Lecture 6: Terrorist Profiles/Theories
Cindy Combs opens Chapter 4 with the following questions:

- What kind of person becomes a terrorist?

- Is there any way to tell who is likely to become a terrorist?

- Is there such a thing as a terrorist personality?
The reason these questions are relevant is somewhat obvious:

If we can determine the types of individuals who are drawn to terrorism, we can better predict those who are most likely to become terrorists in the first place...
As Combs argues, “this could be an extremely useful tool for governments...in coping with terrorism”
At the end of this discussion we will break into groups designed to create a terrorist profile (i.e., a “typical” terrorist)

There is mixed opinion on whether it is possible...most researchers say it isn’t...
Let’s start with some material in the Combs text on profiling, take a look at some theories and then break into groups
Let’s start with some highlights from Combs chapter on terrorist profiles...
Frederick Hacker (1976) suggests 3 categories of people who commit terrorism:

1) **Crazies** (are emotionally disturbed)

2) **Criminals** (are about personal gain)

3) **Crusaders** (prestige/power for collective causes)

**Question**: What are the differences b/n criminals & crusaders?
Question: Can we generalize about a “typical” terrorist?

Edward O’Balance suggests we can generalize about some terrorist characteristics:

1) **Dedicated** (not casual/part-time)

2) **Brave** (death/torture/jail a possibility)

3) **No pity/emotion** (kill for “higher purpose”)

4) **Fairly high intelligence** (planning and conducting terrorism isn’t easy so intelligence is necessary)

5) **Fairly high sophistication** (travel 1st class, stay in nice hotels, blend in with executive jet setters etc)

6) **Reasonable education/knowledge** (English language/another language-College)
Question: Why do people become terrorists today?

Combs suggests 3 things about individual terrorists:

1) **Simplicity** - they see world in black & white terms/they good-enemies evil

2) **Identification** - group identity/identify with suffering of others w/n larger “group”

3) **Revenge** - identification with the suffering of others is often linked with the desire to avenge “wrongs” done to identity group
Demographic Trends in Group Membership
1) **Age**-active terrorists tend to be young; leaders are older than followers

2) **Education**-Mark Sageman argues 60% have college education; but terrorist followers are now younger so they’re less educated

3) **Economic Status**-Formerly most came from middle class; today’s terrorist followers come from destitution & leaders from mid-upper classes

4) **Gender**-Most followers and leaders are men; however, more and more women are becoming terrorists/suicide bombers (black widows)
Is there a typical demographic pattern? Not really BUT...
Two psychologists, Staub and McCauley (2010), argue terrorists tend to come from 3 types of social groups:

1) Those who identify with a suffering group

2) Those who respond to suffering in their own group

3) and alienated individuals who find purpose by joining a terrorist group

*They suggest most terrorists are revolutionaries drawn to a cause, people who have sudden conversions, and people who are attracted by their peers...
In his book, *United States of Jihad*, Peter Bergen argues that many young folks are going to Syria-Iraq to join ISIS for fairly vague, prosaic reasons:

- going to join a “movement”
- in the “vanguard of world history”
- “inspirational”
- “opportunity”
- “God inspired”
Bergen spends the book explaining why some young folks (looks at 300 individuals) are inspired to kill innocent people they don’t know in despicable acts of terrorism...

**Conclusion**: ultimately “there isn’t one” and also that it’s next to impossible to create a profile...
*Combs (p.59) says “it is difficult to generalize about the ‘typical’ terrorist with any degree of accuracy”
Walter Laqueur (1999, pp.79-104) says that “no one can develop a composite picture of a terrorist b/c no such terrorist exists...terrorism fluctuates over time and profiles change with circumstances.”
Criminologist Randy Borum (2004, 2013) agrees that there is no single terrorist personality and that terrorists represent a variety of physical types and psychological characteristics...
*You’ve heard from Borum, Combs, Hacker, Laqueur, O’Balance et al...

Very soon, you will try to create a profile of a “typical” terrorist...after next topic...
Terrorist Theories

**Let’s briefly examine some theories & explanations for what motivates folks to become terrorists...**
Theoretical Perspectives
1) Rational Choice

a. From this perspective terrorism is “calculated violence that is goal directed and employed in pursuit of political objectives” (Crenshaw)

b. So terrorism is political in nature, goal oriented, and the result of rational or logical choices among several alternatives.

*Such as:

- removing foreign influence from a country or region (al Qaeda v USA)
- removal of a regime (PLO v Israel)
- or national independence (IRA v British Crown)
Theoretical Perspectives
2) Personal Traits

a. From this perspective, political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces/factors (Jerrold Post)

b. Jeffrey Ross has called individuals “facilitating traits such as alienation, depression, or antisocial behavior may drive persons to join terrorist organizations...”

c. Randy Borum explains that “histories of childhood abuse and trauma appear to be widespread amongst persons belonging to terrorist organizations”
*BUT, how many millions of alienated, depressed, abused young people do NOT join terrorist groups or commit terrorism?

*Plus, if terrorists are compelled to kill because of psychological traits, as Post, Ross, Borum, and many others argue, then are such actions really terrorism or just actions taken by crazies or criminals (Hacker)?
Theoretical Perspectives
3) Social Interactions
   a. From this perspective, social interaction and social ties, NOT personal traits or rational choice, explain why individuals join terrorist groups/commit terrorism

   b. Marc Sageman analyzed the personal backgrounds of 172 members of the global Salafi movement, including Al Qaeda and found “there was no evidence that these jihadis were brainwashed and enlisted by distinct recruiting efforts...the key was social affiliation through friendship, kinship, and discipleship”

* So from this perspective it is neither alienation nor the embrace of religious and ideological extremism are the driving forces behind the establishment of jihadi terrorist cells...(ie their friends and family are involved so they get recruited...)
*Perhaps makes some sense in explaining why people join terrorist groups BUT does it explain what motivates them in the first place?
4) The “Structural” Framework
   a. From this perspective, a group’s structure and purpose cause it to act.
      i. For example, al Qaeda was a radical, anti-American/anti-Western organization structured in a very hierarchical, top down (i.e., dictatorship not democracy) way
      ii. So its structure led to the 9/11 attacks...
   
b. From this perspective, individuals aren’t violent, the structures that contain them are...so the structure and movement of groups explain terrorism
   
c. Donald Black (2004) argues from a structural perspective that “a group’s structure and purpose cause it to commit terrorism” not individual group members with specific psychological traits who are making individual rational choices...
*But what about individual choice and culpability?
Theoretical Perspectives
5) Criminology Perspective
   a. Criminologists tend to look at terrorism more practically by mostly focusing on behaviors & actions rather than motivations, structures, etc

   b. To prevent crime and apprehend criminals/terrorists, law enforcement personnel focus on recognizing differences b/n typical criminals and terrorists

   c. Differences b/n criminals and terrorists:
      1. Criminals are unfocused; terrorists focus their actions toward a goal
      2. Criminals are devoted to crime not as a philosophy but as a way of making a living; terrorists are dedicated to a cause
      3. Criminals will make deals to avoid punishment; terrorists rarely cooperate with law enforcement (cause too impt)
      4. Criminals usually run when confronted with force; terrorists tend to attack
      5. Criminals strike when the opportunity to do so is present; terrorists strike only after careful planning
      6. Criminals rarely train for crime; terrorists prepare for and rehearse their operations
In sum, terrorists have organizational structures, beliefs systems and motivational values that separate them from ordinary criminals...which makes trying to understand them more complicated.
In conclusion then, what does a typical terrorist look like? What would Combs or Marc Sageman argue?

a. Combs argues it is very difficult to create a profile beyond the fact that terrorism is mostly committed by the young, less rational and more emotional...

b. Marc Sageman finds it is possible so long as the unit of analysis is the group not individual terrorists

c. Israel seems to think it’s possible.  
   How does Israeli screen for terrorists?  
   -Do you approve of Israel’s method, which includes ethnic profiling?
Typology of the “Typical” Terrorist???
Are these men terrorists and a war criminals?