

## TERRORIST MINDSETS: destructive effects of victimisation and humiliation

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*Terrorist mindset is defined as a preparedness to hurt or kill innocent people for a »higher cause« (ideological, political or religious). It involves degrees of dehumanisation of other human beings and uses destructive and indiscriminate violence. Terrorist mindset may develop in individuals and groups in different contexts; in various terrorist groups (fundamentalist, political, vigilant etc), as state organised violence or in the context of organised military or paramilitary activity. Humiliation and traumatising of groups or nations are seen as producing pre-conditions for the development of terrorist mindsets.*

### Introduction

In 1878, General Fyodor F. Trepov, head of the St. Petersburg police, was killed in the first terrorist act of significance in Tsarist Russia. Narodnaya Volya (People's Will), the group behind the assassination, saw terrorist acts as a »sad necessity« in their fight against Tsarist repression and capitalism. This group and the later Social Revolutionary Party, established in 1902, targeted the power elite in society and spared »innocents« by, for example, cancelling a planned attack when the targeted person was accompanied by his wife and children (Volkan 2001).

In 1979, the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran, and the idea of exporting the revolution emerged, which implied support of terrorist groups abroad. The Red Army entered Afghanistan and Islamic fighters from all over the Islamic world joined the *Jihad*. Osama bin Laden emerged as a leader, and the fight against the Communists was supported by the USA. Ten years later, in 1989, when the Red Army withdrew, many abandoned »freedom fighters« returned to their home countries. Since the only activity they were trained for was combat, many of them joined different extremist and terrorist groups, some of which were led by bin Laden. On 11 September 2001, the peak of terrorist activity was reached – so far – resulting in massive killings.

Between 1878 and 1989 the methods, motivations and justifications of terrorism changed significantly, and terror and terrorism became the methods of choice for a wide variety of groups and states with different political, social and religious aims. In recent years, groups with fundamentalist ideologies with a tendency to seek violent solutions have increased all over the world. There exist terrorist organisations in different contexts worldwide and we have also seen an internationalisation of terrorist activity. Many terrorist groups, notably the al Qaeda network and groups more or less connected with it, no longer limit their activities exclusively to local conflicts, but participate in a global network of terror. We are confronted with a new wave of terrorism that has generated savage, ghastly and indiscriminate killings and a horrifying display of the power of violence. In other words, the new type of religiously motivated terrorism brings with it a savagery that far exceeds that of its Russian predecessors. A change has taken place. Today there are several types of terrorism, not all equally violent. Waldman distinguishes between four types of »terrorism from below«: revolutionary groups, religiously motivated groups, terrorist groups who fight for the rights of ethnic groups and national minorities, and the so-called vigilante terrorism or »Law and Order« movements that aim at preserving the status quo by violent means. A fifth type, state-organised terrorism, has a long history. The Stalin regime in former Soviet Union, China, the Nazi regime in Germany and Argentina during the »dirty war« are examples. Moreover, today many countries, e.g. Iraq, Syria, Iran and Sudan, use violence as a means of terrorising the population. The scope of state-organised violence has by far exceeded that of »terrorism from below«, even when the 11 September attacks are taken into account.

Over one hundred definitions of terrorism exist in the relevant literature. Most stress the aim of producing fear, revulsion and anger in a population through the systematic use of terror and violence. The political goal may be more or less well defined, ranging from specific demands such as gaining independence or eliminating oppression to diffuse ideological motivation where the aim seems to be destruction rather than achieving political solutions. The latter seems to have gained importance today. It has been said that while ordinary wars and guerrilla wars aim at protecting or conquering land, terrorism is warfare that aims at conquering the mind.

Definitions of who is terrorist or what is terrorism are moreover highly politically motivated. Oppressing regimes or occupying forces do not hesitate to call any opposition or resistance terrorism and many renowned state leaders have previously been labelled »terrorists«. Rather than attempting a definition of terrorism from the perspective of political science or politics, which would be outside the scope of this article, I will later attempt to delineate the psychological aspect, what I call terrorist mindset, a preliminary definition of which would be a preparedness to kill or hurt innocents for an ideological-political-religious aim.

It is obvious that with the diversity seen regarding context, motivation, aim and means each case needs to undergo thorough and specific study. An interdisciplinary approach is recognised by most scholars in the field. The historical roots, the societal conditions and so forth must be understood. What is of special interest for me as a psychoanalyst is the process whereby individuals and groups can arrive at a point where the main objective is to produce fear and subordination by terror and murder and other atrocities with some ideological, religious or political justification. Further, I am interested in discussing why such terrorising and violent processes, once they have started, are very difficult to stop. The analysis of the psychological motivations for terrorism is in this perspective judged to be of central importance.

Terrorising others involves different degrees of dehumanisation. From the perspective of the victim, being terrorised is a form of persistent, frightening and nerve-racking violence that seems as though it may never end. From the perspective of the terror-producing agent or perpetrator, the distress of the victim may be perceived with indifference or may give sadistic pleasure.

Such destructive processes are well known in psychiatry and psychoanalysis and can be observed for example in families. The question is, to what extent can this knowledge be useful in understanding organised terrorism? In other words, can a psychoanalytic approach to the understanding of individual as well as group processes contribute, and can this approach constitute, so to speak, one piece in the interdisciplinary patchwork that the understanding of modern terrorism requires?

I will start with a clinical case of a traumatised and victimised man who contemplated a terrorist act. I do not think this case represents a typical example of a terrorist as would, for example, suicide bombers in the Middle East. I will argue, however, that this case illustrates a certain mindset and some specific mental dynamics that may be typical for those active in dehumanising terrorist activities. I will then demonstrate how these dynamics become apparent in large groups. As I will show, the large group has its own dynamic that cannot be derived only from individual psychology, and thus it must be studied in its own right.

### *Case*

A patient from a Middle Eastern country, whom I will call Ahmed, decided at one point during his psychotherapy to place a bomb at the social welfare office. The intention to perform this private terrorist act was the conclusion of a long process during which he had struggled with severe feelings of alienation, shame and powerlessness in a very difficult exile situation. Through this act he hoped to deliver a message about a system he found unjust and oppressing, and which he perceived as antagonistic and racist towards his group.

Ahmed was the younger of two brothers. His father and his elder brother had been killed, apparently by government agents, because of their political activity. He himself had not been politically active, but came into opposition during his military service because of what he perceived as inhuman treatment of his fellow soldiers. He was arrested and tortured, but managed to desert and later to flee.

The severe attacks on his family, combined with the concomitant attack on the social group he belonged to, seem to have struck a major blow at the level where he could have found models for identification and support (from father, group-leaders etc.). He identified with an ideal image in which he was the one who should have been able to save the family's honour and rectify the injustice and harm that had been perpetrated.

Ahmed started his life in exile with great expectations. However, exile became a long process of disillusionment. He did not manage to complete any education, nor did he manage to find a job. After a few years, he was reduced to the position of being a welfare recipient, and lived a very lonely life with no intimate relationships. He felt humiliated, and harboured an intense and primitive rage against all people, especially those in a position of authority, including the welfare officers, who sometimes deprived him of what he felt were his rights. In time, he began to direct this rage against Western society and the Western way of life.

The subject of bombing had been worked with in therapy for a long time, but his intense shame/rage was repeatedly stimulated in all kinds of situations (racist comments in the street, derogatory remarks from compatriots, humiliation at the welfare office, etc.).

Exile was thus for Ahmed a long period of decline. He rejected most attempts to help him to understand and cope with what had happened to him both in his home country and in exile. He felt deeply humiliated and attributed his defeats entirely to the inhumane treatment he was exposed to as a refugee. When his mind finally turned to violence, this was a schema he could borrow from the abundant repertoire of terrorist ideologies from his part of the world. He had also associated with militants in the exile milieu, but this was most likely a rather loose connection. He claimed, however, to have learned to make a bomb from these people.

To understand this process of decline leading to what may be called a terrorist mindset, that is, being prepared to kill innocent victims with some kind of ideological justification, we need to take a step back and look at some basic preconditions for emotional stability, secure identity and a general sense of safety. In other words, what is needed for the protection and development of self and identity in reasonable harmony?

From the perspective of the individual, three major relational levels can be identified:

1. The relation to the other on a dyadic level. Developmentally this applies to the relationship to the caregiver, in which emotional regulation is

mediated through nonverbal means, for example through gaze, gestures, the rhythm of satisfaction and frustration, etc. In adult life, this presupposes intimate relationships that emphasise holding and containing aspects. These may be disturbed by withdrawal caused by feelings of shame and humiliation and by the projection of too much aggression onto the other.

2. The relation to the group, that is, the relation to family, extended family (the clan) and the larger group (ethnic group, society). At this level identificatory processes are important. One is simultaneously a member and a part of the group and a unique individual who is different from the others. Through one's name one is identified with lineage of inheritance, one is further identified as a boy or girl, a son or daughter, and possibly later as a father or mother. In this process, one learns what others want one to be at the same time as one develops one's own perspectives. The socialisation in a family or group teaches one to empathize with others in a process where several perspectives may be valid.

3. The third dimension concerns the relationship to culture in a broad sense: the body of existential, religious, philosophical, scientific, etc., discourses, narratives, and claims of truth and morality. This is the level where one can use narratives and moral codes to establish meaning and can also gain access to moral and symbolic laws governing relationships to other human beings. This is the level that regulates society at large and that affects and regulates the individual's behaviour. (Rosenbaum & Varvin 2002)

These levels are interdependent, and what happens at each level influences what happens at the others. For example cultural narratives on victimisation may influence group functions and cause splitting processes, and dyad relations may also be influenced by, for example, reduced levels of care. Before going into exile, Ahmed had experienced a breakdown on all three levels (body/other, group, culture). The devastating results of this were deepened in exile and he experienced severe problems in establishing relations in exile. He could not:

- use others as a receptacle for emotional distress or as participants in an emotional regulatory interaction;
- use the group (family) as basis for belonging and for the establishment of a sense of identity;
- use familiar cultural discourses for modifying personal pain and to promote the establishment of perspectives that could help him maintain a safe position in a human community. He also temporarily lost connection with important moral codes.

The act of bombing was intended as a means of restoring the balance and giving him a feeling of selfhood, revenge for real and imagined injustices, a perverted kind of glory, and an outlet for the tensions that had built up.

So what did the therapist do? He picked up the telephone and started to dial the police emergency number. As a result, Ahmed gave up his plan and, after some fruitful therapeutic work in that session, he left with a strengthened feeling of coherence and dignity.

How can we understand this sequence? Obviously, Ahmed experienced a setting of limits that restored an internalised moral code concerned with both prohibitions and ideals. A line had been drawn and he was able to gain some directedness in his life, seeing himself as a man who could take part in a sense of human community. In psychoanalytical terms, one could say that a symbolic law was reinstated, permitting the restructuring of identity and the use of the therapeutic relationship to regulate his intense negative emotions.

This case illustrates certain aspects of mental functioning in relation to dehumanising destructive aggression. These aspects had their background in his past traumatisation and losses and the destruction of a safe and predictable social environment. He experienced this as very humiliating, and a process of victimisation set in that was reinforced by his experiences in exile.

He thus ended up in a situation where he, as a result of massive projection, interpreted others' reactions to him mainly as aggressive and derogatory. His attitude and behaviour functioned as a strategy to preserve a sense of self. In the course of this process, others were seen more and more as devoid of any humanness and could be treated thereafter.

We can see that the dynamic forces behind the situation where terrorist acts become an alternative are complex and surely individually and context dependent. The end result, however, is more or less the same; a mindset prepared to kill or hurt others justified by some »higher principle« be it religious, political or otherwise ideological. Based on this, I will argue that the concept terrorist mindset must be defined according to this end result. A mindset where the representation of others are devoid of humanness and where there is a definite preparedness to ignore their value and rights as human beings because of an internalised higher principle. In the end, one is prepared to kill if necessary. The dehumanisation of others are usually not generalised and may pertain to a specific group (e.g. Americans, Jews, Muslims) but not necessarily. The people one kills or injures may just happen to be there, coincidentally. The means by which this is done is not necessarily important. The preparedness to use weapons of mass-destruction (atom bomb, sarin gas etc.) implies, however, that the dehumanising of others have

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1 Acts of soldier in a war may come close to this definition especially when leaders claim ideological principles of freedom, democracy and so forth or religious claims that »God are with us«. The difference being that the ordinary soldier obviously obeys orders. The leaders may by their acts and justifications, however, come closer to be included in this definition.

been extended potentially to all humankind<sup>1</sup>. The background for the development of terrorist mindset(s) may have typical patterns both on an individual and social level.

### **Dehumanising destructive aggression**

On an individual or psychological level this development can be understood by taking two psychodynamic dimensions into consideration:

1. the shame/narcissism dimension, and
2. the projective-persecutory dimension.

First the shame/narcissism dimension:

1. Ahmed had experienced overwhelming narcissistic mortifications. He expected recurrences of these in most of his encounters with others, and met them with a defiant and condescending attitude. This strategy served more or less to confirm and repeat these injuries to his self-image in that he provoked anger and often open aggression. In this regressed state, his capacity to reflect on his and others' emotional states diminished and was, at moments, totally lost. He was a living example of shame as one of the most toxic of affects (Krause 2001). Ahmed exemplified the effects of severe and chronic experiences of shame with his diminished self-worth, weak capacity for empathy, feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, tendency towards hate and rage, desire to control others and need to externalise failures. As a result, he had a strong need to project onto others the shameful and denigrated aspects he perceived in himself, and treat others as »lesser human beings«, exactly what he felt himself to be. In some circumstances, such externalisation may lead one to perceive the persons or group on whom the shameful features are projected as threatening, because they represent unwanted parts of oneself. Paranoid anxieties may develop, and identification with an idealised position is strengthened. Identification with the aggressor, which results from having been made a helpless victim in traumatic situations, may reinforce the picture of oneself as both perfect and powerful and the other as debased and shameful. A consequence of this may be a wish to destroy the other in order to get rid of these features, which on an unconscious level are experienced as belonging to oneself.

2. The projective-persecutory dimension concerns the effect of making the other a victim, and involves an equally violent potential. This dimension concerns the effect of *being* a victimiser, and even if Ahmed was not a prominent one he experienced how he made both his therapist and others victims of his aggressive attacks. Attacking others with psychological and especially physical violence results in remorse, which in regressive states may develop into a primitive superego's demand for severe punishment. This primitive, punishing superego may be projected onto the victim of the

aggression and the suffering victim may, precisely because of his or her suffering, be perceived as harbouring acute resentment for one's criminal acts. This is perceived as a severe threat to the self's stability and self-worth. In regressive situations, this may give rise to a wish to abolish the threat, thus giving way to further violence. This may in turn result in increased anxiety for projected violent superego elements due to the mere fact that the victim is suffering even more. This creates a vicious circle of violence, where victims must be destroyed just because of their suffering.

We may now draw some tentative conclusions regarding the development of preparedness for dehumanising violence based on this case history and other studies, e.g. (Lifton 2000; Rashid 2002; Serauky 2000; Volkan 1996).

Firstly, the shame/narcissism dimension may be seen as an important dynamic in establishing a terrorist mindset through identified personal and societal dynamics. When a person is exposed to traumas and humiliation in a context of social and political violence, he will both tend to experience this on a personal level, as injuries affecting him in a personal way, *and* as something affecting him as a member of a group. The need for revenge and rectification of the harm done may then not only be personally motivated, but may also gain strength from a need to restore the group's identity and honour.

Secondly, the projective-persecutory dimension gains importance during the phase of ongoing atrocities, for example in ethnic cleansing, genocide and terrorist acts. The violence give rise to further atrocities because the victim comes to represent an accusing aspect of oneself that one wants to get rid of.

Both dynamics involve severe splitting processes with a tendency to divide the world into either a totally good and idealised entity or an entirely bad and denigrated one. How does this picture correspond to what we know from research on terrorists and terrorism? Jeanne Knutson found in interviews with Northern Irish terrorist leaders that »all had been victims of terror themselves.« The experience of having been victimised had longstanding consequences, and she stated that underlying the genesis of political violence »is the belief that (...) only continued activity in defence of oneself (one's group) adequately serves to reduce the threat of further aggression against oneself« (cited from Volkan 1997, page 161). These findings were confirmed by the research of Volkan and co-workers. They found that personal identity problems were common among terrorists and that many had experienced victimisation in childhood or later (Volkan 1997). This often led to a merging of ethnic identity with personal identity and thus made the ethnic group's destiny personal. The need to turn passivity into activity and to prevent future victimisation may then trigger a process of identifying oneself with the group's humiliation. In conditions of violent political conflict and unrest, people who under normal circumstances would not have contemplated killing innocent victims for political or religious reasons may receive group-based ideological »permission« to do so.



Violence that produces terror in others may then be understood as a distorted and disturbed relationship, which fulfils important psychological needs on the part of the perpetrator. This represents an important explanatory background for what Jeremy Post has called the »threat of success« (Post 1990). Because terrorist leaders have such a great degree of personal gain from the group's activities, for example the need to project victimized and humiliated features onto the »enemy«, they often act in ways that hinder the success of the group's struggle. This makes the work, in fact, inefficient according to its official goals and perpetuates the terror (see also Juergensmeyer 2000).

Here we approach the field of large group dynamics, which will be the subject of the last part of this paper. Large groups are here understood as including the family, group, community, ethnic groups and even nations.

### **Large group dynamics and fundamentalism**

I will now discuss how these dynamics may be related to specific large group dynamics and the transformation of religious-political ideology into arguments for destructive actions on a mass scale. (Large groups are here understood in a societal and political context and I will not refer to the vast literature on group-dynamics on to large groups).

First we need to examine the ideological motives and justifications for terror and terrorism. It seems that the significance of this and its roots in individual and group dynamic forces has been underestimated and not fully understood by many researchers in the field (Bohleber 2002). I will argue that the amalgam of extreme forms of fundamentalist ideology with motivations based on primitive individual and group dynamics may result in a highly dangerous and very deadly Molotov cocktail. The religious-political ideology functions as an important *identity-forming factor* on a group level. This type of ideology gives a reason for and meaning to the group's desperate condition; it can name the causes of the misery and identify those responsible, and can thus justify violent actions.

On an individual and a group level, the religious-political ideology gives rise to mentalities or mindsets that bridge unconscious fantasies and consciousness and present solutions to individual and collective problems (Bohleber 2002). In Islamic countries, this religious justification has its background in certain trends that arose particularly in the last century. The key word is fundamentalism, here briefly defined as a conviction that »we« represent the true doctrine and that »others« are wrong.

The confrontation of traditional Islamic culture with the modernised Western culture and way of life sparked attempts to modernise Islamic thinking, starting several hundred years ago, in order to adapt to the new developments generated by this meeting of cultures. However, it also led to the re-

verse, namely attempts to restore Islam by returning to its roots from the time of Mohammed. Modernisation, as it was seen in the West, was in this context perceived as endangering the *right way of living*. The Muslim Brothers in Egypt argued for the establishment of what they called an »Islamic Order« (Nizam Islami) (Heine 2002). However, as it developed, more weight was put upon the contrast, the »bad influence from the outside«, than on the development of the values inherent in Islam. They looked upon Europe as a deterring example of »greedy materialism, militant fanaticism, degraded morals and imperialism« (cited in Heine 2002). The anti-modernistic trend in most fundamentalist movements is, however, not total. While modern technological developments have obviously been accepted in order to further the aims of these movements, reactions have been directed in particular against liberalisation, emancipation, especially concerning women's rights and the rights of homosexuals, materialism and a lack of spirituality. Further, a vision developed of a perfect future society based on a myth of an ideal past, e.g. society at the time of Mohammed (Heine 2002). Influence from the West threatened basic values, and the idea of the unity and purity of the group became increasingly important. As several studies have shown, in extremist and terrorist groups the struggle to secure the cohesion and purity of the group brought with it a death cult, a glorification of dying for the cause.

The following factors mark this regression and perversion of religious-political ideology (see also Bohleber 2003):

- Myth of an ideal past,
- Utopian dream of the perfect society,
- Defence against threat from without (e.g. Western influence for many Islamic groups),
- Death cult.

Additional characteristics were a preoccupation with purity and blood, the development of a sense of entitlement and a concomitant glorification of victimhood (Volkan 2001).

As Bohleber has shown, these were equally characteristic for the ethnocentric nationalism in Germany, which gave rise to the Nazi Holocaust (Bohleber 2003).

What, then, are the motivating forces that can activate groups of people to participate in such extreme atrocities? An important dynamic has been developed by Vamik Volkan (2003; 1997), who described how large groups can develop a shared identity around a »chosen trauma«. A chosen trauma is the group's shared mental representation that contains a narrative about the group's victimisation. The narrative may bear more or less resemblance to a historical event, and the event may have only superficial similarity with the actual problems or traumas of the group.

A situation may develop as follows:

A catastrophic change may threaten the group's *identity such as social decline or war*. This leads to regression on a group level. A shared mental representation of ancestor's trauma experienced in the past that has been handed down through generations is evoked. It comes to a time-collapse in the group, present is experienced in terms of the past and a need for purification of the group may develop, that is get rid of those who symbolise the past enemy (e.g. Muslims in former Yugoslavia). This may then be accompanied by a need for revenge and rectification.

It should be underscored that the memory of the chosen trauma whatever resemblance with historical events becomes important because it can contain the group's humiliation in a coherent and understandable narrative. An example of a shared representation of a chosen trauma is what the Indian psychoanalyst Kakar called the »Andalusia syndrome«. In a Hindu-Muslim ethnic conflict in Hyderabad, where the Muslims experienced an expulsion similar to their expulsion from Andalusia hundreds of years ago, a representation of a collective sense of victimhood, fuelled by this ancient »memory«, reinforced the actual conflict (Kakar 1996). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is another. Milosevic evoked a narrative of the defeat of King Lazar in 1389 as a chosen trauma, which then fuelled the savage ethnic conflict that followed in the 1990s (Volkan 1996). These regressive situations imply a breakdown on all three levels or dimensions described above with primitive and often violent group processes as a result, what I will call malignant group-dynamics.

## Epilogue

We have studied some characteristics of modern terrorism, which is indeed different from the chivalrous Russian version of the nineteenth century. In a certain sense what we see today may be understood in connection with the mistakes of imperialism, the many ethnic conflicts and wars, and not least globalisation. A constant element in this story, however, is the lasting effect of massive victimisation and humiliation of large populations. Through shared representations of chosen traumas, among other things, the groundwork has been laid for the development of fundamentalist and violent mindsets and group mentalities mediated by religious-political fundamentalist ideologies. We have also seen that once these cycles of violence have started they are extremely difficult to stop. Present-day terrorism has become increasingly cruel, and the indiscriminate killings bear a disturbing resemblance to ethnic cleansing. We are indeed facing a serious situation. »History takes revenge«, would be one way of seeing it. We are facing a global civil war, according to one commentator. A global uprising is under way, under a more or less well-defined ideological-fundamentalist umbrel-

la. The various terrorist groups act not so much because they are part of a global organisation, but more because they are part of a global »spiritual« movement in which religious-political fundamentalist ideologies give rise to terrorist mindsets or mentalities.

This »spirituality« imbues past and present traumas and humiliations with meaning, and functions as a motivation for revenge that involves the cruellest violence. Malignant group dynamics further fuel the cycle of violence, and additional atrocities, in the name of prevention, bring new victims – and perpetrators – to coming generations. An insoluble dilemma?

It is easier to make recommendations about what not to do than about what needs to be done. Creating new victims is an obvious example of what should not be done. Another thing we could do without is the conviction of some leaders that a single and absolutely right solution exists, an attitude that perfectly mirrors the terrorist leaders' fundamentalism.

It is regrettable to have to end this story without being able to provide an encouraging vision of the future. At the moment, I am afraid it is difficult to find. This is, sadly, also the view of many terrorism researchers. After reading a number of books and many more articles I found that most end either on a note of pessimism or with a more or less religiously inspired statement of hope. It seems that this is the best we can do at the moment especially in these days when a massive war against supposed terrorism has been launched, a war that moreover by many political analysts are predicted to produce even more acts of terrorism.

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