2015

Forensic Psychological Mindset of an American Suicide Bomber: The Next Terrorism Frontier

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Johnson, Ronn; Saadatzadeh, Yasmin; Ross, David B. Ed.D.; Matteson, Rande; Kim, Ji Youn Cindy; and Grace, Elizabeth, "Forensic Psychological Mindset of an American Suicide Bomber: The Next Terrorism Frontier" (2015). *Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles*. 248.

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Forensic Psychological Mindset of an American Suicide Bomber: The Next Terrorism Frontier

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Abstract

Terrorism in the United States has been a critical topic for many years, with one of the most well-known terrorist attacks taking place on September 11, 2001. In the Middle East, terrorist attacks often manifest in the form of suicide bombings. With recent bombings, such as the Boston Marathon and an American al Qaeda suicide bomber in Syria, the risk of an American suicide bomber in the United States is beginning to rise. This presentation explores the forensic psychological patterns exhibited by suicide bombers which can potentially aid in the development of the next terrorism frontier.
Forensic Psychological Mindset of an American Suicide Bomber: The Next Terrorism Frontier

**Overview**

The threat of terrorism in the United States has been prevalent for several years, with notable United States terrorist attacks including the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11. However, terrorism has actually been occurring for several centuries, dating back to the second century B.C. with guerilla warfare (Finn, 2004). While methods of terrorism vary among region and group, much terrorism that occurs outside of the United States comes in the form of suicide bombings. Many researchers are interested in understanding suicide bombers for two reasons: To have an understanding of why an individual would not only kill innocent people, but kill themselves, and having an understanding of the motivation for suicide bombing gives the opportunity to create counterterrorism strategies (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009).

Although there has not been an American suicide terrorist attack occurring in the United States as of yet, the risk of this happening is increasing. On May 25, 2014, 22-year old Moner Mohammad Abusalha drove a truck packed with explosives into a restaurant in northern Syria where government forces were based (Schmidt & Mazzetti, 2014). Along with him, two other suicide bombers also completed the suicide bomb, and one parked his vehicle and left before the explosives detonated. This attack was the first time an American has been involved in a suicide attack in Syria (Mazzetti, Schmitt, & Schmidt, 2014). Investigation concluded that he was trained by Islamic militants in Syria for two months, along with dozens of other Americans. Abusalha was found to have traveled to Syria to help fight in the Syrian war, which has been going on for four years. He received the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) along with other Americans because they have traveled often to Syria, most likely because of the
war as well. Although an attack like this has not occurred in the United States, the incident of Americans completing suicide bombings in Syria raises the risk.

On April 15, 2013, two explosions occurred near the finish line of the Boston marathon (Parker & Bidgood, 2015). The result of the blast included 3 people who died and 260 people who were wounded. In order to prevent this from occurring, it is important to understand the motives behind suicide bombings. The two suspects involved in this bombing are Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and his older brother Tamerlan, who was killed during a shootout with the police directly following the bombing. During the investigation, Dzhokhar told the FBI that they had been planning the attack for a while, originally planning to complete suicide attacks on the Fourth of July. Instead, they chose to wait and used pressure-cooker bombs and other homemade detonation devices. When asked about his motivation, Dzhokhar explained that he wanted to strike against the United States because of its military action in Iraq and Afghanistan; both brothers thought that this was part of a conspiracy against muslims. When asked if he knew of other attacks against the United States, Dzhokhar stated that he did not know of any other attacks. This attack that occurred in Boston along with the addition of Abusalha’s attack, both greatly increase the risk of a suicide bombing occurring in the United States. In order to prevent this from occurring, it is a necessary to understand the history of terrorist attacks, the motivations behind a suicide bomber, and motivations of terrorist attacks in the United States. With this knowledge, evidence-based counterterrorism strategies can be formed.

**The Historical Perspective of Facing Terrorism: United States and Abroad**

Throughout the American history of wars (i.e., Vietnam and post-Vietnam) the American military battled guerilla warfare strategies. Some historians would say Washington and his group were an early version of guerillas (e.g., revolutionaries). The terminology of *wars* can
also be the same as conflicts and interventions, oppositions, campaigns, expeditions, rebellion, revolution, occupations, invasions, and other acts of violence. Not until the 21st century, the prominent terminology changed to include the *War on Terror* and *Insurgency*. The latter terminology was already used last century in many parts of the world (e.g., El Salvador FMLN, Sandinistas & Contras/Nicaragua, FARC/Colombia, M-19 movement/Colombia, Tupamaros/Uruguay, Red Brigades in Italy, Red Army faction aka Baader-Meinhof gang/Germany, Khmer Rouge/Cambodia, to name some). In addition, during the many wars, prisoners were taken and later released when a war ended; however, with the terrorists, people are not called prisoners of war, they are called *hostages*. Compared to many prisoners, hostages have a lower expectancy of being released or even returned once they are brutally murdered, unless a hefty ransom is paid by either the private sector including families or government. Hence, it is a way for terrorists to financially sustain themselves; add to that with recently taken oil fields by ISIS, and the two Japanese hostages.

To understand an enemy is a first rule in war. To understand terrorists is not as simple because they do not belong to a certain country like most other enemies of war. These terrorists live in many countries and have different ideologies and complex motivations against individuals and groups (Global Focus, n.d.). Consider using asymmetric warfare -- “The [new] term is also frequently used to describe what is also called *guerrilla warfare, insurgency, terrorism, counterinsurgency*, and *counterterrorism*, essentially violent conflict between a formal military and an informal, less equipped and supported, undermanned but resilient opponent.” Important aspect is different than conventional warfare in which forces assume the locations and potential strategies of the opponent, which is not necessarily the case with asymmetric conditions. Hence,
the *element of surprise* is a strong belligerent and often exploited by them (M. Gonzalez, personal communication, January 15, 2015).

After the 9/11 incident of terrorism, the American Armed Forces was faced with a different opposition compared to those wars of guerrilla warfare. From the early wars, guerrilla warfare was used during the Roman Empire as well as when the Maccabees defeated the Greek and Syrians in the second century B.C. (Finn, 2004). In that line of thought, Finn (2004) commented that during the contemporary Chechen conflict with Russia, the Chechen rebels used guerrilla warfare against the Russian military. However, during modern Chechen times, guerrilla warfare was somewhat aligned with acts of terrorism. Guerrilla warfare was used against the Russian State, but acts of terrorism were used against the civilians. “In an example of the first case, an explosives-laden truck killed 40 people at a government building in northern Chechnya in May of 2003. In an example of the second, Chechen terrorists took hundreds of hostages at a packed Moscow Theatre in October of 2002. Around 130 hostages from seven different countries were killed, as were 41 terrorists” (Finn, 2004, para. 8).

The difference between guerrilla warfare and terrorism are not so much acts against any country’s military (Castro and his force excepted as they did go after Batista’s military in Cuba), but to place fear and terror in people as well as place a specific ideology behind the attack(s). Most terrorists use symbolic means to send a message. In the case of the 9/11 incident, terrorists used symbols as the names of the airlines: American and United. They also used the date of September 11, which represents the call for an emergency of 9/11 (implying emergency code); not to mention the targets of the American culture: [military] power (i.e., the Pentagon) and synergy of capitalism money (i.e., World Trade Center). This terrorist act placed fear in people, who constantly relive it every September 11th due to the large media coverage. This is another
terror tactic of fear; terrorists want media coverage while having constant media exposure. This is something most Americans never learn. Based on the history of American wars, the United States military and public were not ready for the change of guerilla warfare to terrorism. People used to wonder why the Israelis would fight against Arab opposition; they never thought it would ever occur on American soil (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2015). Kapitan (as cited in Greenwald, 2014, para. 15) stated:

> Even when a definition is agreed upon, the rhetoric of “terror” is applied both selectively and inconsistently. In the mainstream American media, the “terrorist” label is usually reserved for those opposed to the policies of the U.S. and its allies. By contrast, some acts of violence that constitute terrorism under most definitions are not identified as such — for instance, the massacre of over 2000 Palestinian civilians in the Beirut refugee camps in 1982 or the killings of more than 3000 civilians in Nicaragua by “contra” rebels during the 1980s, or the genocide that took the lives of at least a half million Rwandans in 1994. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some actions that do not qualify as terrorism are labeled as such — that would include attacks by Hamas, Hezbollah or ISIS, for instance, against uniformed soldiers on duty.

Dobson and Payne (1987) illustrated a chronological order of terror from 1968 to 1989 in their book *The Never-Ending War: Terrorism in the 80s*. Dobson and Payne mentioned that 1968 was the “seminal year” of modern terrorism (p. 307). Following the Six Day War of 1967, Arabs embraced terrorism as their main weapon against Israel. After Arabs killed kibbutzniks and bombed water pumps, terrorism was taken abroad by hijacking airlines, which lead to international terrorism. Although Dobson and Payne did not cover every terrorist account in their chronology, they felt the terror acts listed give the reader information on trends and issues
that influenced their agendas. In 1968 was another incident when European students failed to achieve their objectives by rebelling against government and their universities. As a result, a small group of radical students turned to terrorism and fought differently than others, “they were to use the pistol and the bomb instead of cobblestones” (Dobson & Payne, 1987, p. 307). Most of the incidents in the chronological order dealt with the hijackings of El Al Airlines in the following cities: Rome, Athens, and Zurich.

Hijackings were not the only method of spreading terror, but also attacks-raids using hand grenades and bombs. The first bombing mentioned was in London on July 7, 1969 when the Middle East war arrives in England. The victim of this firebombing was the Marks and Spencer store; Jewish-owned stores are now targeted worldwide by George Habash the founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). In Brussel, the PFLP attacked Israeli offices with hand grenades on September 9, 1969; the PFLP was also responsible for the mid-air explosion of a Swiss airliner from Zurich to Tel Aviv on February 2, 1970. In West Berlin on December 12, 1969, a bomb was defused near an El Al and America House offices’ block, while a bomb did explode at V Corps Headquarters, Frankfurt, and then the Federal Republic of West Germany. The group responsible for this bombing was the Baader-Meinhof Group, also known as the Red Army Faction.

Meantime, the Fatah, whose founder was Yasser Arafat, blew up fuel tanks in Rotterdam on March 14, 1971. This is recorded as the first coordinated attack by the Fatah. Following this March 1971 attack was a failed suitcase-bombing attack in Tel Aviv on July 28, 1971. This was believed as the first “surrogate” bombing as the PFLP gave an innocent Dutch girl a suitcase bomb to blow up an El Al airplane. On September 1, 1971 The PFLP gave an innocent Peruvian girl a suitcase bomb in an attempt to destroy another EL Al airplane.
Dobson and Payne (1987) listed the first attack in New York on December 26, 1972. The Jewish Defense League, which is a far-right religious-political organization to protect Jews from anti-Semitism was responsible for the firebombing of the Offices of Sol Hurok. The Jewish Defense League is also known as a right-wing terrorist group listed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Not until December 24, 1975 was another bombing at the Fraunce Tavern in Wall Street that killed 4 people and injuring 51; the group claiming this attack was the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional, which is translated as the Armed Forces of National Liberation. Five days later in Washington, D.C., the Weather Underground was responsible for bombing the United States State Department building; luckily there were no injuries. In addition to bombings by terrorist groups from outside the United States, there were 30 plus bombings by American bombers who attacked abortion clinics from 1981 to a Christmas Day bombing in 1984 at a Pensacola, Florida clinic. On February 23, 1993, the north tower of the New York City World Trade Center was bombed killing six people and injuring 1,042 people. In Oklahoma City, 168 people were killed and over 600 people were injured on April 19, 1995 when two domestic terrorists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

From 1972 to present day, there have been bombings, hijackings, kidnappings, and other assaults by many terrorist organizations such as the Black September Organization, known for the Munich Olympic Game murders of Israeli athletes, Irish Republican Army, Provisional Irish Republican Army, Japanese Red Army, People’s Revolutionary Army from Argentina, Mossad, Qaddafi’s National Arab Youth for the Liberation of Palestine, Syrian-backed Sa’ika, Carlos the Jackal from Venezuela, and Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional. The groups today, which have more notoriety due to so much media coverage, are Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah,
Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and ISISL. On May 16, 1986, George Schulz, then Secretary of State stated that the Central Intelligence Agency should wage a secret war against terrorism.

The recent retired Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) Assistant Special Agent in Charge and Branch Chief of the Explosives Technology Branch (served as a Civil Affairs Major during Operation Iraqi Freedom) Dondi Albritton opined that dating back in history, it is a common theme to find a plethora of examples of amateurs and experts who find creative ways to construct explosive devices intended to invoke fear and many times injury to advance a cause or other act. Albritton noted the expertise required to manufacture an explosive device does not mandate much in the way of scientific knowledge. As time has advanced in this particular area many explosive device components and instructions can be easily obtained. Clearly global digital masked bandits-vendors offering to supply most any explosive component(s) including exotic automatic firearms are ready to sell and move in interstate commerce those items to the numerous insurgent members and merchants of death that plague the world (D. Albritton, personal communication, January 20, 2015).

As recently reported in the media the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) conducted a long-term international covert operation and arrested the infamous and United States indicted Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout in Thailand. For many years, Bout supplied mass quantities of every conceivable weapon and explosive devices to insurgents worldwide. Recently convicted and sentenced to a 25-year term of incarceration for his role in providing material support to terrorists, Bouts’ continuing criminal enterprise has been tied to providing weapons to Al Qaeda and to the Taliban. Bouts former work as Russian Military Intelligence Officer served him well in understanding global conflict and he has been identified as a key player and political loyalist among corrupt officials in the massive Genocide that occurred in Rwanda. Having
established good working relationships with Warlords as in Rwanda. Bout was reportedly paid for Arms with Blood Diamonds instead of cash.

Albritton underscored that one can surmise that given the open access to the necessary means to manufacture an explosive device this complicates our ability in early detection and early intervention strategies with a few qualified exceptions. Some of those exceptions include source development and oversight-reporting requirements for certain ingredients and components generally found in the manufacturing process of explosive devices. As a result, insurgents and terrorists conceal their activities using clever methods to acquire and source the necessary components to advance their tradecraft (D. Albritton, personal communication, January 20, 2015).

As a result of being surprised and attacked by well-armed insurgents, Retired U.S. Army Ranger Commander Colonel McKnight portrayed a serious threat in his recollection of the armed conflict in the book titled Streets of Mogadishu - Leadership At Its Best, Political Correctness At Its Worst. In as much as the well-equipped military services hold in their modern inventory for weapons the proposition that a well-armed group of insurgents can present a serious threat to any military unit as was situation in the armed conflict in Mogadishu (i.e., Blackhawk Down event). Those U.S. Military personnel were surprised, ambushed, disadvantaged and outnumbered in the armed conflict which resulted in many military and civilian deaths (McKnight, 2011).

Motives of Suicide Bombers in the Middle East

Terrorist bombing attacks symbolize an emerging threat that has the potential to impact large crowds of people with psychological consequences. The consequences of human-made disasters are more profound in the general population than after a natural disaster (Freh, Dallos,
In order to understand the reality of violence and the experience of terrorist bombing attacks, it is necessary to understand the contextual history in relation to the current state of this society, its sufferings, and the tribulations of its people. The appearance of modern day suicide bombs in the Middle East can be dated back to 1983 when the Hizbu’llah in Lebanon, an Islamic Shi’ite group, killed 241 United States marines in an attack (Kruglanski et al., 2009). Following the success in Lebanon, the method of suicide bombing as a terror tactic spread globally to other groups to Israel/the Palestinian Territories, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq, Uzbekistan, and Somalia (Speckhard, 2008). In actuality, human bombers existed long before the bombings in Lebanon during the 1950s in Vietnam when insurgents terrorized their French occupants by sending bombers on bicycles to gatherings places (e.g., restaurant) frequently visited by the French, and in warfare by carrying large hollowed out sticks filled with explosives into battle to explode themselves amid the French troops (Speckhard, 2008). In areas of Southeast Asia including the Philippines, male and female suicide bombers were used as a last ditch effort by Muslims resisting foreign occupations (Speckhard, 2008). In an effort to embrace one’s own group, culture, and ideals, individuals have been motivated to sacrifice their lives with mortality (Bloom, 2005).

Over the last 60 years, Iraqi people have lived through the suffering and bloodshed of their people with various war events. The Iraqi/Iranian war of 1980 to 1988 killed more than half a million Iraqis and hundreds of thousands were handicapped while vast economic resources were wasted (Freh et al., 2013; Ismael, 2007). During this time, hundreds of Iranian child martyrs—*Basiji*—marched onto landmines separating enemy lines in order to clear the way for Iranian warriors to charge the Iraqi soldiers exploding themselves along with the mines (Ismael,
2007; Speckhard, 2008). After the attack on Kuwait in the Gulf War of 1991, the United Nations imposed upon Iraq with more than 10 years of a tight economic embargo, which affected the lives of the population and caused emigration of thousands of Iraqis to neighboring countries (Freh et al., 2013). Human rights were abused along with hunger, poverty, various diseases, and psychological distress (DeMause, 1991). The fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein and the occupation by the United States of America in 2003 promised peace and democracy to Iraq, but instead, unleashed religious sectarian violence and deterioration in political, economic, and social stability for Iraq and its citizens (Freh et al., 2013). The violent sects and attacks against the American army have caused thousands of deaths and turmoil with more than 1,000 cases of suicide bombings between 2003 and 2010 and documented 19% (42,928 of 225,789) (Hicks, Dardagan, Bagnall, Spagat, & Sloboda, 2011) of all Iraqi civilian casualties (Freh et al., 2013).

In the case of Tamil Tigers, though of Hindu origin, their motivations for suicide bombings have been through nationalism and not religion (Kruglanski et al., 2009). The individuals carrying out suicidal terrorism and their sponsoring organizations have shown a strong sense of satisfaction and community rewards when they are perceived by their communities as having acted in their defense, expressed communal outrage, having caused the enemy to suffer, and acquired media attention to help their cause (Speckhard, 2008).

Women suicide bombers in the Middle East become involved for personal reasons compared to males who commit the acts of terror for ideological reasons (Bloom, 2007). The motives of females focus on avenging for personal loss, redeeming the family name, escaping a life sheltered monotony, and to equalize the patriarchal societies in which they live in (Bloom, 2005, 2007; Speckhard, 2008). Throughout history (e.g., Russian Narodnaya Volya, Irish Republican Army, the Baader-Meinhof organization in Germany, the Italian Red Bridgades, and
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Bloom, 2007), women’s primary contribution has been to sustain an insurgency by giving birth to many fighters and raising them in a revolutionary environment (Hafez, 2006; Speckhard, 2008). In 1985, a 17-year-old Lebanese girl named Sana’a Mehaydali was sent by the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP/PPS), a pro-Syrian Lebanese Organization, to commit suicide by blowing herself up near an Israeli convoy in Lebanon killing five Israeli soldiers as the first documented female suicide bomber (Bloom, 2007). Fifty percent (six out of 12) of the suicide attacks conducted by the SSNP were women (Bloom, 2007). In Sri Lanka, women who witnessed and learned about rape from other villagers (e.g., Sri Lankan Army killing Tamil youth), and the helpless feeling against the Sri Lankan Army are the main reasons for them to join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Bloom, 2007). Palestinian women joined the ranks of men as suicide bombers in 2002 when it became increasingly difficult for young Palestinian men to cross Israeli checkpoints to enact terrorism (e.g., case of Wafa Idris) (Speckhard, 2008). In contrast, Chechen groups used women without hesitation, which is a reflection of Chechen women under the Soviet Union and their equal opportunity for higher education and their freedom to work outside of their homes without the presence of a male chaperone (Speckhard, 2008). Similar to the Chechens, female bombers in Uzbekistan joined their male counterparts in all aspects of the terror movement with parallel roles of females (e.g., modern Western dress, work outside the home). Although the expectations of Uzbek women are similar to the Chechens, their motivations contrast since they have not witnessed the devastation of war and foreign occupations on their territory. Uzbek women identify through a process of indoctrination with the claimed oppression of Muslims throughout the world, and they aim to be heroic with suicide missions against both Uzbek and foreign Western targets (Speckhard, 2008).
In an effort to rationalize the phenomenon of suicide attacks in the Middle East, religion in general, and Islam specifically has been linked to political violence. Religious symbols and rituals have been used to convince individuals to offer their bodies for missions of martyrdom (Hafez, 2006; Hoffman, 2006). In the role of militant organizations, the Palestinian society implants the emphasis on the “culture of martyrdom” and the willingness of individuals to adopt their culture (e.g., resemblance of a supply and demand situation) (Moghadam, 2006). Individuals and the community experience a socialization process with a religious message, a national message, and an individual’s responsibility to the community (Bloom, 2005; Hafez, 2006). The testimonies of suicide bombers who have failed their missions demonstrate their absence of understanding the act as suicide. They completely reject the use of suicide terminology and explain their acts of terror as a performance of martyrdom (Hafez, 2006). Although the acts are equivalent, its social constructions are different; for the suicide bomber, there is a great gap between egoistic suicide and altruistic sacrifice (Bloom, 2005). As a sacrificer (i.e., religious martyr), the bomber does not see it as ending his or her life, but performing a service to God and their community for which he or she and their families in their world and the next will be rewarded and the “death” is replaced with a process of passage from one existential state to another (Hafez, 2006). Leading organizations open doors of “paradise” to potential suicide attackers by propagandizing them in the concepts of religious sacrifice (Moghadam, 2006). In all monotheistic religions, foundations of martyrdom can be found, which casts doubt on the hypothesis that Islam in itself is the cause for the acts of suicide bombers (Hafez, 2006).

The American Suicide Bomber

Terrorism can be defined as “politically motivated violence, perpetrated by individuals,
groups, or state-sponsored agents, intended to instill feelings of terror and helplessness in a population in order to influence decision making and change behavior” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 161). The psychological consequences and long term effects of terrorism are significant.

Research suggests that disasters resulting from terrorist attacks such as the Boston marathon bombing and school shootings across the United States are more “psychologically disrupting” than those resulting from natural disasters (Mathewson, n.d., p. 192). Specifically, terrorism may be considered “the most pathogenic of all due to its unpredictable and unrestrained nature” (Mathewson, n.d., p. 192).

The understanding of terrorism and psychological implications are essential in order to comprehend psychological and motivating factors surrounding the root of terrorism which is necessary in order to implement policies and counterterrorism prevention strategies (Garner, 2004). Modern terrorism has become “essentially indiscriminate” (Garner, 2004, p. 34). Terrorism strategy is focused on drastic and fundamental political change, which vastly contracts with criminal activity in the modern age. Although the terrorists’ actions may be nearly identical to those committed by the common criminal, the intent is to achieve substantial goals and significant change (Garner, 2004, p. 38).

Terrorism essentially works to undermine the perception of security and aims to disrupt everyday life (Garner, 2004). Terrorist’s ultimate goal is to create fear among the targeted communities and drive public opinion and “pressure decision-makers to surrender to the terrorist demands” (Garner, 2004, p. 38). The terrorist’s focus is not necessarily on the number of deaths in the target population, but rather, terrorists allow the imagination of the community to essentially “do the work for them” (Garner, 2004, p. 38). The fear of the unknown implemented by the terrorist drives the victim to use their own imagination against themselves. Acts of
terrorism are designed to create psychological instability and fear. “Death and destruction are merely a means to an end. Terrorism is psychological warfare” (Mathewson, n.d., p. 208).

**Psychological Mindset**

Terrorists often feel they do not have a sufficient voice in society and are encouraged by high-ranking terrorist leaders to project their aggression onto external individuals and organizations (Moghaddam, 2005). Within the context of terrorism organizations, obedience and conforming to organizational standards is necessary in order to achieve goals and elicit fundamental and political change. Often the lead of the terrorist organization will represent a dominant and assertive authority figure in which deviation from standards will result in extreme punishment (Moghaddam, 2005). Terrorist recruit members are persuaded commit to the law of the terrorist organization through a number of tactics, including “isolation, affiliation, secrecy, and fear” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 165).

Research provides scares evidence to support the notion that terrorism is indicative of psychopathology. In addition, there is minimal evidence indicating that terrorists have a low socioeconomic status or are minimally educated. Under certain conditions, particular individuals will be more susceptible to influence from others, including those who commit acts of terrorism. “As long as conditions are perceived to be unjust and hopeless . . . some individuals will very likely be influenced to climb the staircase to terrorism” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 167). This vulnerability may be fueled by displaced aggression. In order to understand the psychological mindset of terrorists, it is essential to comprehend the level of perceived, deep-rooted injustices and the feelings of oppression that terrorist’s likely experience (Moghaddam, 2005).

Terrorists view acts of violence against outside groups as justified behavior because they view civilians as being part of the “enemy” (Moghaddam, 2005). Newspaper headlines stating
that a terrorist attack has resulted in deaths of innocent civilians will likely not evoke meaning in
the viewpoint of terrorists organizations. These groups have created a distinct dichotomy and
categorized the world into “us” verses “them” and adopted the perception that anyone who is not
actively promoting the terrorist mission is considered a legitimate target that needs to be
eliminated (Moghaddam, 2005).

From the point of view of the members of terrorist organizations, acts of violence against
civilians are justified because civilians are part of the enemy, and only when civilians actively
oppose the targeted “evil forces” will they not be the enemy” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 167). In
this perception, only when civilians join the terrorists’ worldview will they not be considered to
be associated with the enemy. This is completed through implementing exaggerated polarities
by perceiving outsiders as an evil that needs to be eliminated. Terrorists psychologically distance
themselves from other human being in order to achieve their mission (Moghaddam, 2005).

**Cultural Considerations**

It is important to note that intergroup violence and hostility in the context of terrorism
occurs within a background of culture, history, politics, and many other contextual variables. In
order to comprehend the complexity of terrorism, it is necessary to acknowledge underlying and
contributing factors (Stroink, 2007). In order to understand terrorist’s perspective and motive, it
is important to understand if the individual participating in terrorism identifies with the culture
that they are targeting. If the individual who commits acts of terrorism identifies with the
culture, they are similar to domestic terrorists (Stroink, 2007).

Establishing a collective identity within a culture is especially important as it provides an
orienting perspective that contributes to self-esteem and stability. Individuals lacking this
cultural identity, particularly young adults, may experience isolation and disconnection (Stroink,
Individuals raised within two simultaneous cultural frameworks, including individuals who choose to target one of these cultures, may have various forms of identities. These patterns will likely have implications for the “meaning of terrorist violence and its underlying processes” (Stroink, 2007, p. 299).

Immigrants who are marginalized have been found to demonstrate “the lowest levels of psychological adjustment and the highest levels of acculturative stress” (Stroink, 2007, p. 301). A significant amount of research “indicates that the experience of social exclusion can increase acts of aggression” (Stroink, 2007, p. 305). Among those individuals who are oppressed or experience stress from cultural segregation or discrimination, a scare number of individuals who turn to violence may do so through the outside influences of organizations such as criminal activity and gangs, as those implementing acts of terrorism (Stroink, 2007).

Radicalization can be defined as “those who consider themselves to be members of the target culture, but perceive this culture to be flawed in certain ways” (Stroink, 2007, p. 300). These individuals “may seek to change the culture, first through conventional means such as protests, but then through more violent means that are believed to be faster and more effective” (Stroink, 2007, p. 300). Anti-terrorism policy therefore should aim to address dissonance among individuals, and provided intervention strategies to foster collective identity and social support among community members.

**Implications for Future Research**

The threat of an American Suicide bomber leads to the question, what should we do? Various counterterrorism strategies have been implemented, including arrest, offender targeting, investigation strategies, and the creation of new laws (Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2008). However, when the effectiveness of these strategies were explored, results concluded that many
of them are not evidence-based. What this suggests is that there is a need for evidence-based counterterrorism practices. This can be accomplished through the creation of research studies to determine which counterterrorism practices are beneficial, and which are not. Additionally, we can learn from what strategies have worked for other countries, and which have not. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research completed on the psychological aspect of American terrorism. If we can understand more about what drives an American terrorist, we can use that in order to prevent an American suicide bombing from occurring.

**Conclusion**

All in all, an American suicide bombing occurring in the United States is an increasing risk that needs to be focused on. With recent events such as 9/11, an American suicide bomber in Syria, and the Boston marathon, the idea of an American suicide bomber is not so farfetched. In order to prevent this from occurring, it is important to understand the history of terrorist attacks, along with motivations of suicide bombers and terrorism attacks. While investigating past occurrences, we can understand the psychological mindset of an American suicide bomber, which gives us the opportunity to alter it.
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