

Commentary letter on: “The mind of suicide terrorists” and “Psychopathology of terrorists”

Lara Foresi Crowther*  and Ilaria Chiarantini

Dipartimento di Medicina Clinica e Sperimentale, Section of Psychiatry, University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy

Letter to the Editor

Cite this article: Foresi Crowther L and Chiarantini I (2021). Commentary letter on: “The mind of suicide terrorists” and “Psychopathology of terrorists”. *CNS Spectrums* 26(4), 316–317. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1092852920001315>

Received: 26 March 2020

Accepted: 28 March 2020

Author for correspondence:

*Lara Foresi Crowther, MD,
Email: laraforesi2@icloud.com

Dear Editor,

We read with great interest two articles entitled “The mind of suicide terrorists” written by Marazziti et al, and “Psychopathology of terrorists” written by Marazziti et al and published in 2018.

In the first place, we underline that we are in agreement with the authors, in that it is difficult to confirm or exclude the presence of mental health problems in modern terrorists, as there is no supporting evidence for one of the two options.¹ However, we would like to focus reader’s attention on the possibility that leaders of terroristic groups recruit individuals with specific cognitive profiles, necessary to cope with the rigorous discipline of their organizations that, on the contrary, an individual with an overt mental pathology and consequent unpredictability and instability would not be able to deal with.²

Again, we would highlight the ambiguity encountered when trying to establishing criteria to identify risk factors in those who decided to accomplish organized terrorist attacks. It is established, on the one hand, that the personal history of the individual must be taken into account and, therefore, the family context (including eventual traumatic childhood, parent’s experiences, relationship with relatives and peers, etc.), socio-economic class, or educational level. On the other, contextual factors are considered important, such as culture, habits, uses, politics, level of social safety of individual’s societies.³ Besides and together with these variables, according to us, another basic pillar should be added: religious conviction and indoctrination. As a result, different profiles of terrorists have been proposed throughout the years. One is the following: well-educated, single men, around 20 years of age, with middle or upper class background, college education, or professionals. Other profiles are opposite and heterogeneous, such as aged 17 to 23 years, coming from large and impoverished families, social isolation, with a low level education; or student, or married men in their late 40s, or even young women.⁴

It is difficult to propose a unique profile of the modern terrorist, as it depends on the spirit of time and is due to the prevailing socio-cultural and political context that is constantly changing.¹

According to us, the main factor favoring the transformation of “normal” individuals in terrorists might be an intrinsic vulnerable basis, coupled with a socio-cultural and political context favoring the claim of what are considered their rights and aims. As a result, these subjects find a sense of identity and belonging in groups, especially if they feel isolated, excluded and misunderstood (those coming from a low social class or with a low education level), or are convinced to be superior to those who do not share what they feel (those with a high standard of education and a good social standing). Therefore, the fact that this group of people who fight for a common cause, demanding dignity and respect for their community using whatever inhumane and cruel means, contradicts the hypothesis that the cause of the terrorism is justified by an antisocial personality disorder, rather than by their actual beliefs.⁵ Therefore, we would propose that the terrorist behavior is not characterized by selfishness, or lack of remorse, but rather by a pro-social behavior, as there is no absence of empathy. In other words, this empathy is directed toward their own community, as they struggle and fight against the others for the good of those who identify themselves as the peers (because of religion, culture, and or political conviction), on occasions considering themselves as heroes.

It is really disappointing that the information on this topic are really limited and secreted in the few cases that the terrorists survived, so that any hypothesis cannot be supported by “real data.” In any case, we believe that exploring contextual, personality, and eventual (psycho) pathological characteristics of modern terrorists would be valuable and represent concrete steps for its prevention.

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