



## Will it Ever be Possible to Profile the Terrorist?

by Jonathan Rae

“Identifying members of terrorist organisations and preventing them from carrying out successful attacks is a core component of any anti-terrorism effort. The fundamental task of this process is to separate the terrorist from the non-terrorist. The most prevalent method of attempting to achieve distinction between these two groups is to establish a set of psychological, socio-economic, physical, and/or racial attributes that mark one from the other. In other words, what does a terrorist look like, what personality traits do they possess and in what circumstances do they live and work? Essentially, it constructs a *terrorist profile* comprised of certain perceptible qualities with which an observed individual can be likened to, thus determining the probability of terroristic tendencies within the subject. Press describes the process of profiling, as follows:

*'In a large population of individuals... governments attempt to find the rare malfeasor [terrorist, for example] by assigning prior probabilities to individuals, in some manner estimating the chance that each is a malfeasor. Societal resources for secondary security screening are then concentrated against individuals with the largest priors' [1].*

If terrorist profiling is possible, it would be an irresistibly attractive method for countering terrorist attacks as it would maximise the efficiency of prophylactic resource allocation, increasing the likelihood of the interception of a terrorist attack. As an example, terrorist profiling could be used to focus assets at malfeasor populations within a crowd of lawful travellers at an airport terminal. Equally, if not more importantly, would be the use of terrorist profiling in observing parallels and similarities in the biographical records of terrorists and subsequently providing insight into the root causes of terrorism. By analysing the personal histories of terrorists, a terrorist personality is hoped to be discovered that signposts individuals willing to ‘commit espionage or sabotage, try to overthrow the government, commit terrorist acts, or otherwise engage in acts that would endanger national security’ [2].

The reality, however, is that terrorist profiling has not proved to be the panacean silver bullet against terrorism. Many explanations have been given as to the reasons why terrorist profiling has, so far at least, failed to deliver [3] [4] [5]. This begs the question: “*Will it ever be possible to profile the terrorist?*” Paramount to this discussion is the logic that drives terrorist profiling efforts; that terrorists can be identified in comparison to a societal population through the observation of noticeable, indicating traits and behavioural patterns. The three most prominent approaches to terrorist recognition employ racial-physical, psychopathological and socioeconomic attributes as profiling parameters. This paper will investigate the merits and failings of these three profiling techniques in order to determine whether the titular question - whether the terrorist can ever be profiled – is answerable.



Before investigating the methods of profiling terrorists, the fundamental difficulty of definition within the field of terrorism studies must be introduced due to the relevance of erecting operational boundaries in terrorist profiling. Defining the limits of the term “terrorism” has been an obstinate stumbling block for terrorism experts; a difficulty that has been evaded and confronted in equal measure by academics and other scholarly experts. Most troubling is the lack of definitional unanimity [6]. For terrorist profiling, in particular, ambiguity of the fundamental terminology has resulted in the bounds of the malfeasor to be imprecise. This is because without a universal meaning of *terrorism*, a comprehensive definition of *terrorist* is impossible. Any serious attempt to study terrorism must appreciate this conceptual opacity. Until the discovery of a universal definition, if one can exist, the efforts to further research the phenomenon must adopt working definitions in order to achieve some clarity of meaning. Those creating a terrorist profile must do exactly that, with particular detail to what actions differentiate a terrorist from a non-terrorist. Importantly, not all of the activities involved in terrorism are illegal, particularly those which support the ultimate action - the terrorist attack - through a peripheral network of terrorist sympathisers, such as financiers, promoters and recruiters.

### *Racial, Gender and Age Profiling*

The crudest and most egregious method of profiling terrorists is to identify potential malfeasors based on racial characteristics. Implicit in racial profiling is the logic that individuals of a certain race are, as a general rule, more likely to commit acts of terrorism. In this thinking, ethnicity and alienage are viewed as adequate demographic divisions to be proper subjects of scrutiny. Following the 9/11 attacks, racial profiling re-emerged as a viable system for detecting potential terrorists and was implemented by the border security agencies of many countries, notably the United States. Ellman writes that,

*‘[to profile] on the basis of race and comparable factors, is both discriminatory and foolish. Arabs and Muslims - to name the two most obvious targets for such reactions today - are part of the American mainstream. Many are citizens. The vast majority... are altogether innocent of any connection with terrorism. Meanwhile, some people who are not Arabs... have apparently joined our enemies in Al Qaeda’ [7].*

While it is true that the majority of current international terrorists are of Arab or Muslim identity, this neglects the fact that a considerable number are not. The second most lethal terrorist in American history, Timothy McVeigh, was a white American citizen. Also, the majority of terrorist attacks against the United Kingdom have been orchestrated and executed by predominantly white republican dissidents. To further deconstruct the cogency of racial profiling, international terrorist organisations have circumvented such measures by initiating attacks on targets thought to be outside of their expected theatre of operations, such as the 1972 Lod Airport massacre in Tel Aviv by the Japanese Red Army (JRA) on behalf of the People’s Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Clearly, relying on race as the salient factor for profiling a terrorist is not a practical solution for an effective counter-terrorist measure.

Another immutable dimension which is often employed to profile terrorists is biological gender. Proponents of gender profiling argue that all of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were



male, as were the 21 Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists arrested in Singapore in 2002 [8]. The dominance of male terrorists should not be overstated. Despite having numerical superiority, Russell and Miller warn against using simplistic male-centric profiling;

*'[Female terrorists] are more adept at allaying the suspicions of security personnel. As a result, posing as wives or mothers, they often can enter areas that would be restricted to males...'* [9].

Hudson writes that 'women have played prominent roles in numerous urban terrorist operations in Latin America' [10]. Notorious Latin American female terrorists include the Sandinista's Dora María Téllez; Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front's Ana María; Montoneros' Norma Ester Arostito; and a large portion of the M-19 details that seized the Dominican Embassy in Bogotá in 1980 and the Colombian Palace of Justice in 1985. Hudson writes that '[the female terrorists during the siege of the Palace of Justice] were among the fiercest fighters' [11]. The violent assault left 11 Supreme Court justices and 48 Colombian soldiers dead, and the building ravaged by fire. Prominent female terrorists elsewhere include the JRA's Fusako Shigenobu; PFLP's Leila Khalid; the Irish Republican Army's Sisters of Death; the Red Army Faction's Gudrun Ensslin and Susanne Albrecht; and Baader-Meinhof's eponymous Ulrike Meinhof. In fact, the Baader-Meinhof Gang had a 60% female membership and the militant feminist group, Rote Zora, comprised entirely of women [12]. As with ethnicity, the use of gender as a dominant factor in terrorist profiling is undermined by the weight of exceptions against the generalisation. An effective terrorist profile must be constructed using meters that are more clearly indicative of terrorist behaviour and that reduce the malfeasor population to a plausible size for secondary screening.

The issue of age discrimination in terrorist profiling is also an example of the failure to limit the filtering of a large population into a manageable group. There is no definitive age group that terrorists fall into. Although the majority of terrorists are in their early twenty's, the average age of several terrorist groups is considerably lower [13] [14]. Hudson writes that the LTTE had 'many members in the 16 to 17 year-old age level and even members who were preteens' [15]. At the other extreme, the leadership hierarchies of terrorist organisations tend to be markedly older than the mean age. Both Osama bin Laden and Carlos Marighella were in their late 50's when they were killed. The new head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, turned sixty last year. When the FBI's *Most Wanted Terrorists* list was published in 2001, the average age of the 22 individuals listed was 37 years-old. In light of this variety, it is clear that age is a problematic measure of profiling potential terrorists. It is of interest to note at this point that while race, age and gender profiling in the criminal context - such as the routine searching of young black males by police patrols - is condemned as prejudiced, unconstitutional or institutionally racist, the equivalent usage in the terrorism context is largely overlooked by the general public. The populace's relative tolerance of these unsophisticated profiling techniques - and the infringements on individual liberties that result from them - may be a consequence of the post-9/11 climate of fear and the culture of terrorist stereotyping that has emerged from it.

*Pathological and Psychological Profiling*

Unlike racial and gender discrimination, psychological profiling is widely accepted in both the study of criminology and as a method within law enforcement operations. There have been multiple attempts to transfer its apparent success from the criminal environment to the context of terrorism. Implicit in this approach is the belief in a causal connection between abnormal psychopathological behaviour and terroristic tendencies. The presence of certain exhibited personality traits or traumatic life experiences is believed to be suggestive of a propensity towards terrorism. In the criminal context, psychological profiling is used as a method of suspect identification, particularly in highly emotive cases involving rape offenders, sexual-orientated killers and serial arsonists [16]. Several psychologists have associated violent behavioural patterns with the presence of mental trauma, sexual deprivation and/or an oppressive formative atmosphere in the perpetrator's past [17] [18] [19]. Adorno's use of psychometric testing and clinical interviews of willing Holocaust participants concluded that there existed an 'authoritarian personality' that was susceptible to the influences of prejudicial and totalitarian directives. Lester, et al. transfer this work into the field of terrorism studies by attaching to Islamic terrorists such proclivities as the projection of internal guilt, the displacement of anger onto others, the submission to conventionalism, aspirations of toughness and bravado and an absence of empathy [20]. The work by Kagitcibasi into Islamic child raising practices is used by Lester, et al. to demonstrate that Middle Eastern family traditions are more likely to produce authoritarian personalities with recidivistic inclinations [21]. Volkan proposes that terrorists, particularly those that drive others to martyr themselves, had suffered psychological trauma during their childhoods [22]. Alternatively, Juergensmeyer suggests terrorism is a symbolic sexual acting-out by young males confined by religious and social suppression and who are attracted to the explosive nature of the terrorist act and the promise of virgins in the hereafter [23].

Similar studies have been conducted to psychologically profile European terrorists. In analysing right-wing Italian terrorism, Ferracuti and Bruno define an 'authoritarian-extremist personality' characterised by pathological disturbance, ideological vacuity and a psychological disconnection with reality [24]. Sullwold categorises German terrorist leaders into two psychological profiles; the unstable, egotistic and apathetic extrovert, and the intolerant, paranoid and hostile neurotic [25]. Post terms the combination of logical reasoning and psychopathological terrorist influences as 'terrorist psychologic' - a system of warped cognition that rationalises and legitimises 'acts [terrorists] are psychologically compelled to commit' [26]. By compiling the numerous psychological studies into the terrorist mind, their amalgamated results produce multiple terrorist personalities, or utilise personality traits that are widely distributed in a population. Psychological profiling, so far, has failed to determine a single 'terrorist personality'. The commonality between these psychological profiles is that the malfeator is either insane or they hold a warped awareness of reality. This is particularly seen as the case with suicide terrorism. Kushner writes that Palestinian suicide bombers may be overwhelmed by a life experience which has generated extreme feelings of anger and hopelessness, such as the result of losing several relatives or close friends at the hands of Israeli security forces [27]. Salib and Rosenberger both hypothesise that the rationality of suicide bombers is hijacked by desperation caused by a perceived absence of hope, derailing them into a dependence on grandiose, paranoid delusions [28] [29].



The endeavours of psychologists in profiling the terrorist have been limited to vague implications of irrationality and insanity. Post notes that,

*‘behavioral scientists attempting to understand the psychology of individuals drawn to this violent political behaviour have not succeeded in identifying a unique “terrorist mindset”’ [30].*

Dean states that the employment of methods based on behavioural and clinical assessments appear ‘to be of very limited use when applied to terrorists, as no such definitive “terrorist personality” has been found to exist in the scholarly literature’ [31]. Dean describes figurative ‘road blocks’ that obstruct the success of psychological profiling in a terrorism context. The most prominent of these obstacles is the lack of any apparent psychological dysfunction in the biographical records of terrorists. There are two responses that could be drawn from this; firstly, that psychological profiling requires more primary data to deliver significant results; or, secondly, that psychological profiling is intrinsically a fruitless endeavour. The former conclusion is espoused by Lester, et al. who write that the absence of first-hand assessments result in the records of many terrorists, most patently suicide bombers, to draw from a process of ‘psychological autopsy’ [32]. Other scholars dismiss the possibility of a terrorist personality altogether. Wilkinson states that; ‘We already know enough about terrorist behaviour to discount the crude hypothesis of a “terrorist personality” or “phenotype”’ [33]. Laqueur writes that the search for a unique ‘terrorist personality’ has been a futile venture [34]. The focal point of this argument is that terrorists are as likely to suffer from a mental illness as the population at large are - or at least to an imperceptible differential. Moghaddam states that; ‘Critical assessments of the available evidence suggest that there is little validity in explanations of terrorism that assume a high level of psychopathology among terrorists’ [35]. McCauley writes that;

*‘[Systematic research into the biographical records of the Baader-Meinhof Gang conclude that they] did not differ from the comparison group of nonterrorists in any substantial way; in particular, the terrorists did not show higher rates of any kind of psychopathology’ [36].*

Proponents of the *normalcy* of the terrorist mind depict the social environment that terrorists operate in. Terrorists are generally not delinquents or recluses, but thrive in an atmosphere of interdependence. Clark’s investigations into ETA found that its members are not socially marginalised or mentally disturbed; instead, they belonged to a close-knit ethnic community and were supported by loving families [37]. Unlike lone wolves, the terrorist group relies on ‘mutual commitment and trust’ and ‘the cooperation between groups’, as demonstrated by the four 9/11 hijacking groups, which is ‘radically inconsistent with the psychopathic personality’ [38]. In fact, Townshend writes that terrorists are ‘disturbingly normal people’ and Crenshaw notes: ‘What limited data we have on individual terrorists... suggest that the outstanding characteristic is normality’ [39] [40]. Without the supposition of mental illness – a denigration due to a fundamental attribution error - psychological profiles resort to assigning subtler personality traits found in many sane members of the public [41]. For example, Post describes terrorists as ‘action-oriented, aggressive people who are stimulus-hungry and seek excitement’, which, even if accurate, would cover a sizable demographic of



those in the military, security or emergency services [42]. It is now generally accepted that as opposed to serial killers, pyromaniacs and rapists, the terrorist mind follows rational decision-making and attends to a coherent political philosophy that facilitates the use of violence as a tool of strategic and communicative value. The motives of terrorists are inherently socio-political, relating to a group philosophy rather than individual psychology. From this perspective, terrorism is a manifestation of political militancy, albeit in an intentionally audacious form, and the rationality of its actions should not be considered in isolation from their purposes.

Another criticism of the psychological profiling of terrorists is that the terrorist organisation, as with a legal enterprise, recruits many personalities in order to fulfil a diversity of functions. The composition of a terrorist organisation is far from homogenous, and requires the skills of not only hijackers and bombers, but bomb-makers, smugglers, leaders, disciplinarians, orators, communicators, trainers and financiers. The work undertaken by these roles culminates in the overall terrorist campaign. The complexity of a single terrorist organisation, not to mention the variety of terrorist movements as a whole, leads Hudson to write that;

*'The personalities of terrorists may be as diverse as the personalities of people in any lawful profession. There do not appear to be any visibly detectable personality traits that would allow authorities to identify a terrorist' [43].*

Psychological profiling is an inadequate form of discerning between the terrorist and the non-terrorist due to both the diversity and normalcy of the personalities that constitute a terrorist organisation's membership.

### *Socioeconomic Profiling*

The final profiling technique which will be examined is the use of socioeconomic measures. This strand of terrorist profiling relies on the premise that terrorist proclivity can be ascertained through information on an individual's social status, education, livelihood and marital status, amongst other factors. The general belief among international leaders is that "poverty lies at the heart of terrorism", as purported by Desmond Tutu and South Korean President Kim Dae Jong, and "education reduces terrorism", as supported by the Dalai Lama and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel [44] [45]. These blanket suppositions do not always correlate with real world research. An example of this incongruity can be seen in Russell and Miller's analysis of eighteen different terrorist organisations and 350 individual terrorists active in the decade following 1966 [46]. Their research concluded that '[the observed terrorists] have been largely single males... who have some university education, if not a college degree'. From this, terrorists are more likely to be single, and, more surprisingly, they are likely have undertaken higher or further education. The same conclusion is drawn from the study of West German terrorists during that period;

*'Whether having turned to terrorism as a university student or only later, most were provided an anarchist or Marxist world view, as well as recruited into terrorist operations while in the university' [ibid.].*



Hudson writes that; ‘The RAF and Red Brigades were composed almost exclusively of disenchanting intellectuals’ [47]. Dean’s study of the thirty-six Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists arrested in 2001 and 2002 found that most of the members had high levels of education [48]. Besides a defining commonality of religion and above average education, the terrorist sample was socially and economically unremarkable. As with the other profiling measures, education does not, frustratingly for the profilers, paint a uniform portrait of a terrorist. A distinction can be made between the urban terrorist and the rural terrorist; the former – such as the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades – are typically highly educated, whereas rural movements – such as the Armed Islamic Group, PKK and FARC – tend to be characterised by a poorly educated membership. Citing the works of Nolan and Sprinzak, Lester, et al. depict several cases of oscillating demographic dimensions that ‘change with time and place’ [49] [50] [51]. This shows that terrorism, in part at least, is concomitant to the political environment, and, therefore, it is expectable that as social and economic circumstances evolve, so does the composition of the terrorist demographic. It can be concluded that a successful attempt to profile the terrorist must recognise that its assessment is both ephemeral and context-specific.

### *Behavioural Detection*

The lack of definitive success in profiling terrorists based on the dimensions of race, gender, age, pathology, psychology and socioeconomic factors has led to other methods of processing a population in order to detect malfeasors. The intention of these newer techniques is to avoid dimensional profiling due the already explained differences between terrorist movements, between roles within terrorist organisations and between the personalities and motives of individual terrorists. Instead, abnormalities in physiology and behaviour are detected by using technology and behavioural detection officers to monitor individuals at security points. The obvious benefit to this approach is that it requires no previous knowledge of the individual’s personal history. The US Transport Security Administration implemented the Screening of Passengers through Observation Techniques (SPOT) programme in 2003 to ‘identify potentially high security risk individuals by screening travellers for behaviours that may be indicative of stress, fear or deception’ [52]. SPOT has met with increasing criticism for not being able to detect terrorists: There have been 23 occasions where terrorists have travelled through SPOT security points and no interceptions have been made using the technique [53]. As Meyer points out: ‘Put bluntly, the program has a 100% failure rate’ [54]. Many scholars are sceptical as to whether the observation of behavioural and micro-facial movements is scientifically proven to be able to determine future violent intent. Honts, et al. raise several concerns:

*‘First, scientific research does not support the notion that microexpressions reliably betray concealed emotion... Second, whereas brief facial activity may reveal the purposeful manipulation of a felt emotion... the problems of interpretation of such manipulation renders the approach useless for practical purposes... In conclusion, the use of microexpressions to establish credibility is theoretically flawed and has not been supported by sound scientific research’ [55].*



Unless the employment of brief behavioural observation to identify future malicious intent in an individual is scientifically proven, and palpable results are forthwith, SPOT and similar programmes will continue to be rightfully derided by critics.

## *Conclusions*

The task of profiling the terrorist has been a long and drawn-out process that has seen a revival of interest in the post-9/11 era. During the seventies and eighties, many psychologists, sociologists, political scientists and international security academics sought to systematically record terrorist data in order to construct profiles organised around various parameters. The crudest profiles used immutable traits such as race and biological gender, while others endeavoured to define the terrorist through psychopathological or socioeconomic measurements. The initial obstacle facing all of these efforts was definitional, as is still the case today. This is because the fundamental terminology under investigation – *terrorism* – has not been universally defined. Working definitions employed by different studies vary and, therefore, the internal validity of recorded data and the generalised conclusions drawn from that data is considerably weakened. Regardless of this preliminary hindrance, the profiling of terrorists fails to result in any definitive phenotype of the universal terrorist. For instance, the use of racial profiling to monitor a population for potential international terrorists would result in a discrimination of security checks against Arabs, which total over 5 million people living in the United States alone. Overlooking the sheer size of this demographic, the fact remains that not all terrorists are Arabs. The implementation of racial stereotypes into terrorist profiling is not only imprecise, but has considerable ramifications for the individual liberty of the population being monitored. This has equal severity in the instances of gender and age profiling.

The argument for psychological profiling in the context of terrorism also falls short in its claim that a terrorist personality or personalities exist. Although some scholars argue that with more primary data, psychological profiling will be substantiated as a successful measure, the current evidence concludes that no causal progression from mental illness to terroristic intention occurs. Psychological profiling is further stifled by the apparent normalcy and sociability of many terrorists. Ethno-nationalists, in particular, are intertwined into an interdependent close-knit community which requires high levels of trust and mutual commitment, far from the notions of psychosis or other pathological disorders. Psychological profiles that incorporate subtler but ubiquitous personality traits, such as aggression and thrill-seeking, do not provide enough specificity to be of any practical application to the countering of terrorism. On the other hand, socioeconomic profiles do display some merit in specific temporal and geographic contexts, but are soon invalidated due to the fluidity of the political environment and the evolving terrorist-counterterrorist dichotomy. Due to the need of a considerable amount of biographical data and the lack of longevity or generalisability, such profiles have limited practical use in combating emerging terrorist threats. Socioeconomic profiles succeed in demonstrating one thing - the multiplicity and complexity of the phenomenon of terrorism.

To succinctly answer this paper's titular question - *Will it ever be possible to profile the terrorist?* This author believes that the usage of one-dimensional measurements to profile the terrorist is a futile endeavour and is likely to remain so in light of the current research. It may be argued that a successful terrorist profile can be created by amalgamating several unsuccessful one-dimensional assessments into a multi-dimensional profile. This is clearly a





recipe for compounding failure because, with each additional dimension added, the profile's scope becomes more and more extraneous to the diverse nature of the modern international terrorist. As an alternative to profiling the *terrorist*, a more lucrative venture may be to transcend the individual by profiling *terrorism* as a process within a complex system [56] [57]. This perspective is particularly pertinent today in order to profile terrorism as an increasingly globalised phenomenon.

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## Notes

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