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**The Lethal Cocktail of Terrorism:
The Four Necessary Ingredients that Go
into Making a Terrorist & Fifty Individual
Vulnerabilities/Motivations that May also
Play a Role**

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D.

I recently returned from an interview trip in Belgium, the European country with the highest per capita rate of foreign fighters going to Syria, young men and women who travel there sometimes for good, but mainly to join groups like ISIS and *Jabhat al-Nusra* (the Syrian franchise of *al-Qaeda*). With over five hundred Belgians having gone to fight “jihad” and over one hundred foreign fighters now having returned (half of them put in prison, half returned into society) authorities there are struggling with the staggering numbers of Belgians that have been attracted into militant jihadi groups. They are wondering why and how that comes to be as well as what can be done to prevent and turn back those already entered onto the terrorist trajectory.

After interviewing almost five hundred militant jihadi terrorists, their family members, close associates, and even their hostages, from places ranging from Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Russia, Chechnya, Israel, Canada and Western Europe I think I have a pretty good idea of how and why some people get onto the terrorist trajectory. This is my explanation of the necessary ingredients for the lethal cocktail of making a terrorist along with an explanation of the individual vulnerabilities/motivations that may also play a role—depending on the context and the individuals involved.

- 1) First there is nearly always **a group**. [Ted Kaczynski \(the Unabomber\)](#) and [Chris Dorner](#) (the former LA policeman and shooter) each formed their own manifestos and attacked on their own, but these types of true lone wolves are rare indeed. There is usually a group purporting to represent some faction of society and offering terrorism as an answer.
- 2) Second the group offers **an ideology**—one that always *wrongly* attempts to justify terrorism and the attacking of innocent civilians for the cause.
- 3) Third there is some level of **social support** that can vary widely by context. A youth thinking about joining a terrorist group in Gaza for instance is likely to have many friends who are also part of Hamas or Fatah and may chose his group the way other youth in other countries chose a football team. Whereas a youth growing up in Boston, as Tamerlan Tsarnaev did, will have to dig deeper in his community to find other like-minded individuals. Although these days with the Internet, having a phone or computer handy, means that one can quickly and easily tap into social networks supportive to terrorist groups. ISIS currently maintains a 24/7 presence on the Internet; and produces thousands of videos, posters, and memes for individuals to interact with on all the social media sites. When someone shows interest in their activities, they quickly swarm in, providing them with one-on-one attention, care and nurture that is often lacking in their own lives—to recruit them further into the group.
- 4) Lastly there is some **individual vulnerability that resonates** with the first three factors—the group, its ideology and the social support provided by the group. This paper identifies fifty such factors that have to do with individual motivations and vulnerability (see Table One). And we can break these into two cases: by whether or not the person lives **inside or outside a conflict zone**.

[According to my research](#), those who reside in conflict zones are most often primarily motivated by **trauma** and **revenge** as well as **frustrated aspirations**. They most often

have family members who have been killed, raped, tortured, imprisoned or otherwise unfairly treated. They may have lost their home, territory, jobs and resources and may be living under occupation. Often there are checkpoints and conflicts that keep them from engaging in their studies or block them from steady employment.

They are angry, hurt and easily resonate to a group that offers to equip them to strike back. They often want their enemy to feel the same pain they do and even if they know their terrorist act may be futile in every other way, they may be willing to even engage in a suicide attack in order to express their outrage, make the enemy suffer similarly, and sometimes even to end their own pain. If they are highly traumatized a suicide mission may offer them **psychological first aid of a short-term nature**—they can honorably exit a life overtaken by psychological trauma, painful arousal states, flashbacks, horror, anger, powerlessness, survival guilt and traumatic bereavement. If the group is good at selling suicide they may even believe that they immediately go to Paradise, also earn Paradise for their family members, and that they will reunite with lost loved ones by taking their own lives in a suicide attack.

But what about those residing in non-conflict zones like Belgium? What are the individual vulnerabilities that may contribute to their entering the terrorist trajectory? There are many.

In places like Belgium where the Moroccan second and third-generation still lives uneasily segregated from their white neighbors and find themselves easily able to gain an education but less easily hired and allowed into the mainstream middleclass there can be anger over **marginalization** and **discrimination**. **Unemployment, underemployment** and **frustrated aspirations** can all lead to feelings of **alienation** and a longing for **personal significance** that a terrorist group may offer. In Belgium I found long before ISIS arose, that youth of Moroccan immigrant descent would tell me things like what Jamal said about being told at the nightclubs “Go home Moroccan” and at job interviews that his prospective employer could never hire a Moroccan for the front office, “If this country doesn’t want me I can find one that does,” he told me—referring to joining a militant jihadi movement.

Now with ISIS having declared its “caliphate” this draw is even more powerful to the socially alienated, the person falling off his tracks or unable to succeed in the society in which he lives. In the city of Brussels where the commune of Molenbeek has been labeled a hotbed of terrorism, unemployment levels for Belgian citizens of Moroccan descent hover around thirty percent. Yet, ISIS currently offers any Muslim who is finding it hard to make his life in Europe or elsewhere—a job, a wife, a sex slave, a house, perhaps even a car, and the promise of being a significant part of **building the so-called “Caliphate”**.

Anger over geopolitics, particularly if it is mirrored on the micro-level in one’s own life can also play a very important part in providing a fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. Hamid in Antwerp, Belgium told me that he answered the call to al Qaeda terrorist recruitment after the recruiter brought the conflict back home to local politics for him—

asking if he didn't live uneasily with his "white" Belgian neighbors and fear what might happen if things rapidly fell apart in Belgium someday as they had in the Balkans when Muslim women became mass rape victims. Terrorist groups today use video, images and the Internet to portray extreme traumas and perceived, as well as actual, injustices in conflict zones such as in Syria, Iraq, Kashmir, Palestine, and Chechnya that they argue are caused by an enemy other than the terrorist group then calls the viewer to fight against to **restore justice** and **defend the defenseless**. Al Qaeda for years argued that Islamic people, lands, and even Islam itself, were under attack by the West and therefore people all over the world had a duty to rise up and join a defensive jihad. The same is being argued today by ISIS.

In a sense these groups instill **secondary trauma** in the viewers of their raw and graphic videos. A Moroccan friend of the Casa Blanca bombers told me, "We all viewed these videos of the war in Iraq and what was happening in Fallujah and we began to shake from the emotions of it all." He surmised that the terrorist recruiter of his friends referred to what they had all seen on these videos and how they could fight against it. "You see how we have nothing here and will never get jobs or be able to be married. The most we can be is drug addicts as you see us, but their recruiter cleaned them up and showed them another way." That way was self-sacrifice, attacking in behalf of others, and terrorism. He did clean the youth he recruited of their **drug addiction** as well as provided **purpose** and **significance** and he used the secondary trauma that the video recruiting materials caused to put them on a path that tragically and violently ended their lives and the lives of others.

Empathy and a **desire for justice** are also real and serious motivators. Many young kids from around the world went to Syria because they felt no one was offering real support to the beleaguered Syrians in their uprising against Bashar Assad. Those who have studied revenge and fairness find that people all over the world will go to great lengths even depriving themselves in order to make things just. Likewise those who study gender differences in the development of values formation find that young females often put a higher value on relationships when evaluating whether or not a specific action is correct or not. When youth are shown pictures and videos that make them believe the world is unjust and they are called into movements that promise to deliver justice, this can be extremely powerful, particularly in the face of boring and insignificant lives. The opportunity to take part in and even fight and sacrifice for something **heroic**, to help **build a utopian state** such as the "caliphate," and the **idealism** of youth is often preyed upon and captured by such terrorist groups.

We must also remember that for youth, developing a **positive identity** is one of their developmental tasks. They are in a developmental stage of moving away from their families and into society and they look to peers to give them cues about how to **belong** and **find significance**. In many ways we become the company that we keep—and a **band of brothers, gang of guys or a sisterhood** can be factors to pull one into a terrorist group and its ideology, simply because one wants to **belong** and find significance and meaning in the personal relationships offered. ISIS is particularly adept at using relationships—offered in person where they are able to use recruiters, such as in certain neighborhoods

in Europe—and by offering the same over the Internet via text, chat, phone, Skype and other social media in areas where they cannot reach in person. Belonging is a powerful motivator particularly for youth who are struggling with issues of **identity conflicts** and perhaps for some—particularly young converts and “reverts” (i.e. those born Muslim but finding new meaning in their religion)—with what it means to be a Muslim.

For youth, the promise and allure of **adventure** may also beckon them powerfully as does **romance** and for some even the raw excitement of **sex**. While many claim that the allure of the virgins in Paradise are a powerful motivator, in truth I’ve never in my years of interviewing any terrorist found the virgins to be such a powerful motivator. **Belief in a better afterlife** certainly conveys the courage to push the button that releases them into that state of being (or nonbeing), but stronger motivators, I’ve found, are those listed above alongside the very real motivator of what I like to call, “**sex now**”. When young girls offer themselves as sexual partners in illicit marriages as a reward for becoming a mujahid (holy warrior) as a group of girls in the Netherlands did, and when joining the jihad makes one more attractive to the opposite sex, these sexual rewards become powerful motivators as well. I call this “sex now” and am sure it’s a whole lot more motivating than just the promise of the virgins in Paradise. Likewise don’t forget that ISIS currently offers jobs alongside the offer of wives, and sex slaves, to young men facing high unemployment in their own countries. A young man who is jobless is likely to have trouble getting girlfriends and married and may therefore be blocked from sex. With ISIS all their sexual needs are suddenly going to be satisfied. This is no small thing. And this applies both to third world countries like Tunisia, as well as European countries like Belgium, in areas where youth of Moroccan descent face up to thirty percent unemployment rates in some of their neighborhoods.

We must also remember that conflict zones also exist in microcosms in neighborhoods and even inside individual homes where family and community trauma and PTSD happening on a smaller scale can lead to a **desire to escape** a painful life, just like inside any other larger conflict zone. When I interviewed in London a youth worker who was pulling gang youth out of an *al Qaeda* cell he told me that the youth attracted into terrorism were lacking involved parents, were often themselves victims of violence, and heavily involved in drugs and criminality. They were lost, and easily fell prey to an adult who took time to take them camping where he also taught them the *al Qaeda* ideology. The girls found safety in the *hijab*, particularly when their male counterparts were told to honor them for wearing it, and both genders found comfort in the promise of Paradise if they were killed in their criminal lives. Their recruiter became a role model to them, a leader, and infused them with **purpose, belonging to a greater good, meaning, significance** and redirected them onto the path of militant jihad while continuing to justify their criminality against the “kafir” (unbelievers) as works in behalf of the militant group. Only someone who offered similar feelings of care and purpose to their lives could draw these kids back out, as the youth worker had.

Material incentives can also be motivators. To a young girl who does not expect to live in more than a small apartment, pictures of a grand house in Raqqa, or a luxury car, can be alluring—as can the promise of a paycheck. The ability to eat can be powerful

motivators to an impoverished Syrian whose area is overtaken by ISIS as we are hearing in our [ISIS Defectors Interviews Project](#). One thirteen-year-old girl who had been shown pictures of mansions with swimming pools during her online recruitment to ISIS said she thought she would be going to ISIS Disney land.

Any Muslim who struggles with feelings of **shame or guilt** over past sins—or things that were done to him or her such as rape or sexual abuse for which their culture may blame them in whole or part, engaging in militant jihad can also be motivating in that one can **express anger and outrage** at an enemy thereby directing their inner rage at a real target. Likewise the possibility of being “martyred” can be a means of **purifying oneself** as the militant jihadi ideology teaches that such an act leads to automatically gaining Paradise for themselves and their family members. For a young person who may have done drugs, engaged in illicit sexual relations, homosexuality, had an abortion, etc. the possibility to **cleanse oneself** totally, **attain purity** and **be sure of the afterlife** may be highly motivating.

Youth often also struggle with **consolidating their gender identity**. Militant jihad for young men can shore up feelings of **insecurity over their manhood**. There is nothing like being issued a Kalashnikov or AK-47 to instill a **warrior identity** and thereby increase one’s sense of manhood. Likewise for Western girls inundated with confusing and conflicting messages about how to express their sexuality, a simple traditional life style can be attractive—where everything is clearly defined and marriage, a **traditional family lifestyle**, and **sexual safety** is promised (perhaps not delivered, but promised).

Mental health issues can also contribute as motivators. In one ISIS film, a young medical student from Cardiff argues that “**jihad is the cure for depression**” stating that he too was depressed before he joined ISIS. Indeed **action** can lighten the load of a heavy depression, even action that is totally wrong-minded. A **psychopathic personality** may also be thrilled to join ISIS where he or she can give free rein to a desire for brutality.

All, some, or just one of these individual vulnerabilities can be active in a person along with the powerful draw of a group, its ideology and the social support that is offered by the group—either in person, or these days via the Internet. Understanding the factors making up the lethal cocktail of terrorism does not excuse those who chose to engage in abhorrent violence, but it can lead us to thoughtful solutions where we begin to see the value in engaging in and supporting nonviolent civil rights movements for beleaguered communities in Europe for instance, or stimulating employment for areas of high unemployment while also trying to diminish exposure to terrorist groups, their ideologies and whatever support they may offer in person or via the Internet. Many of us spent the last decades studying terrorists to learn to identify and understand how these factors interact to make up the lethal cocktail of terrorism. Now it’s time to engage in action to prevent and deter individuals from ever entering the terrorist trajectory, and if on it, to help change their course.

Table One: Fifty Individual Motivations/Vulnerabilities for Engaging in Terrorism

<p>Conflict & Non-Conflict Zone Issues of Trauma, Revenge & Justice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma & Revenge • Frustrated Aspirations • Restore Justice & • Desire for Justice • Defend the Defenseless • Make the Enemy Feel our Pain • Express Rage • Anger over Geopolitics 	<p>Conflict & Non-Conflict Zone Psychological and Mental Health Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological First-Aid of a Short-term Nature for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma & • Traumatic Bereavement • Depression • Drug Addiction • Shame & Guilt • Purifying oneself • Express anger and outrage • Psychopathic Tendencies • Desire to Escape 	<p>Non-Conflict Zone Social Political Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marginalization & Discrimination • Unemployment • Underemployment • Alienation • Frustrated Aspirations 	
<p>Non-Conflict Zone Significance and Purpose Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longing for Personal Significance • Purpose • Meaning • Desire to be Heroic • Idealism • Secondary Trauma • Empathy • Adventure • Action 	<p>Non-Conflict Zone Identity & Relationship Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Identity • Identity Conflicts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bolster Manhood • Traditional Lifestyle • Consolidate Gender Identity • Religious or Ethnic Identity • Belonging <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Band of Brothers/Gang of Guys • Sisterhood • Belonging to a Greater Good • Romance • Sex Now 	<p>Conflict & Non-Conflict Zone Material Incentives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex slave • House • Car • Employment 	<p>Conflict & Non-Conflict Zone Religious Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longing to Join the Better Afterlife • Desire to Assure one's Positive Afterlife (via "Martyrdom") • Building the "Caliphate" • Building a Utopian State • Being Good

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