

Deconstructing terrorism – Psychology and the state

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Abstract

Terrorism is essentially psychological warfare and its solutions call for deeper insights into the human psyche. This paper ponders over the issue of terrorism and compares it with other man-made problems. It throws light on the evolutionary biases of human behaviour towards aggregating power and resources. The paper further delves into the 'types' of terrorists and ponders over the cognitive schemata that distort objective understanding of the world and lead to skewed perceptions. It also suggests solutions to the problems from a psychological perspective. The paper highlights the association between the individual and the state, and reflects upon the citizen's identity with the state as well as other sub-groups within the state.

KEYWORDS: Terrorism, psychosocial motives, psyops, aggression, cognitive schema

Introduction:

The world is besieged by problems, most of which are man-made or at least manageable by collective human effort. But the problems seem to be spiraling out of control due to our lack of understanding or effort, or both. Wars, accidents, murders, thefts, and assaults are all consequences of human action that can be avoided, while the impact of poverty, famines, droughts, and pollution, can surely be minimized through human endeavour. But the world moves on, complicating each problem, exaggerating its outcomes, and creating new ones. Terrorism is one such problem that is man-made, humanly manageable, and yet allowed to grow in scale and proportion with every passing day. Hardly a day passes without news of at least one terror attack in some part of the world leading to loss of human life, even if it is only that of a terrorist or suicide bomber who is 'neutralized'. Why do terrorists kill innocent people? What motivates them to indulge in such killings? Are all terrorists the same? Is there a 'terrorist personality'? Is terrorism a government's problem with military solutions? Or is it a psychological problem with solutions deep within human psyche itself? This paper attempts to look at these questions among others and provides a psychological perspective to the problem of terrorism.

To begin on a paradoxical note, is terrorism really such a big problem as it is made out to be? Far more people die of disease and in accidents every year the world over, including India, than in terrorist attacks. According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (NCHS, 2010), 1,18,021 people died due to unintentional injury (read accidents) while 36,909 people committed suicide in the United States in the 2009. In comparison, the 9/11 terrorist attacks that altered American consciousness and subsequently foreign policy claimed 2995 lives. According to the research project 'Costs of War' by Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies (Trotta, 2011), the total cost of the 'war on terror' unleashed by the US in Iraq, Afghanistan, and

adjoining areas of Pakistan has cost between 2.3 to 2.7 trillion dollars since 2001 and could go up to as high as 4.4 trillion dollars. The American government however puts the cost of war at about 1.3 trillion dollars. Contrast these figures with the estimated half a million dollars spent by 19 hijackers and other al Qaeda plotters on the plane attacks, and the latter sum pales away as pocket money to a pimple-scratching teenager.

In India, where the scourge of terrorism had afflicted the country for more than two decades, 3,57,021 people died in accidents in 2009, an increase of 4.3% over the previous year and an increase of 31.3% as compared to a decade earlier (National Crime Records Bureau, 2010). Of these, 22,255 (6.2%) deaths occurred due to natural causes like floods and earthquakes, while 3,34,766 (93.8%) deaths were due to un-natural causes like factory/machine accidents, mines and quarry disasters, road and rail accidents, stampedes, etc. When compared to the previous year, deaths due to nature-related accidents declined by 7.2%, while un-natural deaths rose by 5.2%. 164 people died in the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008 bringing the nation to a grinding halt and creating an international uproar, while 86,215 accidental deaths in the city the following year hardly raised a brow.

India recorded 1,27,151 suicidal deaths in 2009, an increase of 1.7% over the previous year, and an increase of 15% over 1999. The same year, diarrhea accounted for 10% (3rd highest cause) of all infant deaths upto 1 year of age, 24% (highest) of deaths in the age group 1-4 years and 17% (highest) of deaths in the age group 5-14 years (National Crime Records Bureau, 2010). The official figure of deaths due to malaria in India according to the National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme is 1,023, while an independent study by the Lancet estimates the toll to be about 40 times higher at 46,800 for the year 2010 (Malaria deaths, TOI, Feb 3, 2012).

It is not the state alone that can be accused of callousness towards its people; the people themselves are equally guilty of negligence towards their own life (read health). According to the Global Status Report on non-communicable (NCD) diseases released by WHO (2010), out of the 57 million deaths that occurred the world over in the year 2010, 36 million (63%) were due to NCDs, principally cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers and chronic respiratory diseases. The same report mentions that a large percentage of the NCDs are considered preventable through the reduction of the four major behavioural factors associated with them: tobacco (6 million deaths), insufficient physical activity (3.2 million deaths), harmful use of alcohol (2.3 million deaths), and being over-weight/obesity (2.8 million deaths).

Although it is absolutely evident that far more people are dying of disease and accidents the world over than in terror attacks, still every terrorist attack grabs headlines and sends shivers down our spine. In doing so, are we guilty of conforming to the wishes of terrorists by obliging them with a set of actions (e.g. publicity) and emotions (e.g. fear, outcry) that they precisely desired in the first place? For, terrorism is essentially a psychological war that can be won in the mind rather than with a gun. This is not to imply that we drop our defenses and abandon all operations against terror groups; rather we pay equal attention, if not more, to the causes of terrorism and the factors that allow it to thrive.

Deaths due to terrorism- Difference in perspective

When people die of disease or in accidents, the numerous deaths do not pose any threat to power equations within the state if they appear to be occurring independently of each other. If deaths occur collectively in a famine, epidemic, or a railway accident, the state can only be accused of negligence or mishandling and the confrontation is usually democratic. Opposition parties in a democracy will call for the government's ouster while the government will try to defend its position and take proactive action to minimize the fallout. The duration of the disaster and its aftermath are relatively short-lived, and it is further difficult to project different disasters collectively in a singular timeframe. For example, floods in one part of the country, outbreak of malaria in another state, and a train accident elsewhere are difficult to be cognitively perceived collectively in a singular frame even if they occur in close temporal or geographical proximity. Such incidents definitely affect peoples' sentiments and can make the government unpopular, but the struggle is far from a power struggle. In fact, if opposition parties try to convert it into one, they run the risk of their own popularity as they may be seen as opportunistic power mongers. So the struggle essentially remains for better governance, better preventive measures, and better remedial assistance.

More than the number of casualties, it is the cause of the casualties that arouses attention. Humans have learned to look beyond happenstances and into the motives leading to the episode. If it is seen as repeated state failure on a particular front, say rail accidents, the democratic outcome comes in the form of resignation of the minister in-charge or suspension of officials for dereliction of duty. One never sees relatives of the deceased from different geographical locations going into armed conflict against the state. There could be strikes, stone-pelting and other aggressive protests, which are mostly sporadic in nature. But if the perception of the people about any incident is that of a deliberate attempt on part of the state or a group against another group or community, there is collective response. For example, if a bus carrying pilgrims of a particular community were to meet with an accident, there is hardly any protest against the state. But even if a fraction of those pilgrims were to be killed for a motive, there would be uproar. If a common thread links different episodes and people, a motive is clearly established, or at least there is sufficient ground for doubt. This common element may be in the form of religion, caste, occupation, or region.

Moreover, accidents and diseases do not directly overthrow governments. They affect the lives of a relatively small section of the population and they do not threaten the basic structure of governance. For example, one democratically elected government may be replaced by another through the ballot. A terror group in contrast can overthrow a government and change the very structure and fabric of society. They pick up arms because they are fundamentally opposed to the ways and means of governance of the existing government. Hence, a new 'government' that would come to power by such means affects the lives of all citizens and in most cases that of neighbouring states too. A classic example is that of Afghanistan where the Taliban overthrew the Soviet-backed Najib government and imposed strict *sharia* laws. They had a 'moral police' that oversaw the stringent implementation of Islamic laws, and men and women found violating them were publicly flogged, even executed.

Human evolution, group behaviour and nation states

There could be an evolutionary bias to the fact that despite a staggering difference in the human loss caused by terrorism as opposed to other 'avoidable' causes, terrorism remains a far more sensitive issue. In primordial times, our pre-human ancestors realized the advantages of living in groups as it increased their chances of survival in extremely hostile conditions. But to live in a group, and to maintain a minimum workable cohesiveness, it was imperative to subscribe to certain group demands while sacrificing some personal needs. This led to the establishment of clans or tribes and the beginning of culture. Norms, rules, regulations, dos and don'ts for group members came into being, however fragile they might have been compared to what we have today. While the chances of survival increased by living in a group and adhering to its norms, it also led to the suppression of individual motives if they contradicted group norms. Thus, the existence of an individual became subservient to that of the group in the larger interest of the survival of the species. With the formation of groups, there now arose inter-group conflicts over maximizing resources and the group with more strength and united effort could ward off potential threat from other groups. But such conflicts often resulted in loss of life or injury to some members and posed a dilemma- if individuals faced personal threat in defending a group, should they rather fend off for themselves? The second option left the individual vulnerable to greater threat and hence chances of survival were still better in a group. With the passage of time, group behaviour got refined with structure and hierarchies. With the advent of culture, civilization and the formation of kingdoms, the individual-to-group existential relationship became more deeply entrenched. Fights among nomadic clans over accruing resources got transformed into battles among professional armies over territories. Even today, with the formation of nation states and adoption of constitutions and civil laws, the same basic fabric of the individual-to-group relationship for survival and self-promotion is retained. In acknowledging the 'rule of law' of the state, individuals have to forgo many desires and restrict many actions, for violation would lead to arrest, trial, and confinement. But in accepting citizenship by adhering to the laws of the nation state, there is an assurance, or assumption, of individual security and opportunity to prosper.

If there were inter-group conflicts throughout human history, there were also intra-group conflicts. There were conflicts among group members over ascendance, control over resources, and mate selection. Humans, like other species, always had the instinct to survive and pass on their genes through procreation. Hence, there were pressing demands over the distribution of resources and mates, as more the power and control within the group, more were the chances of survival of the individual and his progeny. Further, more the access to and control over resources, more were the chances of survival and that of finding mates. Such demands led to formation of hierarchies and opportunistic support to the powerful, or those seeking power, so as to secure self-interest. In the era of monarchy, these conflicts were interpreted in terms of loyalty and treachery towards the throne. The throne, and thereby the king, by simile and metaphor, was a collective representation for the power, aspirations, and well-being of the people. Human behaviour evolved with culture and psychosocial motives started taking root. Behaviour got guided more by needs for power, affiliation, achievement, and esteem than by basic biological needs. Religion only added fuel to the fire and provided sanctity to human conflicts and created a platform for larger group dynamics. Motives may have

changed, but the nature of conflicts has largely remained the same. The same conflict witnessed throughout history is evident even today, albeit in a democratic setup where crude power is replaced by subtle opinion making. Even today people, or groups of people, within a sovereign state are in constant conflict with the state demanding more resources and better chances of survival. Most follow accepted norms of the ballot or debate; of those who fail, some give up, some persevere on the same path, while some choose a path of aggressive confrontation. Terrorism is the path of aggressive confrontation by a group of people against the nation state which may be over resources, religious beliefs, ideology, or perceived or real suppression of a section of society by the state.

State, safety and psychosocial dynamics

A person's status is defined not by what he or she eats but rather *where s/he eats*. In fact, where you dine and what you wear is associated more with psychological motives than physiological needs. More efforts go into seeking prestige, status, achievement, liberty, self-esteem, and self-actualization than gathering food and clothing. Under these circumstances, adherence to group norms takes different hues than mere survival. If the state is not seen to be providing opportunities for psychological well-being, there is unrest. People look for other group affiliations that perceptibly provide such opportunities, or a platform to demand such opportunities, and that is where caste, religion, region, and other such sub-groups within the state gain prominence. The problem is aggravated when subgroups promise to provide better security and opportunities than the state. The failure of the nation state to quench psychological aspirations could only be perceptual, but then the very notion of the nation state itself is more of a psychological construct than a geographical one. Millions of people have never seen anything beyond their village or district, but still they perceive themselves as citizens of the nation state. Similarly, affiliation to a caste or religion is a psychological construct rather than biological. It is when the identity as members of a subgroup gains precedence over citizenship of the state that the ground is fertile for revolt against the state. Terrorism flourishes under such circumstances.

What motivates the state to protect its territory and its people, and the terrorists on the other hand to violate it? What if separatists in Chechnya or Kashmir were to get away with a piece of land? Would it really affect the life of a farmer in a village or the diagnosis of a patient in a clinic in some other part of the country? Of course not. In defending its frontiers and maintaining its territory, the state is definitely protecting more than geographical land. Separatism gives a clear message that the state – which includes the government, the political party/parties and their elected representatives – has failed to hold together its people rather than its territory. The message is that its people have more affiliation to subgroups within, or outside, rather than with the state. This is a perception that the state would never like its people or the outside world to hold at any cost. On the domestic front, the repercussions would be further internal strife leading to more subgroups demanding autonomy and more disintegration. On the international front, it would be a clear loss of credibility. In an era of globalization, no government can risk this as it would set in a chain reaction of flight of capital, both human and economic. And that precisely is the aim of the terrorists.

Brief history of terrorism

Terrorism really is not a very recent phenomenon as many might perceive it. The first reference of terrorism or terrorist acts is traced back to 48 A.D. in Judea where a group of right wing Jews called the 'Zealots' carried attacks on Romans and those Jews whom they believed conspired with the Romans by collaborating with them (Hudson, 1999). Their strategies included the use of assassins called *sicarii* who would sneak into cities and use a *sica* or dagger to stab Roman legionnaires and their Jewish collaborators, kidnap for ransom, and use poison on a large scale. With their acts they wanted to send a message to the Romans that they were not invincible and also to the people the consequences of aligning with the Roman invaders. Almost two centuries later, the scourge of terrorism has spread across the globe with terror organizations and guerrilla groups using violence against the state and civilians for the same reason – undermine the authority of rulers and threaten the supporters.

Limitations in definition and scope

The U.S. Department of State (1998) defines terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.' Crenshaw (1998) defines terrorist action as "the calculated use of unexpected, shocking, and unlawful violence against noncombatants (including, in addition to civilians, off-duty military and security personnel in peaceful situations) and other symbolic targets perpetrated by a clandestine member(s) of a subnational group or a clandestine agent(s) for the psychological purpose of publicizing a political or religious cause and/or intimidating or coercing a government(s) or civilian population into accepting demands on behalf of the cause." Terrorism to the social scientist is essentially a set of psychological operations, *psyops* in brief, although there is extensive use of physical force. The Federal Bureau of Investigation cleverly uses the word 'unlawful' in its definition when it officially defines it as "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." This definition keeps out of legal purview the actions of the state in 'terrorizing' its own citizens, or that of other nations, because it has the sanction of law! It is for this reason that security forces can eliminate terrorists in encounters on the one hand, and also round up civilians for investigations and use force against its own population or others in such a way that justifies the actions as lawful.

The U.S. itself is notorious for arresting and deporting persons it perceives as a threat to its interests in any part of the world by overt or covert action. Prisoners held without legal rights and state obligations at the Guantanamo detention and interrogation facility are a classic example of state-sponsored aggression. The camp was set up at the Guantanamo Naval Base, a US military facility in Cuba, in 2002 by the then Bush administration to hold detainees from Afghanistan after its crackdown on the Al-Qaida and Taliban, and later Iraq. The US department of justice held that the detention camp was located outside American soil and hence was out of US jurisdiction. The administration also refused to acknowledge basic rights to prisoners under the Geneva Convention. Despite the US Supreme Court's ruling in 2006 that the detainees were entitled to minimal protection under common article 3 of the Geneva Convention, and

many reports of torture and gross violations of human rights, the facility still exists and 168 detainees remain held in denial of basic rights (Charlie, 2012). As one United Nations judge observed, 'America's idea of what is torture ... does not appear to coincide with that of most civilized nations' (Norton-Taylor and Goldenberg, 2006).

Israel pursues a policy of *sikul memukad* or 'focused foiling / targeted prevention' which sanctions the state to eliminate any person who poses in its wisdom a potential threat to the country's interests or that of its citizens (Stahl, 2010). The policy even got the sanction of the supreme court in Israel in 2006 and hence any aggression to kill a person in pursuance of the policy is deemed legal (see *Summary of Israeli Supreme Court Ruling on Targeted Killings*, Dec 13, 2006). It has also come to light that the Central Investigation Agency of the U.S. hires private contractors in carrying out covert operations in other countries so as to preemptively absolve its on-roll personnel of implications in any acts of violation of law. The issue was highlighted in January 2011 when Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor, killed two Pakistani citizens in Peshawar in Pakistan. It later came to light that the CIA routinely employs contractors such as Global Response Staff (GRS) in clandestine operations in other countries. These are definitely grey areas in defining and dealing with the issue of terrorism, and they do not show signs of getting resolved any time soon.

India attempts to differentiate between acts of terror with different labels like terrorism in Kashmir, Maoism and naxalism in the central and eastern parts, insurgency in the north-east, or extremism in Punjab. This also leads to labeling the perpetrators of heinous acts against innocent civilians as terrorists, separatists, rebels, Maoists, naxalites, and extremists. There is no universal definition of terrorism or that of a terrorist, for as is widely said, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom-fighter.

Terrorism as an act of aggression

Terrorists essentially use aggression as an instrument to convey their message to the government. Aggression can be classified as hostile and instrumental depending on the motive that causes it. Hostile aggression is when the intention is to harm or injure a particular target specifically and no more. For example a person may commit a murder out of personal enmity where the sole motive was to settle a score. Instrumental aggression however occurs when there is harm or injury to some target, but the motive is to reach some other goal through the act. For example, when protestors damage vehicles on the streets, the owners are hardly known. But in causing damage to public or private property, they hold the government at ransom and try to compel it to submit to their demands. Terrorism is an act of instrumental aggression, where harm to unknown and innocent civilians is used as an instrument to try and compel a government to accept certain demands. It is usually used as a last resort when relatively peaceful submissions and demands go unheard. Although this may implicate a legitimate government of neglecting or suppressing the voice of its own people, or a section of the populace, it does not justify acts of terror in any way. For there are equally legitimate and democratic ways of putting forward popular demand. For instance, all terror groups ranging from the Hurriyat in Kashmir to the Maoists/Naxalites in central-eastern India have deliberately kept away from elections and democratic processes for the past many years despite repeated appeals by the government. On the contrary, calls of boycott are repeatedly given and the population is often threatened with more terror if they participate in the

electoral process. This may essentially be due to the lack of popular support for their demands despite tall claims otherwise. The justification however is the usual rhetoric of elections being rigged by the state.

Aggression is also classified along three axes: physical-verbal, active-passive, and direct-indirect. Acts of terror are primarily physical-active-indirect by nature as they use physical force through action, but are indirect as the terrorists cannot take on the government in direct confrontation with its army and hence look for soft targets. Verbal aggression is also used, directly or indirectly, through hate speeches and literature. The era of computerization and the Internet are enabling the use of novel strategies to propagate fear and hatred to target audiences from anywhere across the globe. In August 2012, videos of incidents of violence elsewhere were morphed to depict them as violence against Muslims in Myanmar and were circulated throughout India in what could be a classic example of such strategies. Mass circulation of text messages of planned violence against citizens from the north-eastern states of India led to an unprecedented mass exodus of that population from all major cities in the rest of the country, especially the southern states. In a truly globalized world connected by the Internet, hacking of websites and the use of computer virus programmes are also a part of the broader strategies of aggression. With economic strength of countries gaining more importance than military might in the post cold-war era, terrorist groups have started targeting financial institutions to destabilize the economy of countries. Their strategies range from pumping counterfeit currency in the local markets to laundering and siphoning money by manipulating the banking and stock markets or the use of *hawala* routes. Addressing delegates at the 43rd Munich Security Conference on Security Policy, then National Security Adviser M. K. Narayanan had explicitly voiced his concerns of terror money making its way in the Indian stock market (The Hindu, Feb 17, 2007). Such aggression strategies are active but indirect.

‘Types’ of terrorists

The terrorist is not a singular construct with identical motives and goals even within a single organization or group, leave aside various groups operating in different nation states. There are many people involved in a terror organization, ranging from actual perpetrators of violent acts to fringe sympathizers and donors. Depending on their roles, the following major types can be identified in what are collectively labeled as terrorists, or those who collude with or lend support to terrorist groups. In no way is the list exhaustive nor are the types to be viewed as water-tight compartments; rather they present a brief overview of the roles of individuals in terror organizations.

The Ideologue: The ideologue deals with the theoretical constructs that are worthy of fighting for, or can be projected as being violated by the state and hence justifying a revolt. In the absence of a clear ideology, terrorism would be just another crime. The ideology can be religion, communism, or revolt against state oppression. The ideologue almost never indulges in acts of physical aggression, rather he is the mentor and guide to others who act on his behest. Osama bin Laden and Prabhakaran are examples of ideologues who deliver(d) speeches and issue(d) statements, videos, pamphlets and other inflammatory literature to fuel aggression among the masses.

The Perpetrator: These are the individuals who actually indulge in physical aggression, killing people and destroying property. They do so supposedly because they are convinced by their ideology that the path of violence is justified. There are also those who are indoctrinated and those gullible who are promised martyrdom and a better life-after. Curiously enough, it is seen that gender, education, or income hardly account for a person getting influenced by a certain ideology and thus perpetrating a violent act. There are women and children (possibly forced) on the one hand who are seen to indulge in acts of terror, while there are also professional doctors and engineers on the other hand who remorselessly indulge in the massacre of innocent civilians.

Crime Syndicates: Terrorist organizations need manpower, logistics in procuring and ferrying men and material, as well as some penetration in both the populace and the government for intelligence gathering. Established crime syndicates in the state have all these qualities and hence it is only natural to see the two groups ally for mutual benefits. Some crime syndicates like that of Dawood Ibrahim in Mumbai have openly collaborated with terrorist activities, while others like some drug cartels operating in the Af-Pak theatre, Russia and Columbia are known to provide 'need-based' support.

The Opportunistic Criminal: There are individuals with either a criminal record or an antisocial personality who join terror groups not for ideological leanings, but rather for the many opportunities that they see in joining such groups. The opportunities are in the form of money, support, and feigned glory— better to be a known as a terrorist with a cause than as a wayward petty criminal. Joining a terror group expands the scope and horizon of activities, while providing a cushion against loss of social status within the community. Ajmal Kasab, the terrorist arrested in Mumbai for the terror attacks in November 2008 is an example of an opportunistic small-time criminal who got sucked in by the lure of money and glory.

State-sponsored Terrorism: Complicity of the state in using terrorism as a policy poses a unique challenge today. Pakistan, for example, is at the forefront with its policy of 'bleeding to death with a thousand cuts' against India after losses in traditional wars. Pakistan is also involved in the murky waters of Afghanistan by supporting America-led forces on the one hand and financing and providing sanctuary, arms, and training to the Taliban through the ISI on the other. Many commentators have labeled this as a policy of 'running with the hares and hunting with the hounds'. Though other neighbours do not follow such a policy explicitly, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar are providing sanctuary to renegades from India. Others nations like Iran and Turkey are also implicated in supporting rebels fighting against other sovereign countries.

Outsourced Terror: Many countries are outsourcing terror activities to 'non-state actors' in order to dodge accusations of abetment. The role of criminals like Dawood Ibrahim and organized crime syndicates has already been mentioned. But apart from these, there are mercenary-type elements that will get a job done for a price. Terrorist organizations, usually due to lack of support or manpower, are also using outsourced elements to keep the issue burning. For example, a majority of terrorists operating in Kashmir today are believed to be foreign mercenaries who have been roped in due to waning local support.

Sleeper cells: Terrorist organizations and sponsoring agencies spend a lot of time and energy in recruiting and indoctrinating individuals who would be of potential use in times to come. This not only creates a buffer stock or increases the bench-strength of the organization, but also one that is below the radar of state agencies. These sleeper cells can be made active when needed, or merely used for logistical support like providing safe-houses, transportation, or delivery of material. An interesting phenomenon came to light after the Ishrat Jehan encounter case in Gujrat where the young college girl from Mumbai was presumably used only to accompany the terrorists in a car, as the presence of a lady creates a 'family picture' and thus reduces the chances of interception by state agencies. The case is still in the courts and there are differing versions of the role of the girl by two state agencies.

Soft-supporter: Apart from ideologues and perpetrators, there are individuals and groups who support a terrorist organization and their ideology apparently without direct involvement. There are left-leaning intellectuals who support the Maoist cause in India for instance. These individuals can be heard or their views read in popular media, where they seemingly oppose violence but support the cause nevertheless. Even Pakistan claims to provide only moral support to the Kashmiri separatists and soft support comes in the form of donations that are gathered from the public ostensibly for charity and social work, but is funneled for supporting violent acts, which the donor is well aware of but may choose to either ignore or feign innocence.

Is there a psychological *theory* of terrorism?

There is no unified 'theory of terrorism' or a 'terrorist personality' that explains any or all of terrorism entirely. However, there are definite roots deep within the human psyche to which overt manifestations of terrorism can be attributed. Traditional theories have not addressed the issue explicitly, although there are constructs which can help explain terrorism and related issues. But none of the constructs are as robust as would be expected in pure sciences. For example, some psychologists (Feuer, 1969; Crenshaw, 1988) have suggested that terrorism is rooted in child abuse, but then not every terrorist has undergone abuse in childhood, nor every abused child grows up to be a terrorist. Nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that the cause of terrorism is definitely deep within the psyche, and psychologists are attempting to extract it. The following paragraphs highlight some important psychological facets that are associated with terrorism, and those that can help curb the menace.

Cognitive schema

Cognitive schema is an organized representation of prior knowledge about a concept that helps guide our processing of current information. A host of cognitive functions including learning, memories, apperceptions, motives, emotions, social interaction, cultural constructs, and environmental cues help form schemata. Schemata are relatively stable, although they can modify with experience. A schema basically facilitates speedy interpretation of sensory information and helps maintain a stable worldview. For example, we all have fairly well-established notions about army officers, vegetable vendors, primary school teachers and artists. When introduced to any one of

these people, we know what to expect. Two cognitive processes are at work if there is a mismatch between our perceptual window and the incoming information – assimilation and accommodation (Galotti, 2007). Assimilation is the process of including new information into existing cognitive frameworks, even at the cost of reinterpretation or distortion. There are some schemata that are very rigid and hence the individual refuses to expand his cognitive window, rather opting to tamper incoming information such that it would suit his interpretation. These cognitive schemata are usually in the form of religious beliefs, emotional attachments, and pressing motives that are held for a lifetime.

Accommodation on the other hand is about changing our existing cognitive frameworks so as to incorporate discrepant information. Here people change their attitudes and perceptions about themselves or the outside world by adjusting their cognitive windows so as to interpret information in a new way. Terrorists, it would be evident, are prone to assimilate information to suit their purpose, while scientists on the other hand, would be inclined to accommodate newer research to expand their understanding of the world. Indoctrination is essentially a tool used to build stable, unshakable schemata of a skewed interpretation of the outside world. Individuals are taught to assimilate every bit of relevant information in such a way that the underlying schemata are not disturbed.

Another cognitive style important for sustaining ideology and aggressive acts is a 'black and white' view of the world as well as one's own actions. Terrorists perceive the world as 'us' and 'them' - a clear demarcation based on religion, ethnicity, geographical boundaries, or any other line that can be imagined. Because 'they' are perceived to be essentially different, the treatment meted out to them is also cognitively justified. Take the example of people who eat non-vegetarian food. Because they perceive chicken or goat, although living organisms, to be different from the rest of the human species and further view them as food, they have no qualms or regrets about consuming them. Their debate with veggies will continue no matter what efforts go into trying to convince them of a life lost for gastronomic pleasure. The idea here is definitely not to equate non-vegetarians with terrorists, but rather to explain cognitive differences we may hold in routine matters.

The black-and-white perceptions never occur suddenly, but develop slowly as an individual gets influenced by an ideology. There are conscious efforts on part of ideologues and 'recruiters', and many a times we see religious, cultural, and historical perspectives truncated to facilitate such perceptions. Many a times the effort is deliberate on part of the state, as in Pakistan where textbooks are replete with instances of hate material against non-Muslim minorities. Black-and-white thought processes or perceptions have an advantage that they simplify the processing of incoming information in a complex world. By simply viewing things as good or bad, us and them, love or hate, there is no need to expend cognitive energies on a wide array of options between the two extremes. In an era of 'information explosion', deciphering actions, gestures, statements, or observations of people far and wide could be very taxing. Many individuals do not possess the requisite training, through education, culture, or other social agents, to cope with the information overload. Water-tight compartmentalization also has the advantage that it does not require revisiting, rethinking, or reevaluating the same issues, because they are simply not going to change.

Another dimension of rigid cognitive schemata is that they allow an individual to focus and assume only one role in an increasingly multi-tasked society. It is stressful for many individuals to adapt to various roles and assume changing identities in a globalized world. Among those who cannot sustain the pressure, some stick to singular one-dimensional roles thus relieving them of the stress to adapt themselves to different situations, people, and places. Terrorist organizations always hold rigid positions and have a very narrow focus, and joining a terrorist organization allows an individual to merge his single role with that within the organization. Accepting the group's ideology has the advantage of justifying the one-dimensional position without further need to assume any other role. Terrorist groups also have a cult-culture where their ideologies and actions are glorified. This bolsters the rigid schemata and gives psychological comfort to the individual in a 'zone', although physically he or she may be living dangerously.

Power motivation

Humans have evolved socially to look beyond basic biological motives, and most of their overt behaviour is guided by psychosocial motives. One important social motive that guides the behaviour of individuals heading terrorist groups is power motivation. Power motivation, or need for power, is the desire to control or manipulate the behaviour of other people. Individuals with a high need for power use many different tools to achieve their objectives. Some use muscle power, some use money, while others may use positions of authority to influence other people. Ideology and religion are also used as tools to achieve personal goals, sometimes in a violent way. Although this is not the space to debate whether God invented man or man invented God, but religion has definitely provided a solace to individuals facing personal, social, or existential crises. People hence have a natural propensity to submit to religion, and this is the very grain of fundamentalism. Self-anointed saviors of religious groups assume the mantle of leading the followers and thus find a ready-made platform to fulfill their power needs. Religion is abstract and hence people indirectly end up submitting to individuals who appear to decipher it 'concretely'.

Prevention of terrorism- A psychological perspective

It is impossible to reach out to each and every citizen and make a psychological profile, at least not with the resources available today, although one cannot rule it out as a distant possibility.

Governance: It has to be made evident, and perceptibly so, that adherence to the nation state has a considerable advantage over affiliation to sub-groups. Unfortunately, democratic governments are formed by popular vote and that brings in populist measures and vote-bank politics. Delivering governance is a tough job; pampering sub-groups is easier. And if the latter pays more dividends, why bother about governance? However, with lack of governance comes a general feeling of frustration and insecurity, driving the people away from the nation state to the perceived security of sub-group identities. Every sub-group does not take up an armed conflict with the state; precedence of sub-group identities creates fertile grounds for terrorism to prosper – one, it will justify the actions of a sub-group and two, others will perceive it as a conflict between 'them' and the 'state'. Drifting away of sub-groups from the nation-state identity is fodder to

propagandist machinery. Corruption may not directly lead to terrorism, but better and transparent governance brings people closer to the nation state, which they believe provides equal security and opportunity to all.

General vs. Specific security: The focus of the security apparatus, in India at least, is on providing security to specific people who, needless to say, occupy seats of political, administrative, and judicial power. The very few at the top are given security cover by the most elite commandos while the common populace is left to fend for itself, thereby creating more and more opportunities for terrorists to strike soft targets. Not only does it cause loss of human life and property, but with every terrorist attack the atmosphere is polarized further. The focus of the American government on the other hand is towards providing general security to its citizens which has not allowed any major terrorist strike to happen post 9/11.

Role of media: Independence of the media is of paramount importance in a democracy. However, it is the press and electronic media that convey the deeds and messages of the terrorists to the world and thus end up being the unintended ‘vehicle’ of propaganda. It would be improper to gag the media but one can expect them to exert refrain. The situation is quite complex as the media can be complicit in carrying government propaganda which can be equally damning. The CNN and BBC for instance reported the bombing of Iraqi cities in the first war as a successful ‘awe and thunder’ strategy by their governments overlooking the loss of innocent lives. Neither did they vociferously pursue and question the conspicuously missing WMDs after the second Iraq war- the very foundation of the war that never existed. So the media can become a propaganda vehicle for either sides in a conflict and precipitate mass opinion. In the era of blogging and social networking sites on the Internet, the press and electronic media had better establish and maintain their credibility if they wish to sustain and survive.

Stop pampering fundamentalist elements: Fundamentalist views often find more time and space in the political domain not because they are popular, but simply because they are more visible. It is coupled with the silence of the majority sober view that catapults the extremists onto centre-stage of debate, discussions, and policymaking. Further, much more damage is done as these vociferous extremist elements occupy public consciousness and the entire sub-group or community gets stereotyped. Stereotyping polarizes society which is of benefit to terror outfits as it makes their job much easier. So democratic governments should stop engaging with fundamentalists and look out for popular voice, thereby not polarizing and stereotyping in the favor of the very enemy they are fighting against.

Education: Educationists need to imbibe more cognitive skills in their students in the developing years. The focus has to shift from scholastic ability to inclusive learning. Accommodation needs to be promoted over assimilation, but then that requires teachers to be trained in these skills. Efforts are already on to include value-based education across all levels of schooling and these only need to be strengthened further. In a society deeply divided on caste and communal lines like India, teachers themselves carry the baggage of discrimination in the classroom. Unconsciously, they end up promoting the

existing differences further. More the focus on sub-groups with a black-&-white perception, more fertile is the ground for strife.

Inclusive state policy: Three factors that are common to all terrorists are injustice, need for identity, and need for belongingness (Borum, 2004). All the three factors are evidently psychological and highly subjective when it comes to feeling and perception. In a way, it won't be an exaggeration to say that almost all mortals on this planet have felt at some point in life that they have been wronged, have felt lost in the crowd, and have yearned for love and belongingness. That doesn't imply that there are billions of potential terrorists lurking around in every nook and corner of the world. It simply calls for reassessment of state policies that are inclusive in both theory and practice. It is imperative that state policies do not alienate any section of the society - minority or majority - and create equal opportunities for growth.

Social learning: Albert Bandura (1961) demonstrated the role of observation in learning through his landmark experiment on children. When children were exposed to the sight of an adult abusing and hitting a bobo doll, they repeated the same behaviour of violence and abuse when exposed to a similar situation. Not only is there much violence to be observed in society today, there is also vicarious conditioning when people using violence are seen to achieve goals and get away with it. This reinforces the use of violence as a means to achieving goals. A credible, transparent, and speedy justice system not only acts as a deterrent against those resorting to violence, it also preempts the need to use extra-judicial means to seek 'justice'. More importantly, perpetrators of violent acts need to be brought to book and the guilty punished so as to deter others from using violence as an instrument.

Role models: Mahatma Gandhi is revered as the apostle of non-violence the world over. His presence in India is ubiquitous with roads and institutions named after him in every city. He appears on the Indian currency notes and his portrait decorates the walls in every government office. Unfortunately, there is a huge disconnect between what people say of him and what they practice. The cognitive dissonance is evident in the highest echelons of power and thus makes his presence nothing more than ceremonial. The same can be said of all prophets and saints by whose names people swear, but fail to emulate their actions in public or personal life. The earlier we get over with this hypocrisy the better. What is even more alarming is the fact that the society has to revert back to role models in history with hardly any inspiration around. It is this perception that has to change and the young and restless generation needs to see more sober role models in flesh and blood.

Stop stereotyping: Stereotyping reduces effort in cognitive processing and provides mechanical cues to a seemingly complex world. This allows it to prosper at the cost of rigid posturing in social life. Stereotyping discredits achievements of some while exaggerates the prowess of others. Both the situations are undesirable in an equitable society as it fosters discontentment and sows the seeds of alienation and revolt. Due acknowledgement creates an environment of trust and fosters growth. It allows talent to be nurtured and achievements to be rewarded.

Collective morale: Terrorism is essentially psychological warfare and can be tackled by collective morale more than anything else. Although the nation state is a large group, there is limited action on different fronts by a small number of players each time. For example, only a small fraction of the population is directly involved in counter-insurgency and anti-terrorism activities. However, there is a collective belief in the larger population as to whether their actions will lead to the stated goal or not. Collective morale motivates individual action and increases the chances of reaching the goal. Action without conviction is the hallmark of a soft state.

Civil society is in constant flux and is moulded by ideas and events. Perceptions overrule realities and emotions override rationality. Humans are surpassing natural barriers riding high on the back of technology, and exploring newer frontiers in science and outer space. Ironically, it is the lack of understanding of human behaviour itself that could be the biggest cause of an impending catastrophe. More than outer space, humans need to explore and better understand their inner space.

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