

Psychological Profiles of Terrorists, Part 1: Introduction



Worldwide, terrorists are a motley crew. From different cultures, genders, and ages, each group and, sometimes individual, has distinctive beliefs, objectives, and methodologies. They play different roles in their organization or are only loosely connected to one, if at all. Yet, typical profiles of terrorists exist in different contexts.

Regarding personalities and psychological profiles, an organized terrorist outfit is a little like a corporation. There are a hierarchy and different subdivisions with separate functions, sometimes at multiple locations, which are hopefully coordinated together to fulfill a shared goal and purpose, if the organization is successful in its vision and strategy.

Personality-wise, individuals are better suited to one role or another

For that reason, people have various specialties and strengths, and, as with all other corporate functions, some are better suited to specific personality types and psychological tendencies than others. However, most roles require a sound mind, an adequate ability to regulate emotions and impulses, be disciplined, listen to authority, and work in a team toward a common goal, which facilitates the pursuit of [rational intent](#). After all, the success of a terrorist campaign means [achieving stated goals](#).

Such a notion implies a few ideas. Firstly, unless a person is only valuable as a short-term pawn, shield, or otherwise disposable, the organization expects a follower to perform his duties well, act predictively according to a plan, and be responsive to the group and leader's demands. This means that most forms of severe psychopathology, including psychotic disorders, and those with poor emotion regulation, high impulsivity, and a lack of personal insight, are not workable.

Furthermore, followers are usually not allowed to question, contradict, or ignore leader's orders and decisions. Those in management roles must be able to lead and exert respect and admiration to attract and recruit support, as well as imprint ideals and objectives onto followers and uphold discipline. The [societal explanations](#) of the development of leaders and followers also lean more toward a manifestation of their psychological needs than the widely believed poverty argument.

Using the DiSC profile to analyze personality profiles of terrorists

As with normal business and corporate structures and the behavior of employees therein, one can also analyze the different positions in terrorist groups with the help of the DiSC Profile, described as “the leading personal assessment tool used by over 1 million people every year to improve work productivity, teamwork, and communication.” The DiSC evaluation classifies an individual’s personality in four categories, namely dominance, influence, steadiness, and compliance.

The predominantly dominant or compliant person focuses more on tasks than people and is questioning and skeptical, with the opposite true for influential or steady individuals, who are accepting and warm. Where compliant or steady people are more cautious and reflective, those who are more influential and dominant have an active and outgoing orientation that are fast-paced and outspoken instead.

An effective organization needs a balance between personality types

One can easily see that an efficient organization best has a well-balanced composition of types utilized in different roles. Structured terrorist groups are no different. A group such as the Islamic State, or ISIL, which also has substantial area and population under its control, requires many divisions and functions to look after its interests. In addition to military strategy and operations, leaders and members have to manage and execute public relations, recruitment, promotion, strategic and financial planning, staff monitoring and coordinating, law enforcement and justice, purchasing, fundraising, and any production operations under its purview.

What is making this more demanding and crucial is that modern terrorist tactics intermingle with civilian populations and are reliant on their compliance and support. Many groups are having a difficult time reconciling the public’s needs and rights with their own objectives and beliefs while accepting that forcible suppression and threats are not a sustainable option.

As a result, terrorist groups have increasingly become a hybrid of militia, political party, and social services and public works provider, with employees who have to fulfill these different demands. Therefore, one can safely assume that various roles and demands in a terrorist group will suit different personality types best.

Different roles in terrorist activities require different personalities

I will discuss this in much more depth in following parts of the series, but, for now, one expects a

divide between the typical traits of leaders, managers, and followers in such an organization, depending on the value that they add and the demands on them. Leaders are more forceful, charismatic, and cold, while other members are probably susceptible, compliant, and with different needs, such as belonging, fitting in, and approval. However, terrorist leaders have also growingly appealed to non-members and other groups to act in their support, thereby arguably trying to distance themselves from accountability while extending their geographical reach.

Moreover, then, on the fringes and from the outside, there are those looking in, aspiring to be a part of the vision, to share in the successes, and, with or without the nudging or inciting by organized groups, commits terrorist acts for a variety of personal reasons and contexts. These “lone wolf” operators typically have a different psychopathology and context than those formally serving in a group.

A definition of terrorism

Therefore, whether an individual belongs to a structured terrorist group, a small informal cell, rag-tag mercenary bands, freedom fighters, or acts solo, determines his likely psychological profile, together with his needs and motivation. For the purpose of continuing the discussion, terrorism is defined as:

“The use of violence or threat of violence that reaches more than the immediate target victims and may also be directed at targets consisting of a larger spectrum of society to purport a political, religious, or ideological change.”

Subsequent discussions focus on the common psychological profiles of different archetypes of individuals involved in or committing terrorist acts, including leaders, lone wolves, suicide bombers, cell members, double agents, and active followers. These are by no means inclusive of all individuals committing terrorist acts or involved in or supportive of terrorism groups, but is the start to a useful typology of individual types that may be useful in understanding and countering their actions.