

The Myth of ‘Pure Evil’: Using Behavioural Science to Help Understand and Counter Terrorism

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ABSTRACT Conventional theories have become insufficient in explaining the complexities of terrorist action. This brief offers an integrative approach that borrows from psychology, inter-group conflict theory and neuroscience to understand the mind of a terrorist and, by extension, inform counterterrorism strategies. It provides evidence against popular beliefs about terrorists as principally being religious extremists who lack a moral compass and belong to broken families. The brief highlights a neural basis of some characteristics of terrorist action to help pave the way for the creation of reliable, scientific predictors of extremist action.

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INTRODUCTION

In his landmark book, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty*, psychologist Roy Baumeister debunked the myth that terrorists are sadists who seek pleasure in other people's pain.¹ This "myth of pure evil" provides an appropriate starting point to analysing the psychology of those who engage in terrorist acts. Any discourse attempting to understand the motives and rationale for terrorist activity is fraught with methodological hurdles that begin with a lack of a common definition of what 'terrorism' is. This brief considers terrorist networks as fulfilling three key criteria:

- Groups that use violence especially against civilians as a means to initiate policy change.
- Groups that aim to instill fear in the minds of people to combat an asymmetry in military capabilities vis-à-vis the nation-state they are rebelling against.
- In order to instill fear, terrorists engage in morally repugnant acts of violence.

As many parts of the world confront the threat of terrorism, it is necessary to conduct a deeper examination of its etiologies, complemented by the use of psychological and neuroscientific tools to understand and counter such threats. Traditional counterterrorism strategies primarily anchored on military campaigns have met with little success over the years. Indeed, analysts have observed that one of the factors that led to the 9/11 attacks was the then growing US military presence in Saudi Arabia.² Furthermore, labelling individuals as "terrorists" and relegating them to the fringes

of society by simplistically dismissing them as "maladjusted" individuals with intrinsic flaws has failed to get to the root of terrorism.

It is important to seek an understanding of the psychological processes behind terrorism and developing reliable psychological predictors of violent behaviour. To begin with, radicalisation and the propensity for taking up arms have both push and pull factors at play. This brief, however, focuses on the "push" factors, and how they have failed to account for the psychological complexities underlying terrorism. Within such discourse, the analysis must go beyond deeming terrorists as eccentric extremists seeking violence and lacking basic humanity.

This brief draws on interdisciplinary social sciences to examine the mind behind terrorism, integrating psychology, inter-group conflict theory, and neuroscience. The analysis is pegged to the inadequacies of conventional models in explaining current trends in global terrorism, more specifically, the widely held belief that most violent extremists were raised in broken homes or victims of childhood abuse. These notions are unable to explain trends in recruitment to the Islamic State (IS), for instance, where the terrorist propaganda is succeeding in luring individuals who are educated and belonging to affluent communities.³ Psychiatrist Mark Sageman, in his research found only one out of 171 terrorist profiles of the "*Global Salafi Mujaheddin*" had documented evidence of childhood trauma.⁴

This brief proposes an alternative for modelling terrorist behaviour by examining the psychological underpinnings of terrorism

and the role of relative deprivation, cultural alienation and theories of rational choice in explaining its etiology. This exercise will help in developing a more holistic account of the mind of a terrorist. A key component is looking at studies that examine neural responses to stimuli, correlated with characteristics of terrorism.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF TERRORIST GROUP FORMATION

Patterns in IS recruitment show the importance of a 'need to belong' as a shared motivation amongst recruits. In Western democracies, there has been a growing incidence of middle-class children of immigrants feeling disenchanting in their own country and getting convinced to join the ISIS. Moreover, the importance of the need to feel a sense of belonging as a driver to joining a terrorist group can be partially explained by the inverse relationship between attendance at mosques and IS enrollment.⁵ This finding—that mosque attendance is not a common practice for the majority of ISIS recruits—contradicts the notion that terrorists are commonly religious extremists.

Rukhmini Callimachi's interviews with recruits and recruiters for the ISIS has made a profound contribution to the current understanding of the drivers of radicalisation and the importance of not making any reductive claims about the same. In her interview with Canadian ISIS recruit Abu Husefa, she found that he did not feel "truly Canadian" because of his immigrant status and frequent vacations to Pakistan.⁶ This identity conflict that Abu Husefa articulated is an important dilemma that someone on the cusp

of radicalisation may face. The lack of a crystallised identity binding them to a nation or value system sets the stage for potential recruits to be prone to enchantment by Jihadist propaganda. In her interviews, Callimachi also found that in response to the United States and its war in Iraq, Abu Husefa's identity conflict widened and he started conceptualising the war on terror as a war on Islam. More specifically, he reported seeing images of Guantanamo as being especially integral to his notion that the United States is waging a war on Islam.⁷ This, coupled with exposure to the teachings of Syed Kutub from the Muslim Brotherhood played a key role in his being radicalised.⁸

Therefore, through the case of Abu Husefa, it is clear that the identity conflict faced by immigrants can widen upon exposure to persecution of one's own people. This is also known as the "Us vs Them" effect wherein people tend to form strong in-group identities in response to persecution. Such strong in-group identities also become a means to legitimise violence against the out-group and in turn, form the basis of most inter-group conflicts. In her interviews with ISIS recruits, Callimachi reported many of them as saying that the essence of a lot of ISIS persuasion to join the cause was hinged on the idea of a "universal" Muslim brotherhood. The ISIS recruitment establishment frequently invoked Prophet Mohammed's core preachings that if one part of the body is in pain, the rest of the body must also feel the pain. Thus, applying this metaphor to their circumstances, Jihadist preachers called on the Muslim community to feel the pain of their brothers in Syria and fight for their rights.⁹

Such rhetoric is strongly underscored by a sense of “Us vs Them”, thereby reinstating the importance of social categorisation in forging radicalisation. This strict sense of “Us vs Them” is codified in the phrase, “Al Wallah - Ul Barah” which translates to loyalty for the faith and its true followers, and rejection for everyone and everything deviating from it.¹⁰ Being a core tenet of the Jihadist propaganda, recruiters like Jesse Morgan believe that once the recruits get indoctrinated into this strict “Us vs Them” notion, they can be made to do anything the terror establishment wishes.

There is also neuroscientific evidence to validate some of Rukhmini Callimachi’s insightful field observations about the importance of “Us vs Them” in fuelling radicalisation. Jay Van Bavel et al. have demonstrated the malleability of in-group–out-group distinctions and how such biases can be traced in the brain. In this study, the researchers showed Caucasian participants pictures of African American people and recorded the activity in the amygdala¹¹ section of the brain upon seeing the image.^{12,13} Subsequently, researchers randomly divided the participants into two groups (not based on race) and presented both groups with tasks that pitted them against each other. Interestingly, the amygdala got activated only in response to the out-group which was the group the participants were told they were not a part of. This study thus demonstrated the association between the emotion of fear and the notion of the ‘out-group’.

This study may help explain a terrorist’s motives as well. The need to belong in a social setting, coupled with indoctrination of a strict notion of “Us vs Them”, sets the stage for fresh

recruits to engage in tasks they might have never voluntarily agreed to in the absence of these social pressures.¹⁴ Thus, it seems that human beings are sensitive to group affiliation and in the process of affiliating with a group, a notion of the “Other” is created. Driven by the innate human desire of self-preservation, feelings of fear and distrust often colour notions of the out-group. However, one may argue that terror groups are not any ordinary social group that one may join to pacify their need to belong. In the context of this argument, the importance of ideology as a grounding force for the organisation comes into play.

Terror groups are often formed as a response to perceived injustice. This notion of victimhood is foundational to the ideologies of such organisations. Moreover, a study on competitive victimhood, “Suffering begets suffering: The psychology of competitive victimhood”,¹⁵ illustrates the tendency for minority groups to compete over which group is suffering more.¹⁶ This competition over primacy in victimhood serves the function of gaining third-party sympathy and to initiate drastic measures within the in-group as a likely consequence of this victim status.¹⁷ Terrorist outfits have a profound and persuasive stance regarding their suffering, nurturing those beliefs to justify violence. Given this strong ideological support for violence, a cohesive in-group and clearly identified enemy, the terror outfits are able to persuade people from a diverse range of backgrounds to join their cause. Prolific ISIS recruiter Jesse Morton echoed these sentiments when he told Rukhmini Callimachi, “The key is to frame their personal grievance in a way that makes them think that they can contribute to a broader cause.”¹⁸

THE 'RATIONAL CHOICE' MODEL: WHY IT DOESN'T WORK

One of the more common explanations for terrorism as a strategic decision is based on the rational choice model. This theory of economic reasoning was first applied in the understanding of criminal behaviour by Cornish and Clarke in 1997.¹⁹ The rational choice model postulates that terrorists are rational actors seeking to maximise their utility. This model understands the use of violence on civilians as the maximum utility deriving proposition in meeting their end goals.²⁰ In decoding the seeming contradiction between suicide terrorism and a rational choice thought process, Robert Pape showed that most suicide bombers rarely show signs of mental disorders or religious fanaticism. This counterintuitive proposition posited by Pape was reinforced in his study of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, who carried out 75 of the 186 suicide attacks across the country from 1980 to 2001.²¹ The Tamil Tigers were not “religious fanatics”; they had Marxist/Leninist elements in their ideology.²² Pape’s research thus showed that the choice to engage in suicide terrorism is a strategic goal to challenge liberal democracies into making territorial concessions.²³

In the case of the Tamil Tigers, for instance, Robert Pape demonstrated that the use of suicide bombings was not for harming another religious group. Conversely, it was a strategic goal to build the concept of martyrdom “around a secular idea of individuals essentially altruistically sacrificing for the good of the local community.”²⁴

This strategic logic underscoring suicide terrorism contributes to the persuasiveness of

the rational choice framework in understanding terrorist action. The rational choice model has also found empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness in explaining propensity towards violence. For instance, in a study examining sibling fights, researchers showed that the probability of the younger sibling (conventionally the less powerful actor) picking up a fight increased in the presence of their parents, as the chances of self-preservation in such cases are higher.²⁵ In spite of the work by the likes of Robert Pape that advocate for the use of the rational choice framework in understanding terrorism, the rational choice model is unable to explain certain incongruencies of terrorist action as articulated by Roy Baumeister: “Wars harm both sides, most crimes yield little financial gain, terrorism and assassination almost never bring about the desired political changes, most rapes fail to bring sexual pleasure, torture rarely elicits accurate or useful information.”²⁶

This excerpt from the paper, “*Relation of Threatened Egotism and Violent Aggression*”, emphasises that terrorism is often a choice that defies conventional notions of rationality.²⁷ Thus, the rational choice model fails to explain the nuances of terrorism. This perspective is echoed in research conducted in 2013 by anthropologists Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran who surveyed Israeli and Palestinian civilians in the context of the long-standing conflict between the two countries. The semi-structured interviews conducted by the researchers presented participants of both groups with a series of hypothetical peace deals that included the provision of material incentives in exchange for disputed land. The responses of the participants saw the rejection of what the rational choice model would

predict as the likely preference. Many participants saw the land as sacred and linked with their communal identity, and the mere thought of exchanging land with material gains enraged them and provoked thoughts of violence.²⁸ Thus, elements of social identity that is often shaped by religious affinity, race, and ethnicity and so on could motivate violence that may be seemingly irrational. Neural mapping of the responses generated in the aforementioned study also showed interesting findings. An activation in the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex and left temporoparietal junction was found in participants that resisted the idea of exchanging their sacred land with material gains,²⁹ while absent in those participants that encoded land as being purely utilitarian.³⁰ This shows that the brain has specific neural responses to tendencies of ascribing sacred value to an institution; tendencies which are a common characteristic of terrorist rhetoric.

NEURAL CORRELATES OF TERRORISM

There is a dearth in prior research integrating neuroscience into discussions around terrorist psychology. Of the few studies that exist, one of the most important ones is that of Dr Kent Keihl which sought to find linkages between psychological dispositions and specific areas of brain activity during moral evaluations. Published in 2014, his research worked towards identifying the cognitive and neural processes underlying propensity towards violence.³¹

Psychologists have found two essential profiles of individuals who have joined terrorist outfits. Some fit the conventional notions of a “terrorist”, which is often synonymous with

the profile of psychopathy. Traits associated with this category of recruits include oratory charm, social deviance, and callousness, lack of empathy, sensation seeking and violent aggressiveness.³² Many have attributed these characteristics to terrorists like Hafiz Sayed and Hashim Muhammed Zahran.³³ While the existence of psychopathic traits in certain terrorist profiles does not make the two categories synonymous, certain elements of the psychopathy profile help understand aspects of terrorist action. For instance, the case of Zarqawi’s ruptured relations with the Al-Qaeda due to planned attacks on the Shia population in Iraq demonstrates some elements of a psychopathic profile that Zarqawi embodied. Largely aligned with the ethos of the Bin Laden regime, Zarqawi was ready to manipulate his allies to push his myopic interests in Iraq. This perception of Zarqawi being a “loose cannon” that cannot be controlled and who lacks remorse for attacks even on fellow Muslims demonstrates some convergence between psychopathy and the making of a certain kind of terrorist.

At the same time, some terrorist profiles are also often wealthy, well-educated, soft-spoken and seemingly well-adjusted members of society. Thus, there is no clear cause-effect relationship when it comes to understanding terrorism; therefore, it is important to account for a holistic and non-reductionist view of the “push” factors of radicalisation. Neuroscience can help identify the thread that is common to both these personality types.

Dr Keihl integrated neuroscience in the study of violent psychopaths in Canadian prisons.³⁴ His research has important implications for understanding terrorist

psychology. Through numerous brain scans of psychopaths—all of whom were prisoners in the Western New Mexico correctional facility—he found that those who fit the definition of “psychopathy” had a compromised limbic system.³⁵ Thus, lack of empathy in a terrorist who fits the profile of a psychopath shows in the irregular functioning of the limbic system. More specifically, the activation in the parts of the brain, called the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and anterior temporal cortex, in response to moral evaluations was lower among psychopathic profiles than in others. In cases of psychopaths, both these mechanisms for moral processing and regulation of fear responses are impaired, explaining the lack of hesitation in psychopaths to commit acts which may be beyond the imagination of those considered as ‘normal’.

Research has also shown that apart from a compromised limbic system, an increased activation in the thalamus and decreased ventromedial prefrontal cortex activation is associated with enjoyment of aggression, coupled with a diminished capacity for controlling aggressive behaviour.³⁶ These traits have often been used to describe individual terrorists fitting the psychopath profile. For instance, the grotesque nature of some of the beheadings carried out by members of IS makes a persuasive case that the individuals carrying out the deed derive satisfaction from it.

It is important, however, to refrain from making binary conclusions. Neuroscientific evidence implicating certain brain structures in the enjoyment of aggression does not mean *all* terrorists enjoy violence. Instead, it merely

provides another facet of the profile of a violent offender which, in combination with other characteristics, help create a useful profile of terrorists. There is also an interesting association between reward mechanisms and acts of violence in certain research subjects. Such association is important and may help understand the appeal of terrorism for those who may not be displaying psychopathic tendencies. The dopaminergic receptors D1 and D2 within the nucleus accumbens which signify pleasure in response to acts such as eating desserts, having sex and playing video games,³⁷ are significantly activated in response to bouts of aggression. This indicates that the brain associates these acts of aggression with reward and pleasure mechanisms.

Other recent studies have also examined individuals who confess to supporting a terrorist cause. In one such study,³⁸ researchers examined the neural responses of 30 Pakistan-born Spanish nationals who have sworn allegiance to the Taliban and have vowed to fight against the West in the name of Jihad. The study found high activation in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex in response to questions regarding their willingness to die for the cause of Jihad for both these activities.

Willingness to die for a cause has previously been attributed to the presence of strong sacred values that guide such dispositions. A neuroimaging study validated the importance of the aforementioned association by showing that more participants were willing to die for important sacred values (for example, forbidding cartoons depicting the Prophet or banning gay marriages) rather than important but non-sacred values (for example: women not wearing *nikaab*).³⁹ Additionally, sacred

values activated the left inferior frontal gyrus, the part of the brain which gets activated in response to the processing of “sacred values” and especially a willingness to die for them.⁴⁰ Thus, neuroscientific evidence seems to support the importance of sacred values as an underlying factor that makes people join terrorist groups. Furthermore, research has suggested that levels of social exclusion could mediate the relationship between propensity towards violence and adherence to sacred values legitimising such violence.⁴¹

HOW NEUROSCIENCE CAN SHAPE COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIES

In the context of neuroscientific evidence providing inputs to devise counterterrorism strategies, what is especially relevant is the impairment of moral processing evident in a compromised limbic system and low amygdaloid volume in many people displaying psychopathic tendencies. This suggests that those able to commit violence on unsuspecting civilians may have a distorted moral compass, one that deviates from moral codes that are regarded as sacrosanct. According to Psychologist Alan Fiske’s work, the “belief in a universal moral code that emphasises doing good and avoiding pain” may merely reflect “democratic Western ideals” that has little to no universality.⁴² In other words, the moral compass of terrorists encodes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ differently than what may be universally accepted.

A recent study validating Fiske’s hypothesis found that incarcerated offenders understood good and bad actions purely based on *outcome* and not *intention*. This contradicted what the study observed in

participants who had never been imprisoned.⁴³ A different or altered moral compass does not mean an absence of morality. It only signals a different notion of morality. According to Fiske, the belief that terrorists are amoral is a myth of folk psychology. In fact, the ability to carry out violent acts by putting one’s own life at risk must be underscored by a strong sense of right and wrong.

One implication of this science is that the use of torture as a means to elicit information from suspected terrorists may not be a viable approach. For torture to work, it is important that the victim makes an association between the moral repugnance of the act committed and the pain meted out as a punishment for committing this act. Given the evidence suggesting a deviant moral compass, and in some cases the possession of psychopathic traits, torture may not be the right way forward. Indeed, the use of torture has been widely criticised in many sections of the international community and there are various efforts to curb its use. For one, the United Nations Convention against Torture and (UNCAT) passed in 1987 urges nation states to find alternatives. However, instances of torture being used in settings like the Guantanamo Bay or the former Abu Ghraib prisons have raised questions over the extent to which the use of torture has been minimised.

A few years ago, US President Donald Trump advocated the use of torture for reasons similar to the rationale behind the “torture memos” published in 2003. In one of his first public interviews after winning the presidency, Trump remarked that the US must “fight fire with fire” and that waterboarding as

an interrogation technique is very effective. However, as retired air colonel Steve Kleinman has pointed out, evidence of torture's efficacy is anecdotal at best. Nonetheless, this belief of fighting violence with violence is a comforting parallel to draw but does not seem to find support amongst interrogation experts like Keinman who served as an adviser to the FBI on interrogating terror suspects, nor from the scientific community at large.⁴⁴ Thus, there is a gap between scientific research and the insights informing the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States government's stance on the use of torture. This gap only reiterates the importance of understanding how the mind of the terrorist works, while forming counterterrorism strategies.

The United States is not the only country that still supports torture's efficacy despite contrary evidence. India's use of torture has been extensively documented and the findings cause massive concern. Human Rights Watch, in their comprehensive study on the use of torture in India interviewed 35 suspects and their families who were allegedly involved in the 2008 bombings in Gujarat.⁴⁵ Documented cases of abuse are a regular feature of the report, with particularly gruesome torture attributed to the crime branch, Ahmedabad police. One detainee reported, "They always used dark masks. I had to stand with my hands extended horizontally and if they came down, the police would beat me. Whenever they interrogated me and they felt that the answer was improper, they beat me with the wooden stick or the leather belt or whatever they liked.... I was told by the police department, 'If you do not cooperate, we will take custody of all of your family.'"⁴⁶ The aforementioned

remarks from one of the detainees shows how torture is often imposed with the idea of a "proper" answer in mind that when not reaffirmed, leads to more pain for the victim thereby increasing the probability of a false confession.

The blatant use of torture to elicit the state's version of the truth rather than what the alleged terrorist knows was captured in the remarks of another detainee who reported, "They used to make us memorise a story of the police version of the case. We were not allowed to sleep until we could recite the police version."⁴⁷ Thus, the "police version" is what is expected and until it is matched by the detainee, torture is meted out.

In the neuroscientific community, the evidence against the use of torture as a means to serve its own ends is extensive. A deeper understanding of the brain's response to extreme pain shows us that regions associated with behaviour control and intention become less active in response to torture.⁴⁸ Additionally, research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) victims and combat soldiers have shown that stressors associated with torture practices greatly deplete memory and cognitive function. Torture is often rationalised as a good counterterrorism strategy, with the belief that extreme pain will lead to the divulging of the truth. However, this belief is mere "folk psychology" and scientific evidence in this regard paints a contradictory picture.⁴⁹

As documented by neuroscientist Shane O'Mara, "the brain is a limited storage entity containing memories that are fragile and subject to distortions due to pain and extreme

suffering". Torture is associated with the impairment in the encoding and retrieval of long-term memory which are integral brain functions in facilitating total recall. Thus, these impairments of the brain under torture renders the 'torture yields truth' hypothesis to be false.⁵⁰ It may lead to what the perpetrator wants to hear, but the need for self-preservation could often lead victims of torture to think short-term and agree to any of the charges levelled against them so as to stop the pain.

A case in point is that of Arar, a 34-year-old law student at McGill University who was detained at an airport by US authorities since his name featured in the "US watch list of suspected terrorists" in the aftermath of 9/11. His experience of the interrogation techniques illustrated the futility of torture and its ability in eliciting anything but the truth. He reported being repeatedly whipped with electric cables and recounted that, "Not even animals could withstand it."⁵¹ He tried to assert his innocence but the extent of pain meted out to him made him confess to things he never did. "You just give up," he said. "You become like an animal."⁵²

Researchers have suggested the replacement of torture as a means of interrogation with the Scharff technique.⁵³ This form of interrogation refers to a technique of information gathering that gives the person being interrogated an illusion that the interrogator is already aware about what information is to be extracted. Additionally, the interrogator is advised to use indirect questioning tactics that do not let the person being interrogated know what the interrogator has up their sleeve. This has shown to increase

feelings of anxiety in the person being questioned by making them feel "boxed in", thereby facilitating full disclosure.⁵⁴ Moreover, recent research has shown that interrogation based on rapport building and mutual respect for detainees was four times more likely to lead to confessions and full disclosure. The lesson is that there is a need to inform counterterrorism strategies with insights from the behavioural sciences, as well as fundamental humanitarian principles.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Neuroscience, and more broadly, behavioural science, may yet prove to be the missing component in how contemporary societies seek to analyse the "terrorist" and to find ways of dealing with terrorist activity. Integrating a neural understanding of violent extremism may hold some crucial answers to questions that have long evaded a clear consensus.⁵⁵ Adding to the potential are the rapid technological innovations that only serve to enhance the utility of neuroscience in shaping measures against terrorism. For example, advanced MRI scans can provide increasingly accurate representations of the brain's microstructures.

This brief has examined the potential of integrating behavioural science into both the understanding of terrorism, and the development of ways to counter it. With regards to the first, the key is non-reductive labelling. When it comes to explaining terrorism, there is tendency for many to attribute a specific tangible cause as singularly driving people towards joining a terrorist group or engaging in terrorist activity. Such analysis

is both dangerous and counterproductive. One way to avoid reductive analysis is to take terrorist profiling seriously. According to the American Psychological Association, there has been a paradigm shift in how behavioural scientists view terrorism.⁵⁶ From a far more individualistic view that focused on mental disorders, researchers are now realising the importance of group dynamics in leading to terrorism. Research on the effects of cultural alienation, minority victimisation among other factors has increased in importance. Thus, there is a need to further probe the effects of such group-level processes on facilitating terrorism.

When it comes to the use of behavioural science in understanding terrorist action, a core recommendation is to not judge terrorist action with a universal moral code. Therefore, the idea that people perceive good and bad the same way across cultures and life experiences is a faulty assumption that often guides certain misperceptions about all terrorists being intrinsically bad. Psychologist John Horgan reaffirmed this notion in his study that interviewed 60 people formerly associated with terrorist causes. Horgan's research highlighted the importance of reasons such as these individuals feeling disenfranchised, or seeing themselves as victims of social injustice and seekers of rewards through martyrdom and other higher-order goals.⁵⁷ Thus, even the factors "pushing" these people to join terrorist outfits are not a product of character but of circumstance.


This brief has also discussed the potential of behavioural science in shaping counterterrorism frameworks. With extremism being increasingly associated with

the use of terror attacks, strategies to combat the two have often been viewed interchangeably. Thus, the United Kingdom's Prevent program that was set up in response to terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalist groups is a case of counter-extremism and counterterrorism being seen in the same vein. Prevent was criticised for its excessive focus on ideology as being a driver of radicalisation.⁵⁸ Lessons learnt from the failure of the Prevent program is that counterterrorism strategies must look beyond merely seeing ideology (commonly focusing on Islamic fundamentalism) as driving radicalisation. Thus, in countering terrorism, strategies should examine the socio-economic realities of an area considered to be a hotbed of terrorism. Additionally, realising the important functions that terrorist groups provide their recruits—namely, giving them an identity, providing protection and a sense of community—is key in shaping de-radicalisation strategies. From the outset, assuming recruits to be brainwashed and coerced into taking up arms is a highly simplistic understanding of the deep drivers of radicalisation. John Horgan's interviews with former terrorists accurately describes the plight of vulnerable young men enchanted by the romanticised notion of oppression heard in rallies and speeches which encouraged them to join the group.⁵⁹ Horgan's interviews showed that deradicalisation must focus on providing avenues to some of the same functions that terror groups provide which include a sense of community, protection and identity. For instance, programs in Sweden have attempted to fulfill some of these goals by having "preventative conversations" with at-risk youth that included showing them the negative

consequences of violence and educating them about the biased notions of history guiding their desire for violence.

Lastly, it is especially relevant for India to nurture data sharing between research and government entities. The US, for instance, has realised the importance for research on countering extremism and this is reflected in the allocation of funds. According to an official statement of the Department of Homeland Security, the Congress approved a US\$10-million grant for a Countering Violent Extremism program. Moreover, the United States Navy commissioned the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation to conduct an extensive study on the prospects of integrating behavioural science into counterterrorism. This financial backing and transparency in flow of information between

research entities and governmental institutions as embodied by US policymakers is something India must seek to replicate.⁶⁰

The future is promising for research and advances in this field but certain policy decisions must be taken so as to not squander the potential of such cross-disciplinary research. Already, the development of counterterrorism strategies is being informed by the knowledge that torture is not an appropriate tool for treating terror suspects, as well as the learning that terrorism does not have a unified cause attracting the “mentally deranged”. The hope is that the curiosity to question outweighs the comfort taken in convenient reductive analysis about good and evil. When this myth of “pure evil” is demystified, societies can begin finding more sustainable ways of countering terror. 

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ENDNOTES

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