many individuals become affiliated because they desire to belong to something larger than their own lives. They want to give up their lives to belong to a group that they believe can help them fulfill their desire to serve for a greater cause. In the case of the terrorist group ISIS, people who join can range anywhere from the “sadistic psychopath to the humanitarian, to the idealistic driven” (Banco). It

creates an opportunity for people of all paths to join the terrorist group, simply because each person has a goal he or she wants to reach and the group will help them achieve it. ISIS broadcasted one of many propaganda videos via social media that intrigued psychologists everywhere. They sent out a video of a man discussing the reason he joined ISIS. He said, “Before I come here to Syria, I had money, I had a family, I had good friends. It wasn’t like I was some anarchist or somebody who just wants to destroy the world and kill everybody. I was a regular person. We need the engineers, we need doctors, we need professionals. Every person can contribute something to the Islamic State” (Banco). This video interested psychologists because it once again demonstrated that not all terrorists are sociopaths or have mental health issues, even before becoming apart of the terrorist group.

People are driven to affiliate themselves ISIS and groups like them because they feel the need to belong to something important (Banco). Every person, no matter who they are has some sort of need to belong to something, whether that be a church group or a wide-scale terrorist group. Denying the brain’s need to belong can have a major psychological impact on oneself. If a person has no friends, or grows up without the love they need, the risk for early death and depression increases (Miller). This information also makes evident the reason why people with seemingly normal families decide to associate themselves with terrorist groups such as ISIS. They seek out the terrorist groups because they view it as an opportunity to belong to what they believe is a greater cause. The advancement of technology and social media allow terrorist groups, such as ISIS to connect to individuals and help with their recruiting process as well. Take ISIS for example, they are able to send propaganda through social media, connecting to people

and touching their psychological need to belong. Radicalization of terrorists begins with emotions, through communications such as social media, which provoke people to want to join.

Terrorism not only affects the victims of the attacks, but it also affects the people who fit the terrorist stereotype. During World War II, German-Americans and Japanese-Americans were persecuted due to the fact people believed that all Germans were Nazi sympathizers and all Japanese were spies. Both Japanese-Americans and German-Americans were forced into U.S. internment camps because of this belief. World War II is known best for the internment of the Jews by the Nazi government, but American citizens who had German or Japanese bloodlines were placed in internment camps that were similar qualities of the German concentration camps. In 1940, 127,000 people of Japanese ancestry lived in the U.S. In 1942 120,000 Americans of Japanese, German, or Italian decent were removed from their homes and placed in internment camps (“Japanese-American”). The children, especially the Japanese children, who lived in the camps developed major psychological issues after they were released (“Internment History”). Children in the camps experienced low self-esteem, psychological anguish, post-traumatic stress, accelerated loss of their Japanese culture, and disturbing flashbacks, even later in life (“Internment History”). Innocent people who fit the terrorist stereotype will be affected, even if they aren’t terrorists. In recent years, it is the Muslims who have been stereotyped because of Islamic terrorist groups. People automatically assimilate Islam with terrorism, even though most Muslims are peaceful people. A recent study of stereotypes in America found that 51% of white Americans believe Muslims in general to be violent people, African-American and Latino-Americans had similar beliefs. Half of America believes Muslims to be violent people, while 56% of Muslims want to adopt American customs, with only 20% not wanting to (Whibey). The

Psychological effect stereotyping has on Muslim-Americans is frightening. Since 9/11, Muslims in America have shown and increase in, “anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder among a population some called doubly traumatized- first by the attacks themselves and then by the finger pointing that followed” (Clay). Terrorism is evoking fear, not only against their targets, but against the people that they share characteristics with.

Terrorism is a critical topic that is now intertwined with the everyday lives of people all over the world. It is a continual topic on the news and social media and there is rarely a day that goes by that there are not new terrorist attacks. With the new information about the types of individuals that join terrorist groups and why they join, it is time to find a solution to the problem. Terrorists come from all types of families and backgrounds, but the one common denominator they have is the desire to belong to a greater purpose. Terrorists are no longer seen as psychopathic killers, but they are now seen by psychologists as seemingly normal people who have seen something in that terrorist group that fills a need they have. The psychological assessment on the topic of terrorism doesn't only stop with the terrorists themselves, but also the individuals who share the same race or religion of that group. Stereotypes and the information now known about terrorism is caused by the actions of each terrorist group itself. Psychology can only explain certain aspects of terrorism, it cannot solve the problem, but that is where each country, including the US can come in. Each country, including the United States must find a way to end these horrific acts without jeopardizing the rights of innocent citizens.

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