

Policing the New Terrorism

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For over 20 years Dr Michael Diamond has studied the human behaviour component of terrorism and of those who perpetrate acts of terrorism.

Introduction

Terrorism is about people. It relies upon the exploitation of the emotion of terror and the effect that this has on populations, governments, decision makers and individuals.

The body of information, both empirical and anecdotal, that has underpinned an understanding of terrorism has changed significantly over the years. Terrorism can be viewed as a strategy. Examining the rapidly changing way that the strategy is expressed gives us the concept of 'The New Terrorism'.

What are we learning?

The perpetrators are such a heterogeneous group that one must leave the preoccupation with Islamic extremism and *Al Qa'ida* of the past decade. In that time many shared the puzzled look and bewilderment of the president of the US at the time of the September 11 attack when he asked, "Why do they hate us so much?"

Attempts at answering those questions resulted in a growth industry of experts in Islamic extremism and the radicalisation process. We became fascinated with detail of fundamentalist religious beliefs, extremism and, particularly, the structure and operations of terrorist groups such as *Al Qa'ida* and, locally, *Jemaah Islamiya* and others. The understanding now is that the process is far broader than that.

Individuals

We continue to try to profile individuals and identify features of those who engage in terrorism.

The 'typical terrorist'

In a report from the Behavioural Sciences Unit of MI5 titled *Understanding radicalisation and violent extremism in the UK*, 12 June 2008, a number of important points were made. Attempts at profiling a 'typical British terrorist' revealed that:

- most are demographically unremarkable and they simply reflect the communities in which they live;
- mostly they were British nationals and not illegal immigrants;
- most were not religious fundamentalists and instead many were religious novices;
- the idea that terrorists were either mentally ill (mad) or personality disordered (bad) was not borne out;
- those who were over 30 years of age were just as likely to be married with children as to be loners with no familial or relationship ties;
- it was found in Britain that those studied were as ethnically diverse as the Muslim population in Britain;
- the role of radical extremist clerics as central to the radicalisation process was found to be much diminished in recent years.

The Behavioural Sciences Unit analysed case studies of several hundred individuals who are known to be involved in or closely associated with violent extremist activity. The behaviour ranged from fund raising to actually planning suicide bombings in Britain.

What accounts for this diversity?

The unifying forces that were necessary to develop an ideology, establish capability and foster the radicalisation process have become redundant and have been replaced by other mechanisms. These other mechanisms include the 'normalisation' of extremist rhetoric producing the seemingly 'not so radical',

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radical! Much of the radicalisation experience has occurred as a subtle, cumulative exposure that is difficult to differentiate from fantasy-driven material available alongside it on the internet.

Informal cell/group formation is often reliant on existing networks as banal as a soccer team, a professional group (such as doctors), fellow petty criminals, prison inmates, fellow worshippers and, in many cases, established kinship ties. Widely disseminated technological data and methodology to develop capability to carry out acts of terrorism is freely available.

Individual dynamics and processes

Useful information about how individuals become terrorists is described by John Horgan.¹

He lists the following:

- the gradual nature of the relevant socialisation processes into terrorism;
- a sense of the supportive qualities associated with the recruitment (the ‘pull’ factors or lures that attract people to either involvement in terrorism in a broad sense, or those positive lures that are used to groom potential recruits);
- the sense of migration between roles (such as moving from fringe activities like public protest to illegal, focused behaviour);
- a sense of importance of role qualities (for example, what attractions does being a sniper hold as opposed to becoming a suicide bomber, and how do these ‘role qualities’ become apparent to the onlooker or potential recruit?).

These important comments state, correctly in the author's view, that it is better to look at a dynamic process rather than at a static profile.

Predisposing risk factors

John Horgan identifies a series of what he calls predisposing risk factors:²

- personal experiences of victimisation (which can be real or imagined);
- expectations about involvement (the lures – such as the excitement, mission and sense of purpose associated with being involved in any ‘insider’ group and its various roles);
- identification with a cause, frequently associated with some victimised community;
- socialisation through friends or family or being raised in a particular environment;
- opportunity for expression of interest and steps towards involvement; and
- access to the relevant group.

These are all descriptions of human behaviour characteristics.

Group-determined behaviour

Understanding these steps and the process involved, one can see that the emphasis has shifted from looking at individuals to looking at group dynamics and group determined behaviour. This is of significance in making sense of the ‘New Terrorism’ as currently encountered.

The environment of terrorism – changes

The environment of terrorism has changed significantly in recent years. Terrorist methodology and the radicalisation pathway that supports it have changed as compared to the pre-September 11, 2001 picture.

Pre–September 11 2001 concept of Terrorism

Concepts and understanding of terrorism pre September 11 2001 – less than a decade ago – were based on the definition of terrorism as ‘politically motivated violence’. It embraced a perception of terrorism within a structured and para-militaristic model.

The understanding of radicalisation then was that it involved a slow process of indoctrination of a population group, recruitment and sequestration of individuals from the mainstream society. The process was one of secretiveness of the organisation with restriction of information about methodology and limited access to the technology.

¹ Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews from the article titled “*From profiles to pathways: the road to recruitment*”, *ejournalUSA: Countering the Terrorist Mentality*

² *ibid.*

Models of hierarchical organisations with control from the top down were accepted norms. The most studied groups were the Palestinian *Hamas*, *Fatah* and *Hezbollah* groups - different people pursuing a different cause. The belief was that organisers and operatives were longstanding deeply committed adherents to the cause, they pursued increasingly sophisticated training and developed capability, most significantly personal discipline and overriding commitment to the cause over time was the norm.

Previous Terrorism – forged in real danger

The antecedent of the ‘New Terrorism’ that confronts us now was forged in the real danger and struggle of the conflict in the Middle East and in Afghanistan in the 1980s onwards.

The emergence of *Al Qa’ida* is the defining entity. Here real people went to real places and faced real hardships. They attended real training, developed real discipline, made real relationships and faced real death, often in a combat environment.

It meant ideology was tested beyond the chanting of slogans and the reiteration of rhetoric. These experiences, the realisation of capability, the defining of extremist ideology, the birth of an identity as a *jihadi* and later a *shaheed* became tangible entities.

It was this group, that subsequently became known collectively as the ‘Afghani alumni’, who provided the organisational rigour, the ideological slogans and the technical know-how. It is their experience that underpins the identity of the second and third generation of ‘New Terrorists’ who have simply co-opted it as their own.

Radicalisation for ‘New Terrorists’ – Marketing Campaign, not real danger

Today one sees a global homogeneous message reaching out to the Muslim diaspora via easily accessible technology supported by a relentless marketing campaign. The message is exciting to young people in a format that is indistinguishable from fantasy film and television.

It is accompanied by music and graphics that are stirring and engaging, as all good advertising, marketing and propaganda should be. The picture now is one where image and slogan surpass substance and reality and yet the effectiveness and lethality of the acts of terrorism surpass what was formerly the capability of the pioneer group. It encompasses all the features we would normally associate with fashion and pop culture. The effect is dangerous and deadly.

To understand this confounding reality it is helpful to review and reiterate those steps that are outlined above.

Victimisation

Those involved need not have a significant personal experience of victimisation. An imagined one is sufficient. It allows one to identify with a highly marketed, easily identifiable identity and cause.

‘Pull’ factors

The anticipated experiences of involvement are clearly articulated in the marketing campaigns that are so easily accessible via the Internet. Individuals can identify with the excitement and a sense of mission and even feel the feelings of being an involved insider by simply being a member of an online chat group.

Identification with a cause

Identification with a cause is reinforced by the repetition of slogans amongst a group of similarly disposed individuals who see themselves as part of a victimised community.

Socialization

Maintaining social relationships within such a subgroup, be it through friends or family or within a slightly wider group of like-minded individuals, reinforces the view without opportunity for debate and alternative views.

Steps towards involvement

An environment that allows opportunity for expression of interest and provides practical steps towards involvement further enhances the process of radicalisation.

Sense of belonging

An inclusive marketing approach that promotes access to a relevant group creates a sense of attachment and belonging. In effect this process is supported because the relevant structures are already in place. It

fulfils and supports any notion of personal grievance once the individual is familiar with the required rhetoric and is able to share it with those who readily accept it. It normalises a reductionist and extreme view without opportunity for counter argument. The individuals associate with each other in a virtual space and that process will further reinforce the extreme views.

The Operatives

The above steps however do not adequately explain or account for how a seemingly unremarkable personality, an individual living as a locally born member of usually a migrant community, can become capable of acting this out as an operative. We are looking at those individuals who become operational perpetrators and not just supporters of a cause.

Here one can look to a broader sociological phenomenon that deals primarily with pathological 'self' (but in this case the self is the group) concern (narcissism) at the expense of appreciation of broader and larger social engagement.

Radicalisation in Australia

Putting aside the very different pathways to radicalisation of people in grossly oppressed environments, the question here in Australia is about our local population of concern. The following are some factors which may be relevant in becoming an operative perpetrator:

1. Protracted Adolescence

The first factor is that of immaturity and protracted adolescence, often extending, in some people, well into their thirties and beyond. The adolescent phenomenon is one that embodies extreme black-and-white thinking and a limited capacity to think strategically in terms of personal and community consequences.

2. Information overload focusing on short-term personal gratification

The second factor is a society that is overloaded with information without emphasising the intellectual development required to process it. It leads to a population reliant on images and slogans for guidance. This occurs with limited capacity for discussion or debate. It produces a style of problem solving and behaviour that is overly focused upon personal gratification in the very short term.

We see examples of frustrated, unhappy, marginalised individuals who act out their personal distress in ways that impact dangerously upon large numbers of people around them. Examples of this, at its worst, include those repetitive school mass killings that keep occurring. We see less dramatic but nevertheless disturbing examples of acts of public violence and vandalism that emanate from individuals with personal difficulties or grievance.

We see adolescent males doing what adolescent males are meant to do in terms of establishing hierarchies, dealing with conflict and rivalry but now doing so with lethal weapons such as knives and handguns. We have regular reporting of drive-by shootings in certain areas of Sydney. We repeatedly see examples of lethal behaviour at ordinary public and social gatherings.

3. Reduced shock value

A third factor in radicalisation is our capacity as human beings to constantly adapt to what confronts us. No matter how shocking something is it loses that shock value very quickly. What shocked us yesterday is accommodated today.

4. Adoption of symbols becomes reality

We no longer need to undergo a personal process of radicalisation. We can simply indulge ourselves in the symbols and paraphernalia that are associated with that process and, in that way, incorporate the entitlements of a true believer without having to actually be one. In the absence of energetic challenge or debate, the belief becomes the reality.

The personal gratification and resolution of personal angst that follows is further reinforced by the imagery and rhetoric provided by like-minded people. The important point here is that the people may be real but they could just as easily be a virtual community.

5. The Internet influence

The experience of being attached and bonded to a group that exists only as a virtual community is an all too common reality. The role of the internet in providing the capacity to form such virtual communities and to put isolated, insecure, marginalised individuals in touch with other such people at remote

locations creates the capacity to form groups of people who would otherwise never have the ability to actually construct a group and to maintain a group.

The internet provides more material and comfort than anyone could possibly need. This is a key to the process. It allows an endless flow of supportive ideas and images without any capacity for critical thinking or doubt to emerge. There are no requirements to be met. Uncritical reinforcements of one's views as 'facts' without contest or debate, support the notion that the individual's opinions are correct. The material is endless in its diversity.

The graphic nature of the slogan and of the images diminishes the abhorrence or shock value that might serve as a real force of moderation. In fact, they work in the opposite way in that they increase the fantasy component for the opportunity and scale of damage.

Importantly, access to the medium of the internet is a normalised mainstream activity. Young people particularly are attracted. It is safe and it occurs in private. It is truly a way to wage jihad at home.

6. Formation of the operative cell

From here the crucial step is the formation of the operative cell: a small number of bonded people who share a common objective. The mission acts as the glue. The capability may be truly 'home-grown' or may rely upon special training accessed elsewhere.

Those same features of radicalisation as described above are now in play but the seamless transition from rhetoric and fantasy is replaced by reality driven by the dynamics of 'a group on a mission' of the operatives who embrace the heroic term of '*Shaheed*/Martyr'.

What to make of this

For us in Australia the challenge remains to understand who in our community may be undergoing this form of radicalisation. We need to understand how our vulnerable minority communities and demographic groups experience themselves in relation to the dominant culture and to identify the points of alienation and distress that set off the process into

Radicalisation

In Australia the links between criminality, alienation, alternative subcultures, familiarity with violence, weaponry and the expression of these features, reveals the way terrorism has expressed itself in our society to date. Those populations in Australia who are of interest have a different and relatively narrow national and cultural base as opposed to the example of populations of interest in Britain. A deeper understanding of the specific population group, the experiences of its youth and the points of identification of that population with the perceived grievances, is crucial for how this terrible phenomenon plays itself out in our future.