Motivation for Terrorism*

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What is it that drives perfectly rational and sane individuals to commit terrorist acts? How do they get motivated to extinguish the lives of innocent bystanders who have nothing to do with the wrongs perceived to have been done to them either as a group or individually? What was it that drove Abu Bilal (known also as Bomber fro Birmingham) leading a comparatively better life in Birmingham to come all the way from England and blow himself up at the entrance of Badami Bagh Cantonment in Srinagar on Christmas day in the year 2000? Experts in counter-terrorism and psychologists have been trying to fathom these questions for long. Some say it is lack of self-esteem, others say it is lack of identity and many say that it is due to indoctrination starting from their early childhood when their values and belief systems are being formed that result in their subsequent behaviour. According to one analyst terrorists reside in nation-states and their motivations and actions are shaped by their connections to particular societies and cultures. Terrorism is, therefore, not only a military and political problem but a societal problem as well.

However, at the broader level, terrorism has become an ideology to achieve politico-strategic goals and is being resorted to by both non-state actors and weak motives who become sponsors of such acts. For them end justifies means; terrorism is an asymmetric way to counterbalance powerful adversaries. Further, goals of terror lie far beyond the impact on victims of a terrorist act. Fundamental objective is to create fear psychosis, paralyse functioning of the state, and make the state commit inordinately large resources. Because of globalisation and modern means of communication with information crossing international frontiers with speed a terrorist act reverberates throughout the length and breadth of the world. Publicity is like oxygen for a terrorist to spread his message. The term 'Long War' has replaced Cold War.

The book *The Psychology of Terrorism* by Dr John Horgan proceeds to seek answers to questions like why does someone become a terrorist? Are their common causes? Is there a terrorist personality? The main feature of the book as stressed in Preface is to attempt and play a part in undoing some of the widespread confusions about what 'psychology of terrorism' means. Dr Horgan Being professor in Applied Psychology with extensive research in forensic psychology and terrorism, is eminently qualified to treat the subject of the book deftly with incisive insights.

The book proceeds logically with Chapter ①defining terrorism and Chapter ②stressing on understanding the phenomenon. The author concludes that there are substantial problems of definition even though he has given many definitions in his treatise. He veers around the view that terrorism is a conscious, deliberate strategic use of violence against a specific type of target to affect the political climate. Terrorism as a weapon can be resorted to by a wide array of state and non-state actors. Problem also lies in its poorly delineated state as even the simplest critical analyses of the concept of terrorism or 'terrorist' reveal a multiplicity of inconsistent and confusing uses. Dr Horgan puts forward very valid and engaging arguments in both the chapters to support his conclusions.

The succeeding three Chapters deal with individual approaches, becoming a terrorist and being a terrorist. Explanations of terrorism in terms of personality traits are insufficient in trying to understand why certain people get involved in terrorism and others do not. Though there is a widely held view that terrorists may have abnormal personality traits yet, according to the author, such views may be based on weak and shaky foundations and they need to be continually challenged. Coming from a qualified psychologist one may find this hard to reject but empirical evidence does show that in certain cases terrorists have certain traits or individual qualities like low self esteem and need for identification with a group that may propel them towards a path of violence and destruction. Therefore, traditional wisdom about terrorist traits may be as difficult to reject as clinical analyses by psychologists.

Further, the author asserts that identifying issues relating to 'how' people become involved may be more valuable than attempting to arrive at answers 'why' people become involved. There are a number of factors, often a complex combination of factors that can come to bear on an individual's intentional or unintentional socialisation into involvement with terrorism. He cites some incidents and case studies in support of this argument. Being a terrorist provides the individual a growing sense of empowerment, control and defensiveness, a lowering of inhibitions to commit violent acts and overall decrease in non-terrorism related social activity. These assertions by the author have been well argued and bear the stamp of a seasoned analyst.

In the last two Chapters, the author dwells on why individuals disengage from terrorism and stresses on the need for more rigour and research on the issues raised in the book because terrorism is too important a problem to be left to politicians. He is banking on the academic research community to provide further contribution to the analyses of problem of terrorism.

On the whole a very interesting and engaging book even though it is in the long line of many similar books on the psychology of terrorism. The book would give value addition to any library.