

Psychological and Chemically Neurological Reasons Behind Terrorism

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Abstract

Acts of terrorism are not acts of spontaneity, but planned events; when engaging the mind during the planning of such events different chemical and neurological reactions happen in order to create such a mindset of harm and destruction. Typically, within the lesion of the prefrontal cortex, specifically in the striatum, decisions are made based on the value of what one holds for the outcome of the end choice. Therefore, if the brain neurologically desires to make a decision to value a choice of violence, then there is most likely a chemical imbalance. Furthermore, going against the will of morality, favoring the mob mentality, and peer pressure can create of a sense of neurological imbalance no matter how healthy the brain is.

The psychology behind terrorism can differ from culture to culture – whether it is individuals from Europe joining the alleged fight for freedom, or children growing up in the environment; surrounded by a never ending war – there are many reasons as to why people become terrorists. By definition, terrorism is endowing terror and life threatening acts on a larger, international scale – therefore, the chemical reactions within the brain are different when making decisions and ignoring moral codes, compared to when morally conscious decisions are being made. The act of terrorism performed by people is caused by many different factors psychologically; the chemical reaction of decision making, the motive behind the decision making, and the culture in which one has grown up. Terrorism can be effectively lessened in many ways; however, there is only one way in which it can be completely annihilated.

When growing up surrounded by a social norm, the difficulty of finding oneself involved in what is happening around them would be minimalistic. In America, it is normal to drive to destinations, rather than walk to a destination, to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner at many different restaurants multiple days a week, and have a dog or a cat as a pet – Americans do not think twice about these daily activities. However, in a country such as England it is not normal to drive to a destination where public transportation is provided, or to drive somewhere a walkable distance away, or to eat out more than once a month. Following the laws given by a state that is mostly respected by the residents of the countries of England and America is very normal and expected daily; however, in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan, it is not socially normal to have a stable politician leading the country with moral and collectively social laws intact. Tori DeAngelis, author of, *Understanding Terrorism*, states that there are many reasons as to why people might commit acts of terrorism; and according to Dr. John Horgan – they may “Identify with perceived victims of the social injustice they are fighting, feel the need to take action rather than just talking about the problem, believe that engaging in violence against the state is not immoral, have friends or family sympathetic to the cause, [and] believe that joining a movement offers social and psychological rewards such as adventure, camaraderie and a heightened sense of identity” (DeAngelis). If a child has grown up in Afghanistan and Iraq they may not know a life without terrorism and violence; this would be their daily norm, by which they may aspire to be like their fathers who perform acts of terrorism and murder others for their difference in moral views, religious and, or, political differences. To the child this is considered a socially, psychologically normal life.

The psychology of decision making is complicated, situational, but relatively consistent. Terrorists who make decisions find themselves subconsciously experiencing the same chemical reactions as any normally functioning member of society. Ray Williams, the author of, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, states, “Mental illness appears not to be a critical factor in explaining terrorism behavior. For example, most terrorists are not “psychopaths.” There is no “terrorist personality,” nor is there any accurate profile – psychology or otherwise – of the terrorist” (Williams). There is no way, except the possibility of guilt, to tell a terrorist apart from a functioning member of society; therefore, what are the different ways in which functioning members of society become terrorists: social influence and fighting for a cause greater than themselves. The decision to become an empowering part of the larger cause is a journey which begins in the striatum, located in the prefrontal cortex of the brain – where decisions are made based off of a chemical reaction of value. Normally one of the great moral codes, putting others above oneself, is highly valued code followed by many – therefore, when being offered to have a life of defending something greater than oneself, it is difficult to say no biologically as the moral code is highly valued chemically within the brain. After being convinced a great cause to help the earth needs ‘you,’ one will feel valued and worthy of fighting the cause.

Although not often, making heinous decisions can be caused by a chemical imbalance; which are decisions that can be made by anyone as long as the correct chemical and neurological reaction occurs. The article posted on NPR, *The Psychology of Radicalization*, states, “Mental illness and religious fanaticism [are] two other explanations often used to explain why terrorists sacrifice their families, their futures, and their own lives” (*The Psychology of Radicalization*). Although a large majority of terrorists are not chemically or neurologically imbalanced, in fact, they are as chemically balanced as most Americans – there are a few largely, neurologically imbalanced terrorists who may lead groups of other terrorists. Maia Szalavitz, author of *Making Choices: How Your Brain Decides*, states: “In cognitively normal people, the brain’s valuation network computes which decks are “good” and “bad” before people are consciously aware of why: they find they “like” the good ones better, even though they haven’t consciously done the math to determine that they produce more wins. In people with damage to their valuation networks, however, such intuition fails” (Szalavitz). With a damaged neurological system, there is no way for mentally injured people to understand what they are doing is ‘bad.’

NPR also followed a study conducted by anthropologist, White House and United Nations Advisor, Scott Astran - "Astran says these young people "self-radicalized." They were searching for meaning in their lives and found it through friends who shared their idealism. ISIS recruiters promised them glory, adventure, and purpose – things that appeal to many young people" (The Psychology of Radicalization). Astran further noted that people who become self-radicalized and do not grow up in such environments aren't usually moved to become bombers through the convincing words of religion, but through knowing they will have meaning in their life – to fight for a cause greater than themselves.

There are a few different types of decision-making, chemical reactions. Ray Williams, the author of, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, states, "Histories of childhood abuse and trauma and themes of perceived injustice and humiliation often are prominent in terrorist biographies, but do not fully explain terrorism" (Williams). Although there may not be one, sole explanation of terrorism, abuse and trauma are not rare factors to almost every nation in the world. There are many people who experience abuse and trauma in their youth and are much easier to recruit by the Islamic state than those who have not experienced trauma or abuse. Furthermore, the style in which punishment is given in Islamic cultures may be considered abuse by the American culture. Therefore, there are many young, Middle Eastern children more malleable to becoming terrorists than anywhere else in the world due to this common, underlying biographical similarity. Daeyeol Lee, one of the authors of, *The Neuroscience of Decision Making*, shows an image in his article of two different brain scans of the moment a decision was being made. There are different highlighted areas of the striatum on the two images, but the left side had one more lit up spots; Lee states, "Research is revealing how neurons code the value of different options when people make decisions. These MRIs show brain areas whose activities increased according to how much human subjects valued the option they chose between two different alternatives researchers presented to them" (Lee, D., PhD, Salzman, D., PhD, & Wang, X., PhD.). When a decision is being made to join a group that gives oneself value and fame after a difficult childhood, it becomes the more appealing choice; the brain cannot biologically refuse.

There are many different, small ways by which to change the psychology and culture of terrorism. One way to begin the change of terrorism is through a powerful change of political leadership within the different extremist groups in order to change the way people think. Although not possible on most state levels, changed leadership on a smaller level can create a more effective change than

influencing the overall politics of a nation. The terrorists' influence might unnecessarily endanger their lives and mob mentality could take over. Religious fanaticism is the best explanation for ISIS fighters; they do not consider themselves terrorists, but freedom fighters. By displaying large acts of violence they attain attention from the entire world. They have overthrown their political leaders and plan to establish the Islamic religion all over the world – in order to do this all infidels must be annihilated.

Stopping the culture of terrorism can be accomplished through the use of the media and science. Brad J. Bushman, author of *Aggression and Violence*, states, “aggression is a behavior—you can see it. Aggression is not an internal response, such as having angry feelings or aggressive thoughts (although such internal responses can increase the likelihood of actual aggression). Second, aggression is intentional rather than accidental” (Bushman). Therefore, the aggression of terrorism can be stopped by changing behavior because of intentionality – and the best way to change behavior is by changing the way in which one thinks. There are many ways by which a mass way of thinking can be changed; however, most of the applicable ways are generally not respected due to money and fame; for example, the media is the most effective way of spreading messages but will most likely only spread news that will affect their viewing numbers or how much money they will make if the effect is negative – running a news station is expensive. Media can influence the way terrorists think by not showing them the fear they have instilled in America, but by showing them they have broken moral codes – and potentially using reverse psychology to show them that what they are doing is wrong according to their own moral codes, rather than America's moral codes. Reverse psychology can be used in a multitude of ways – for example, showing Islamic, religious terrorists ways in which they have used the Koran incorrectly.

Stopping terrorism through necessary war means that “psychological tools are secondary to military tools: "It's very important if you want to fight effectively against militant Islam, you have to first defeat it physically, despite what people say about hearts and minds," Merari says. "If you want to fight ISIS first of all defeat ISIS in the territory it has occupied successfully." Unfortunately, the psychological circumstances cannot be undone by simply reversing the tempting words of performing acts of terrorism for glory and a greater cause, but through total military annihilation. Due to the passion of the war criminals and terrorists in the Middle East who encourage each other it is near impossible to change the way every single terrorist thinks; therefore, the only solution by which to completely eradicate the terrorists is through necessary war. Ordained by Christianity's God in

order to receive back Israel, a Christian faith based America has become part of a war to defeat terrorism.

The striatum is the key area of the brain involving decision making – when considering how terrorists make such decisions to become violent on a mass scale, there is a trigger within their brain which holds the value of their cause higher than the value of a moral code. Furthermore, past experiences such as abuse, neglect, and feeling as a lost cause can trigger a weakness in the neurological decision making process, but not every terrorist has had such experiences. Each decision to become violent for a cause greater than themselves is purely situational – as with the past of every individual. In order to fight this war; however, psychological warfare is not enough – although effective, it will not end the war at hand; the decisions have already been made and are irreversible.

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