



Is it ideology, politics, poverty, early childhood trauma, loss of personal identity, or social inequality that drives some individuals to leave their lives and to become terrorists?

The most appropriate answer is that the acquisition of the terrorist behavior should be seen as a combination of not so simple behavioral elements and motives, combined with unique experiences, influential sociological and psychological processes that will enhance that kind of behavior that would be impossible to avoid.

Motives are motivating forces that cause a variety of human activities. It's a complex psychodynamic process that is aimed at encouraging human activity, in terms of stimulating, directing, and managing it towards certain subjects and objects as well as regulating the activity to achieve certain goals. They represent the essential energy stimulus that affects the individual to certain behavior and over time directs and manages the human behavior toward the accomplishment of certain selected goals within its social environment.<sup>1</sup> The behavior of the criminal individual including terrorists' behavior is driven by some external and internal factors that have affected the person, directing him so that he achieves his goals through antisocial and illegal actions.<sup>2</sup>

The decade-long question posed by many scientists, theorists, and researchers is how certain individuals decide to create terrorist behavior, that is, to become terrorists, given that a large mass of people is exposed to the same/similar influences and sociological/ psychological processes as those individuals. With the help of technology, more and more people today are being exposed to sinister ideals that encourage terroristic behavior.<sup>3</sup>

To create terrorist behavior, the individual must go through the complex psychological and practical process of metamorphosis from an ordinary citizen into a "full-fledged" terrorist. He needs to form a certain set of beliefs, seek a target group, and finally carries out an act of violence against civilians in the belief that thereby represents the goals and ideology of the group.<sup>4</sup>

Individuals suffering from past or recurring trauma are susceptible to radicalization. Trauma is defined as a deeply disturbing physical or psychological event that leaves its victim feeling powerless.<sup>5</sup> It reduces

1 Reber, A. & Reber, E. (2010). Dictionary of Psychology. Belgrade, official publishing.

2 Crenshaw, M. (2000). The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century. Political Psychology. 21(2), p. 405–420.

3 Coming of Age in a Multicultural World: Globalization and Adolescent Cultural Identity Formation, Applied Developmental Science, 2003, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261591283\\_Coming\\_of\\_Age\\_in\\_a\\_Multicultural\\_World\\_Globalization\\_and\\_Adolescent\\_Cultural\\_Identity\\_Formation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261591283_Coming_of_Age_in_a_Multicultural_World_Globalization_and_Adolescent_Cultural_Identity_Formation)

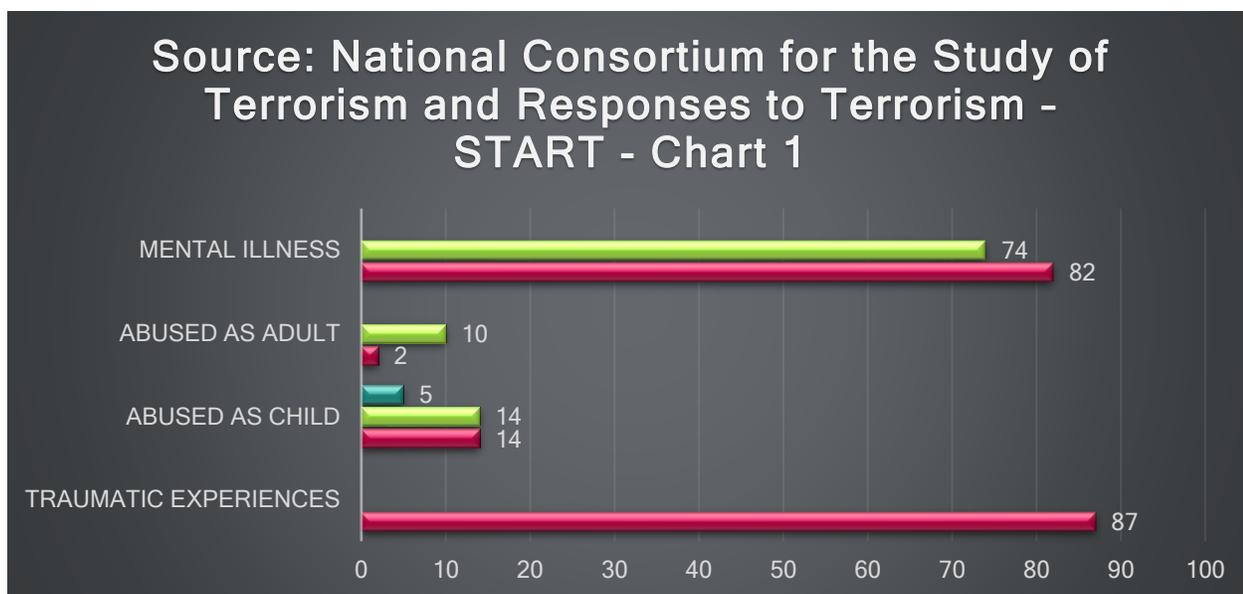
4 Young, H., Rooze, M. & Holsappel, J. (2014). Translating Conceptualizations into Practical Suggestions: What the literature on Radicalization Can Offer to Practitioners Impact. Peace and Conflict Journal of Peace Psychology, 21(2), p.212–225.

5 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder After Terrorist Attack in Healthcare Professionals, Disaster and Emergency Medicine Journal, 2017,

[https://journals.viamedica.pl/disaster\\_and\\_emergency\\_medicine/article/view/DEMJ.2017.0003/43534](https://journals.viamedica.pl/disaster_and_emergency_medicine/article/view/DEMJ.2017.0003/43534)

feelings of self-worth, thereby, preventing the individual from feeling positive emotions and experiences. When this happens, the individual may question their purpose in life and choose to develop a completely different identity to escape the negative emotions associated with the trauma. The influence of emotional injuries in the earliest childhood of such a character that results in the repression of the experienced into the realm of the subconscious, and emotional injuries suffered later, in adulthood are probably more likely to intensify and direct negative feelings towards those from whom a certain evil has already been suffered.<sup>6</sup>

Depending on the type, level, and intensity of trauma, the individual may be forced to psychologically remove himself from his current situation. One of the key elements of psychological removal from the current negative situation is fantasy. Fantasy has a very important role in the development and maintaining the individual's behavior and represents an elaborate set of thoughts with a detailed mental elaboration of events, objects, or other forms of symbolic thought that is characterized by excessive preoccupation with thought trials, anchored by current emotions, representing a change and/or distraction from the current situation.<sup>7</sup>



In

2017, researchers from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) reviewed data from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) database. Data was analyzed to determine common characteristics between U.S. terrorist operatives. Analyzing the data for the period from 2010 to 2018, 87 individuals from total of 774 individuals were

<sup>6</sup> Bandura, A. (1969). Principles of behavior modification. New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime. Types of trauma involved the witnessing of death, threats to life, and severe physical injury. Thirty-three individuals reported being abused during their childhood either by family members, non-family members or a combination of both. Two individuals reported abuse by family members, non-family members, or a combination throughout adulthood and for the other 10 individuals there is no known information about the abuse.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of negative traumatic events where the individual was abused in any way during childhood or adulthood, either by another individual, group, organization or even government, the individual sees the way out of such negative events within the framework of fantasy or excessive contemplation which represents a special psychological reality. Facing extreme insignificance due to negative traumatic events from the "real" world, the psychological reality of these individuals represents a special stimulus that allows the establishment of personality control over a particular situation. Within excessive contemplation or fantasy, a special personal identity is created as protection from reality, where over time they grow into dominant, destructive personalities. Possession of dominance, power, and control over others within the psychological reality is a deep need, and at the same time a great motivating force for resolving certain dilemmas faced by these individuals.<sup>9</sup> According to psychologists, the universal type of terrorist does not exist, the conditions and reasons why certain people decide to join terrorism, must be seen through sociological and psychological circumstances combined with unique personal experiences throughout life. Terrorist organizations recruit candidates with desirable psychological predispositions, which are not necessarily psychopathological. As a group entity, the terrorist organization will attract many different types of people and of course, some of them will have some sort of psychological issues / mental illness.<sup>10</sup> According to (PIRUS) database from National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism – START, 82 individuals from 774 individuals have been professionally diagnosed with mental illness which represents 10.59 % of total individuals who have some sort of mental illness. The other 74 individuals from the total of 774 individuals have been subject to popular/public speculations, unconfirmed cases, of being mentally ill, which represent 9,56%.<sup>11</sup> Some violent people, including terrorists, may have mental predispositions which can be considered as contributory factors for criminal and extremely aggressive behavior, most of them are

8 Chart 1 - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. (2017). Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) [Data file]. Retrieved from

<http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus>

9 Beres, D. (1961). Perception, imagination, and reality. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41, p.327-334

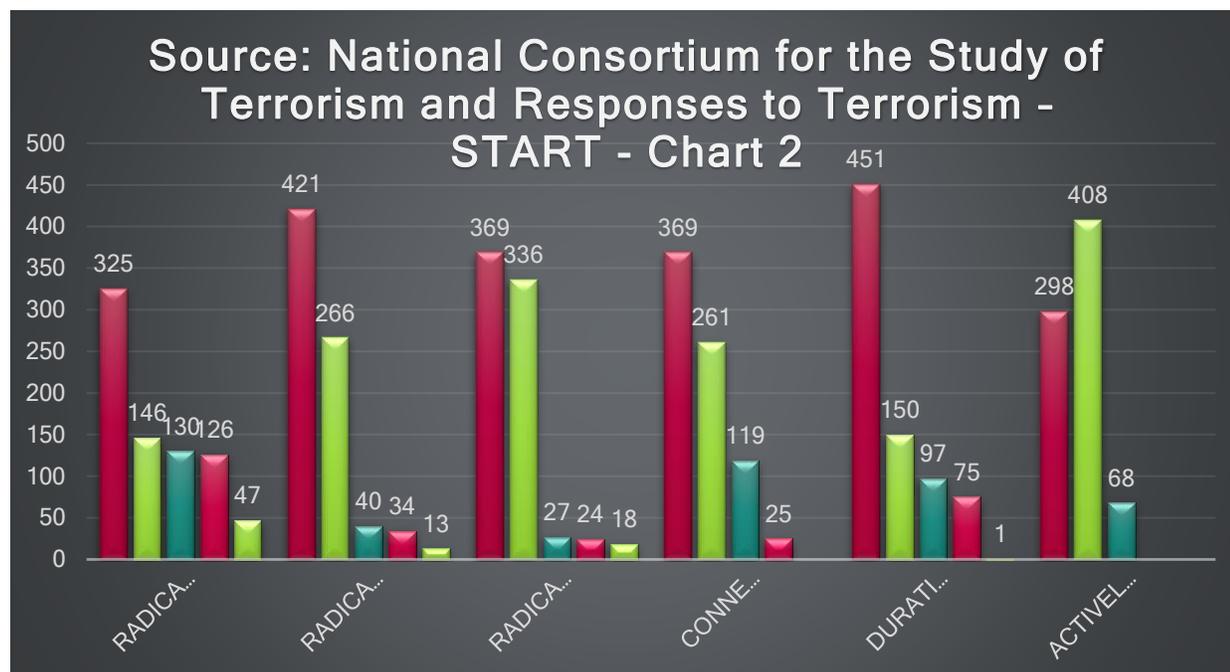
10 Kruglanski, A., Bélanger, J., Gelfand, M., Gunaratna, R., Hettiarachchi, M., Reinares, F., Orehek, E., Sasota, J. & Sharvit, K. (2013). Terrorism: A (Self) Love Story Re-directing the Significance Quest Can End Violence. *American Psychological Association*, 68(7), p.559–575.

11 Chart 1 - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. (2017). Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) [Data file]. Retrieved from

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using special reasons or ideology to justify their actions. Although terrorists are generally considered "lunatics, crazy individuals", because of their gruesome acts, ultimately they are certainly mostly criminals, while for experts who are engaged in terrorist behaviors, these individuals are represented as "beings in search for a reason and a higher goal".<sup>12</sup>

One of the most crucial elements in the direction of the acquisition of terrorist behavior is the process of radicalization, where this main component is made possible mainly by the family and peer association.

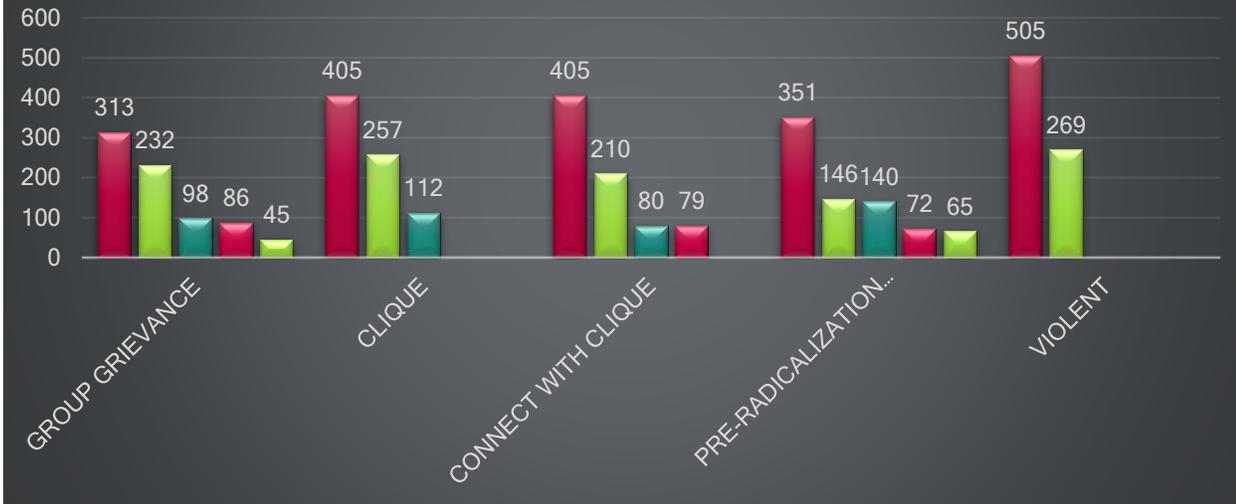


As per the database, 319 out of 774 individuals had at least one close friend who engaged in extremism violence. Eighty-seven individuals had at least one radicalized family member, and 69 individuals reported their significant others participated in extremism violence. 119 individuals had direct connections with an extremist group prior to their radicalization, while 25 individuals made connections after ideologically motivated radical behaviors. Interestingly, less than seventy (68) individuals were successfully recruited into extremist groups; more than 400 were unsuccessful in their recruitment attempts. The duration of radicalization also varies between individuals. Approximately 19.37% (n=150) of subjects adopted their new radicalized identity within 1 to 5 years. Ninety-seven individuals took more than 5 years, while 75 were fully radicalized in less than a year.<sup>13</sup>

12 Borum, R. (2003). Understanding Terrorist Mind-Set. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin 72(7), p.7-10. [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/fbi/terrorist\\_mindset.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/fbi/terrorist_mindset.pdf).

13 Chart 2 - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. (2017). Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus>

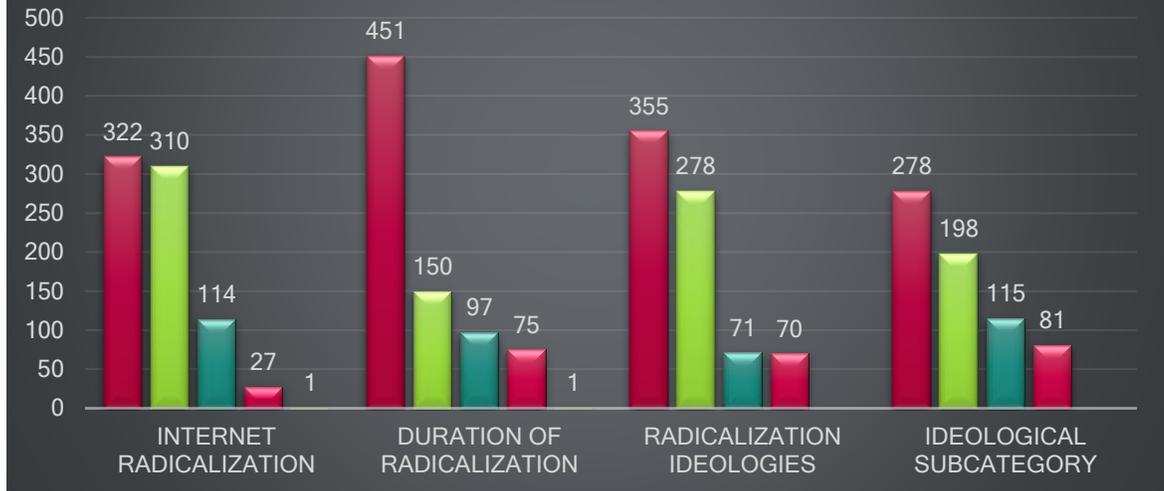
Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism - START  
Chart 3



Self-identification, or the sense of belonging to a particular group, can be established through direct or indirect experiences. From the data, 12.66% (n=98) of individuals identified themselves with a specific group ideology, without the need of personal connection. Eleven percent (n=86) identified themselves with a specific group based on direct experience, and 5.81% (n=45) reported having a personal connection with their group. Thirty-three percent (n=257) were members of an exclusive group with at least two individuals. History of criminal activity may also serve as a precursor for terrorism. Prior to radicalization, 140 individuals committed at least one violent act. Seventy-two committed non-violent, minor offenses. Sixty-five subjects had participated in serious, but non-violent, criminal activity. Yet, over 65% of subjects (505) utilized violence during their attack. Only 34.75 % (269) used non-violent methods.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Chart 3 - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. (2017). Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus>

Source: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism - START  
Chart 4



Social media has proven to be an effective tool for recruiting individuals. With the appearance of social media, radicalization has found its place in cyberspace where physical human contact has been reduced to a minimum. Data shows that for 322 individuals, internet resources helped to reaffirm pre-existing extremist beliefs. For 114 individuals, internet resources were used as a primary means of radicalization, meaning that the initial exposure of extremist ideology occurred online. (310 – unknown, 27 – no known role of the internet in individual’s radicalization and 1 – radicalization occurred before 1995). The duration of radicalization also varies between individuals. Approximately 19.37% (n=150) of subjects adopted their new radicalized identity within 1 to 5 years. Ninety-seven individuals took more than 5 years, while 75 were fully radicalized in less than a year. (451 – unknown). Varying ideologies are also significant when analyzing radicalization. According to the collective data, nearly half (45.8%) represented a far-right ideology. Nine percent (n=71) represented the far left, 35.9% (n=278) embodied an Islamist ideology and 9.04% (n=70) were radicalized by their own single issues. In terms of ideological subcategories, 278 were Islamist radicals, 199 individuals were white supremacists, 115 were anti-government and 81 were xenophobic. Disturbingly, fourteen out of the 774 subjects of interest were below the age of 18 and 412 of individuals were between 18 to 32 years of age.<sup>15</sup>

*ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.*

15 Chart 4 - National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. (2017). Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus>