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## A forensic psychological assessment of terrorists: An anti-terrorism approach for radicalized westerners

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A Forensic Psychological Assessment of Terrorists:  
An Anti-Terrorism Approach for Radicalized Westerners

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**Abstract**

In an effort to prevent terrorism, many political and social resources have been invested. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of scientific evidence explaining the foundation of the psychological process in all levels of terrorist involvement. More specifically, the identification and development of effective assessment models, as well as defining characteristics, of those engaged. This presentation focuses on the complexity of the psychosocial and multicultural process of terrorists. Furthermore, possible predictive models for terrorist offenders will be examined for preventative measures.

Keywords: Anti-Terrorism, Cultural, Psychosocial, Risk Assessments, Terrorists,

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## Overview

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 are more “psychologically disrupting” than those resulting from natural disasters (Mathewson, n.d., p. 192). Specifically, terrorism is clandestine and 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). It should be noted that although a psychological model or analytic approach to terrorism may prove beneficial there remains one universal truth terrorists have plans to cause fear and to kill and they are prepared to carry out their mission using any conventional or nonconventional means to accomplish those goals.

Modern terrorism has become “essentially indiscriminate” (Garner, 2004, p. 34). Terrorism strategy is focused on drastic and fundamental political change, which vastly compares 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). While certain governmental organizations are somewhat required to comply with internal policy and law, terrorists have no rule so to speak except to follow their Jihad mission(s).

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As found in the constant media attention to world events, 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).

Most citizens of the world have no concept or experience living in the chaotic world created by terrorists. Conversely, terrorists abhor America and the West along with our culture and they intend to continue their covert operations intended to avoid detection and disrupt the critical infrastructures necessary to life by any means possible.

### **Psychological Mindset**

Individuals drawn to radicalized group and committing acts of terror 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

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of tactics, including “isolation, affiliation, secrecy, and fear” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 165).

While it was once believed that terrorists were psychopathological, current research provides scarce evidence to support the notion that terrorism is indicative of psychopathology. In addition, according to Moghaddam (2005), 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 and feelings of desperation. In order to better understand the psychological mindset of individuals drawn to terrorist behavior, several factors must be considered. While considering the above mentioned factors, it is essential to account for the level of perceived, deep-rooted injustices and feelings of oppression (Moghaddam, 2005).

Individuals with a terrorist perspective tend to 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” versus “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

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this perception, only when civilians join the terrorists' worldview will they not be considered to be associated with the enemy (Moghaddam, 2005). 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). On the other hand, Americans embrace close knit social networking and enjoy those personal relationships. Terrorists have studied the American lifestyle and know all its weaknesses and will exploit those to achieve their goals.

### **Cultural Considerations**

In order to comprehend the complexity of terrorism, it is necessary to acknowledge underlying and contributing factors such as culture and oppression (Stroink, 2007). In order to better understand the terrorist perspectives and motives, 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, 2007). 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).



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Current 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).

### **Five Levels to Pass Through in Order to Become a Terrorist**

Whenever an act of violence takes place, it is common for individuals to associate the perpetrators with a specific stereotype, such as having a mental illness. Evidence attempting to link psychopathology as a substantial criterion for predicting which individuals are likely to become terrorists has not legitimately been proven.

Terrorists are able to gain recognition for their group and values because of the individuals’ level of education; someone who does not possess the intelligence for meticulous planning and carrying out acts of violence would not be successful. Socioeconomic status, the belief of entitlement to manipulating the justice system and the individual’s perceptions on their inability to meet needs and goals without implementing violence makes up the foundational attributes of individuals that are drawn to terrorist organizations (Moghaddam, 2005).

America joins other nations and each has a unique system of justice, although these tools can be useful but no feared by terrorists, simply stated, one of the best methods to counter

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insurgency is to kill terrorists before they multiple and kill innocent citizens

Becoming a terrorist is a process, and the deeper into the process that the individual progresses, the more unlikely it is for the individual to be persuaded to cease terrorist involvement. According to Moghaddam's 2005 published work, *The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration*, there are five levels that individuals pass through in order to become a terrorist, known as the "staircase." The first level focuses on the individual's belief that justice, overall loss and lack of opportunities coerce the individual into pursuing drastic changes in order to obtain more desirable circumstances. Next, the individual will continue their progression if their actions fail to achieve the idealized view of justice; thus, their dissatisfaction with others who oppose the individual's idealized view motivates individuals to develop aversive perceptions on those who interfered with their goals.

Due to the fact that the individual struggles to achieve their goals, they find comfort and meaning and elevated status in extremist organizations because the organizations have been successful in meeting their set goals, as well as making others aware of their capabilities through implementing violence and intimidation to impact the behaviors of others. Since the acts of violence can produce desired goals, the violence is perceived as both acceptable and necessary. Through the process of joining terrorist groups, the individual begins to separate themselves and their like-minded group members from everyone else. Due to the illegal nature of terrorist groups' behavior, members live a "double life," even from their families, to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Individuals In the final stage, individuals undergo training in the groups' strategic processes and certain individuals are chosen to carry out tasks (Moghaddam, 2005).

### **Multicultural Process**

In response to changes taking place in the United States of America, the opportunities

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and failures, there are many people that crave what the United States of America has attained or are upset (hatred) with it contaminating traditional gender, lifestyle and religious roles. The United States of America has its independence and a plethora of other advantages, such as materialism, education, overall high socioeconomic status and political and industrial aspects that many places throughout the world can only dream of. Experiencing restrictions or limited opportunities that prevent individuals from achieving a desired lifestyle or goal brings dissatisfaction; because of this dissatisfaction, jealousy can develop and lead individuals into seeking out terrorist organizations that are able to meet their needs, even within the United States (Moghaddam, 2005). Realistically, it is not possible for any of these terrorist organizations to reach the same socioeconomic status and enjoy the affluent lifestyle of Americans. It is also not plausible to suggest the vast array of cultural and social issues that divide America with other nations cannot be bridged. These cultures are vastly different and impossible to integrate.

In attempt to produce suggestions for potential courses of action that could take place in the future to counteract the threat of terrorism, Moghaddam (2005) believed that in order to bring about change, preventative measures must be taken to address individuals before they are seduced by the appealing qualities of terrorist groups. As stated earlier, the sooner individuals are identified and persuaded to avoid terrorist activities, the more susceptible they are to refrain from continuing to progress into the terrorist mindset and activities. In addition, promoting equality in social justice and cultural contexts for women and minorities are suggested to provide an opportunity for individuals whose voices are not heard to step forward; by acknowledging their voices and modernized roles, these groups will not face as many oppressive issues that they have previously and currently struggled with (Moghaddam, 2005).

Another area that Moghaddam (2005) believed would be vital to consider is abolishing

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the “us versus them,” in-group versus out-group mentality. Due to the fact that individuals who train to become terrorists often use absolute comparisons between themselves, governments and civilians, it is easy for them to justify their acts of violence in order to avoid the feelings of remorse after mercilessly committing murder and other tumultuous acts (Moghaddam, 2005). Societies, especially Western, American society must receive education on “*interobjectivity*—the understandings shared within and between cultures (Moghaddam, 2005)—to strengthen a shared worldview on justice, rights, and duties” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 167). By doing so, it can gain an overall understanding of the process that individuals go through in order to become involved in terrorism, recognizing the faults in our own society, as well as figuring out ways to address this major issue (Moghaddam, 2005).

None of these measures are simple goals or methods that can quickly be achieved; they are a lengthy process that will take time, resources and determination. Failure to acknowledge these methods and act upon ways to prevent and target terrorism will only maintain the spiral of violence. While there does not appear to be an immediate solution, something must be done in order to reverse the historical cycle of violence.

### **Psychosocial Process**

It is wrong to assume that psychopathology alone can determine who is most likely to become involved with terrorist activity. Earlier research on terrorism was based on clinical conjecture and rooted in psychoanalytical perspectives. Researchers believed terrorists were driven by unconscious impulses that originated in childhood. Psychopathology was the main focus of terrorist research prior to the 1990s; however, contemporary research attempts to address external factors that contribute to who is most likely to become a member of a terrorist organization. Corte, a researcher on terrorism, described terrorism with six main principles.

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Two principles, “terrorism must not be seen as a syndrome but as a method of social and political influence” and “the attributes of terrorists are shaped by processes of social interaction” can attest to the psychosocial process that modern research focuses on (Corte, 2007, para. 15). Social interactions paired with societal pressures have the potential to contribute to the rise of radicalized westerners.

One psychosocial factor important for this discussion, centers on life experiences of individuals before they become terrorists. The 5 levels that individuals pass through in order to become a terrorist explain the motives involved, but do not delve into the experiences that lead to those motives. According to USF’s Randy Borum (2014), there are three themes that appear most in the pathway to terrorism: injustice, abuse, and humiliation. Those themes heavily influence potential terrorist involvement whether they appear in childhood experiences or in adulthood experiences. Field (1979), another researcher involved in the study of terrorism, worked in Northern Ireland where she found that “the children there have suffered severe disruption in the development of moral judgment- a cognitive function- and are obsessed with death and destruction about which they feel helpless, and against which they feel isolated and hopeless” (p. 12). From this data, Field concluded that people who are badly treated and unjustly punished will seek revenge. Field stated, “in a situation where they are afforded social support by their compatriots reacting against the actions of an unjust government, the resort to terrorists tactics becomes a way of life” (p. 12). Childhood trauma may be a causal factor for an individual to seek out extremist/radicalized groups and take part in terrorist activities, but adult injustice and humiliation is another. In support of this theory, Moscoe (2013) referenced “if terrorists perceive the state as unjust, morally corrupt, or violent, then terrorism [as revenge] may seem legitimate and justified” (para. 11). Borum explained that incarceration can create

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experiences of injustice, abuse, and feelings of humiliation. Post and colleagues found that among middle-eastern terrorists, “the prison experience was intense, especially for the Islamist terrorists. It further consolidated their identity in the group and organizational membership that provided the most valued element of personal identity” (Post, 2003, p. 4). These experiences together should not be used to make a cause-and-effect relationship between traumatic life experiences and terrorist involvement, but should be used to demonstrate possible factors that contribute to vulnerability among individuals and those prone to terrorist involvement.

One may pose the question about how the ease of access to global media influences the minds of people. We may ask if it is probable to suggest the *radical have nots* become influenced by the people who have, does that thinking influence terrorists to want to cause those who are viewed as successful as targets of aggression.

Other important psychosocial factors that researchers should include in their assessments are socioeconomic status, social relationships, and demographics. Shared characteristics like the ones mentioned in the last sentence can provide insight into the process of becoming involved in terrorist activities. These factors are linked to experiences of discrimination, injustice, abuse, and humiliation. To further explain this relationship, we can look at the process of gang membership. Motives for adolescents to join gangs include support they might not have from family, acceptance by others including their peers, and feelings of purpose for a better life and contributing to a cause that will benefit their life. Strain theory supports these external factors by explaining that society sets universal goals that only certain groups can actually obtain. In turn, it creates a division between groups that can and cannot where marginalized groups have a lower capacity to function within cultural norms (Taylor, 2013). This division between the haves and have nots creates distress and frustration among minority groups which can motivate them to join

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gangs as a way to get their needs met and take action against injustice. Taylor's study on gang membership focused on the family, home life, and SES, demographics like age, and includes psychopathology like ODD and CD. The study provides evidence that the confluence of these factors, not one of the factors alone; will give researchers the best assessment of who is likely to become a member of a gang. Similarly, the factors influencing gang membership are also factors that influence membership in a terrorist organization. In conclusion, the shared characteristics of the individuals and the corresponding experiences can explain the elements behind individual's motivation to join terrorist organizations.

Social interactions paired with societal pressures have the potential to contribute to gang member and to the rise of radicalized westerners. The potential reasons individuals in the United States join gangs are similar to the potential reasons that individuals in the United States join terrorist organizations. "We have to look at the root causes . . . there is no question that this happened because there is someone who feels completely excluded. Completely at war with innocents. At war with a society. And our approach has to be, where do those tensions come from" (Moscoe, 2013, para. 9). The factors mentioned in the previous paragraph can be put under the umbrella term of marginalization. "Let us look at current state of knowledge regarding marginalization: According to Martha Crenshaw, concrete grievances among an identifiable subgroup lead to the development of a social movement aimed at redressing grievances real or perceived. These feelings of discrimination or deprivation must be viewed as unjust and underserved" (Moscoe, 2013). Society has placed pressures on groups of people that make them vulnerable to recruitment from extremist groups. That societal pressure can impact anyone no matter what country they were in or in what country they live. The previous quote was in reference to the Boston marathon bombings, the suspects had been in America since 2002. One

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suspect was legally an American citizen and the other was working toward obtaining his citizenship. The members of the Klu Klux Klan were all citizens of the United States and can be described as radicalized westerners. The examples provided are meant to explain that social identity and social interactions as well as societal pressures together should be considered as potential causes for indoctrination into a terrorist organization. Many individuals in the United States oppose the laws, regulations, and government policies and that may be reason enough for them to join terrorist organizations that want the destruction of the United States and other western nations.

Many researchers are in support of this new system of viewing the terrorist process and provide evidence that a confluence of data is necessary in the effort to prevent terrorism. However, terrorism research has its limitations. For instance, most of the research presented in this section and most research available today focuses on adolescents and prevention, but does not examine adults and how best to reverse the terrorist process from a psychosocial perspective. Some researchers like Russell and Miller have found that urban terrorists have largely urban origins and that many terrorists' cadres have predominantly middle-class or even upper-class backgrounds and are well educated, with many having university degrees (Hudson, 1999). Russell and Miller's theory is the complete opposite of theories provided in previous paragraphs and in most contemporary literature. An important limitation to consider is the constant changes in society and that research on this topic is coming from many disciplines. Society today is much more sophisticated than society in the 1960s and even more sophisticated than society in the 1990s. Looking at the big picture, there is much more research on terrorism and the psychosocial process than there was in the 20th century. However, research needs to be continually updated to match the time period we are living in. These limitations demonstrate the



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need for continued research on the psychosocial process of terrorism and the extreme need for an interdisciplinary approach between researchers and practitioners in different fields. Further research and cooperation among professionals can provide insight into terrorist interventions and how to reverse the process of terrorism once individuals are already involved.

### **Considerations for Risk Assessment With Terrorist Violence**

A risk assessment identifies potential hazards; a process of determining the likelihood of a specific threat occurring. The threat in question can come from a multitude of entities; individuals, organizations, or countries and consist of any harmful act towards another. To assess risk in any arena one must have a unique understanding of what they are assessing, a knowledge base that includes various facets of the assessed subject. In regards to assessing terroristic violence, having a firm grasp of the political, cultural, educational, religious, economic and financial factors and how they impact the situation is crucial to an accurate assessment (Roberts & Horgan, 2008).

The process of assessing risk is done by separating and analyzing the differing elements that constitute risk. These elements change depending from which perspective the assessment is being conducted; either from the perspective of the aggressor or the victim. Forensic risk assessments focus on that the aggressor's behavior, state of mind, and opportunity to carry out an attack. The other perspective is from that of the victim or vulnerable entity. These types of assessments focus on their vulnerability to threats being carried out and what steps they can take to fortify themselves. Depending on the type of risk being assessed, a variation of one of the following models is typically used:

1. Vulnerability x probability = risk (when assessing from victim perspective)
2. Propensities x probability = risk (when assessing from the aggressor perspective)

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3. Force decision tool: Ability, Opportunity, and Intent (when assessing target vulnerability).

Risk assessments with terrorist violence adds another layer to the process; level of political alienation, grievances, and extreme religious beliefs directly factor into level and type of threat. Religion historically has been a catalyst for many wars and over the last few decades the same religious extremism has fueled violence; these individuals have become known as radicalized westerners (Silke, 2013). Radicalization occurs when political, religious and social beliefs become so extreme they develop a rigid quality and thus diminishing level of tolerance of those with differing beliefs.

Risk assessments from the aggressor perspective takes into account the cultural, economic, racial and motivational factors. When the focal point of the assessment is of a radicalized westerner the additional factors of group involvement, level of political alienation, grievances, and their underlying ideology. Their group associations, manipulability, prior bad acts, root of their disenfranchisement, and level of distortions fueling their need for revenge, and/or that of the group to which they belong.

Risk assessments from the victim or a vulnerability perspective require a different focus; including an understanding of symbolism a target may hold; the level of economic damage and the amount of casualties or fatalities. Most commonly used models for these types include the “advisory-risk” model which requires a large amount of data (Guikema, 2012). The regional terrorism risk model takes a mathematical approach (Chatterjee & Abkowitz, 2011; Wood, Mileti, Kano, Kelley, Regan, & Bourque, 2012).

While mental health training alone is not sufficient to conduct terroristic violence risk assessments, it provides valuable insight. A deeper understanding of forensic issues, counter-

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intelligence, and vulnerabilities of potential targets are central to a valid and usable assessment.

It takes a variety of perspectives and disciplines working together to develop the necessary tools to better understand and anticipate the harmful actions of terrorist activity.

### **The Challenges of Creating a Terrorist Profile and Risk Assessments**

As previously stated, terrorism is a complex social and behavioral phenomenon. It can even be mentioned it has changed and evolved through the years. For example, in the 1970s terrorists *wanted a lot people watching, not a lot people dead*. Now, it can be stated that terrorists want a lot of people dead, and more people being intimidated by fear (Bongar et al., 2007).

Jonathan Rae, in his 2012 article *Will It Ever Be Possible to Profile a Terrorist?* further explained several factors that may indicate behavioral patterns leading to creating a possible terrorist profile. Some of these factors are: socioeconomic and psychopathological.

Although there have been multiple statements by international leaders (such as Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel and Dalai Lama) referring education as a preventive tool for terrorism, scientific research may not support this argument (Rae, 2012). For example, there have been studies analyzing 18 different terrorist organizations and 350 terrorists, that the majority of these observed terrorists were single males with some college/university education (Rae, 2012). It so important to note that political and historical context may play a role in the profile of terrorist groups. Perhaps, this difference can be appreciated when analyzing urban and rural terrorists. Urban groups (e.g., the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the Red Army Faction, the Red Brigades) are considered highly educated. On the other hand, the rural groups (e.g., Armed Islamic Group, PKK, FARC) may have a poorer academic preparation. It could be important to mention terrorist demographics could change depending on the current social and political context they

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are living at the moment (Rae, 2012).

Regarding the efforts on creating a profile from the psychopathological perspective, research has been limited and unsuccessful. More specifically, according to Post (1985), behavioral scientists have not identified a *unique terrorist mindset* (Rae, 2012). Therefore, working on behavioral and clinical assessments to identify and minimize terrorist behaviors, has been also challenging due to lacking a definitive *terrorist personality* terms in scientific literature (Rae, 2012).

Another factor to consider is studying the complex terrorist organization as a whole. The terrorist group appears to recruit members of diverse personalities to be able to fulfill multiple job positions (Rae, 2012). According to Rae (2012), the personalities of terrorists may be as diverse as the personalities of people in any lawful profession. There do not appear to be any visibly detectable personality traits that would allow authorities to identify a terrorist.

### **Conclusion**

The process of terrorism is complex and there is no standard that all forensic psychology trainees and mental health practitioners can follow in order to prevent involvement and/or work with individuals who have been involved in terrorist activities. Lack of evidence-based findings and inconsistent research from a forensic psychological perspective negatively influences the training of individuals on the subject matter. “There are few social scientists who specialize in this study area. Most contributions in this field are ephemeral. Precise and extensive factual knowledge is still grossly lacking. Much effort must still be invested in the very first stage of scientific inquiry with regard to terrorism -- the collection of data” (Silke, 2006, p. 3).

Researchers and practitioners not only need to continue working toward understanding the process of terrorism, but also need to be working toward eliminating false and inconsistent

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research as well as the misconceptions and bias already in literature. It is clear that terrorism is a multifaceted process and continued research will always be necessary. We cannot end terrorism by assessing it from a forensic psychological perspective, but we can add to the understanding of the process. 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.

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