PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BOOK REVIEW

# Review Essay: The Psychology of Terrorism

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**John Horgan, *Terrorist Minds: The Psychology of Violent Extremism from Al-Qaeda to the Far Right*** (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2024), 248 pp., US $ 120.00 [Hardcover], US $ 30.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-2311-9839-4.

**J. Reid Meloy and Jens Hoffmann (Eds.), [Second Edition], *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*** (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 760 pp., US $ 165.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-1909-4016-4.

**Eric D. Shaw, *The Psychology of Insider Risk: Detection, Investigation and Case Management*** (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2023), 222 pp., US $ 140.00 [Hardcover], US $ 56.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0324-8248-4.

Terrorism studies is a multidisciplinary endeavour, with scholars focusing on a wide range of topics such as radicalisation, how individuals are recruited into terrorist networks, their ideologies and agendas, how they are organised and led, their decision to employ certain types of weapons (as opposed to others), how they operate in physical environments and in cyberspace, and their selection of targets, among many other research questions. Within the scholarly literature on the psychology of terrorism, there are at least five challenges that have not been adequately addressed. First, there is a lack of consensus about defining terrorism, and specifically whether it involves only attacks against non-combatant civilians and/or armed combatants to achieve their political objectives. Granted, this is a challenge shared by scholars far beyond the realm of psychology, but here it is particularly significant, as a consistent definition is needed when examining the psychological characteristics of the motivations, agendas, behaviours, and targeting mindsets of those who engage in terrorist-type attacks against civilians and combatants. A second challenge is the lack of consensus about the psychology of those who become ideologically-driven terrorists. For instance, some authors consider them to be primarily rational actors intent on achieving political objectives, while others describe them as psychologically disordered individuals who grasp on to nihilistic extremist ideologies in order to justify their violent acts. A third challenge involves the widespread debates and disagreements among scholars about whether it is possible to psychologically profile those who become terrorists. A fourth challenge involves a tendency to overlook other related categories of violent attackers, such as psychologically disordered active shooters and 'insider threat' actors (i.e. they are known to some of their targeted adversaries), resulting in the discipline's ignoring a substantial literature of inter-related violent actor categories that should inform comparative analyses in studies on the psychology of terrorism. And a fifth challenge involves the need for practically useful diagnostic tools, tables, and checklists that can be applied to examine these issues in a structured analytic way.

To examine how these issues and problems are reflected in the contemporary research literature, three recently published books have been selected that focus on similar and different aspects of the psychology of terrorism.

In *Terrorist Minds*, John Horgan, insightfully explains that "Psychologists study behaviour – what people do and how they do it – and then we try to interpret *why* they do it" (p. xv). As a social process, he adds, "people *choose* to engage in terrorist activity…because they believe they are acting on behalf of a community that will embrace them for doing so. They feel they have a role to play in changing something much bigger than themselves, their immediate group, or the broader community from where they enjoy support" (p. xv). Regarding the second challenge described above, however, this characterisation sounds overly rational and altruistic, as there are many cases of individual members of terrorist groups (such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Hamas), who have clearly embraced (and in some cases enthusiastically spread) nihilistic extremist ideologies, which makes Horgan's characterisation appear uncritical.

In explaining *who* becomes a terrorist and *why*, Horgan writes that there are multiple drivers that characterise those who might join a group or become lone actors, which leads him to reject the notion of a single psychological profile (pp. 45-50). He does cite a study that found that "[m]ore than half of the single-issue terrorists displayed some evidence of a history of mental illness" (p. 45). But while he acknowledges psychologist Randy Borum's three factors that characterise those who become violent extremists — antipathy towards a target group, creating a justification and mandate for violent action, and removing social and psychological barriers to inhibit violent action (p. 76) — Horgan nevertheless argues that "we have difficulty establishing how they relate to one another…" (p. 76). In the final chapter, Horgan concludes that despite all the studies on the psychology of terrorism "We know more about who participates in various activities that constitute terrorism than about what motivates them" (p. 163). Clearly, as Horgan acknowledges, this field of inquiry has made progress, but still has much room for improvement.

As a comprehensive overview of the psychology of terrorism, two excellent chapters discuss the processes of disengagement and reintegration of former terrorists into society, and how psychologists 'talk to terrorists', including those incarcerated, to gain insights into their motivations and actions. However, regarding the fourth challenge discussed earlier, Horgan focuses exclusively on individuals who become terrorists, but not on related violent assailant lone actors, such as the categories of psychologically disordered active shooters and violent insiders, such as those who engage in workplace violence, who are also driven by extremist ideologies (however outlandish and bizarre). And regarding the fifth challenge, the book does not provide any diagrams, tables, or checklists that could be used to profile those who might be on the trajectory toward becoming terrorists, as he argues that such individuals are too multi-varied to profile. In conclusion, despite the challenges discussed earlier, throughout the volume Horgan is masterful in explaining his thinking processes on these issues, which is helpful in educating students and analysts on how to analyse them, making this a valuable textbook on the psychology of terrorism.

Meanwhile, two other recent books address the aforementioned need for practically useful diagnostic tools. The first is an edited volume by J. Reid Meloy and Jens Hoffmann, *The International Handbook of Threat Assessment*, with an impressive collection of contributors who are practitioner members of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP).[1] As practitioner psychologists, they apply diagnostic tools to examine the profiles and trajectories of susceptible individuals, who are primarily lone actors, who might be situated along the trajectory into targeted violence, including terrorism. These tools include a widely applied framework developed by Frederick S. Calhoun and Stephen W. Weston, which they discuss in their chapter on "Rethinking the Path to Intended Violence," on the five pre-incident phases in targeted violence of grievance. These include: triggers; ideation (fantasising about taking revenge); research and planning (deciding how, where, and when to attack); preparation (such as acquiring a weapon); and breaching (transporting themselves to the target), which lead to the final sixth phase of their attack (pp. 392-404).

In terms of risk factors to engaging in targeted violence, the chapter by Monica Lloyd, "Making Sense of Terrorist Violence and Building Psychological Expertise," cites three widely used diagnostic tools in the field of terrorism risk assessment (pp. 624-629). The first—the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18)—was developed by Meloy and is designed to code eight proximal warning behaviours and ten distal (or distant) characteristics.[2] The second—Extremist Risk Guidance (ERG22+)—was developed by the UK Department of Justice, and consists of 22 items across three dimensions: Engagement, Intent, and Capability. When correlated these dimensions are rated as being *strongly present/significant*, *partly present/*

*some*, or *not present/minimal*.[3] The third, Violent Extremism Risk Assessment 2 Revised (VERA-2R), was developed by The Netherlands Ministry of Justice and Security.[4] It consists of 34 risk-supporting and risk-mitigating indicators that are assessed to provide a professional risk judgment of an individual's potential for becoming a violent extremist.

Another category of terrorist-related targeted violence involves violent insiders. In *The Psychology of Insider Risk*, Eric D. Shaw, a prominent clinical psychologist and former US government intelligence officer, defines insider threat actors as individuals "who knowingly betray their organizations" whether through espionage, sabotage, workplace violence, leaks, and theft of intellectual property (p. xv). For the purpose of this essay, the focus is on ideologically-driven terrorist insiders who carry out workplace violence-type attacks. With numerous cases of ideologically extremist terrorists targeting their workplaces, such as former US Army Major Nidal Hassan's attack against his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas (5 November 2009) and husband-and-wife Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik's mass shooting attack at Farook's workplace holiday party in San Bernardino, CA, on 2 December 2015, the shooters were known to at least some of their intended targets, making them 'insiders'.

Based on the data from the cases Shaw has examined, he finds that individuals who become insider threats can be profiled. They were "not normal, well-adjusted individuals," they had "significant symptoms of personality disorders," they had a "history of previous violations" of policy and procedures, they felt "victimized" and "disgruntled," and importantly, "[c]oworkers and/or family members were aware of the risks" they presented (pp. 10-11), which could have led to pre-emptive interventions if these suspicions had been reported to appropriate authorities.

As a clinical psychologist, the author developed a diagnostic tool, termed the Critical Pathway to Insider Risk (CPIR) framework, to assess and map the trajectory of susceptible individuals toward becoming insider threats. It consists of the five progressive phases of personal predispositions, stressors, concerning behaviours, problematic organisational responses to their suspicious behaviours, and crime scripts (i.e. the attack) (p. 17). These phases are accompanied by risk indicators that are scored as highly diagnostic, moderately diagnostic, and minimally diagnostic (pp. 167-169). Each phase includes intervention points to mitigate the progression into carrying out an attack.

When assessing the risk of individuals to become terrorist insiders, Shaw also utilises the VERA-2 and TRAP-18 risk scales, which he overlays onto the CPIR framework (p. 162). Of course, identifying a universally applicable "profile of a terrorist" has been a holy grail for psychologists for many decades. And while there are valid concerns that must be acknowledged about the potential for misuse and abuse of these risk assessment tools, there is clearly merit in the efforts described in both the *International Handbook* and Shaw's *Insider Risk* book.

In conclusion, the three books under review present different kinds of contributions to the research literature on the psychology of terrorism. Two of the books present diagnostic tools to examine the profiles of potential terrorists, while Horgan's book provides a broader overview of the many complexities of this field. Incorporating diverse approaches, including comparisons with related subcategories of active shooters and violent insiders, can help us appreciate what the broader landscape of research on the psychology of terrorism has to offer.

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# Notes

1 Association of Threat Assessment Professionals, online at https://www.atapworldwide.org/

2 J. Reid Meloy, (2018). "The operational development and empirical testing of the terrorist radicalization assessment protocol (TRAP–18)." *Journal of Personality Assessment,* 100(5), 483–492.

3 Extremist Risk Guidance (ERG22+), UK Department of Justice. Online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1145219/extremism-risk-guidance-22+.pdf

4 "Violent Extremism Risk Assessment 2 Revised" (VERA-2R), Netherlands Ministry of Justice and Security. Online at: https://www.vera-2r.nl/

# About

## Perspectives on Terrorism

Established in 2007, *Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is a quarterly, peer-reviewed, and open-access academic journal. PT is a publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), in partnership with the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University, and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews.

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