Nobody Born a Terrorist, but Early Childhood Matters: Explaining the Jihadis' Lack of Empathy

by Nancy Hartevelt Kobrin

Abstract

In the Qurʾan, Allah is described as 'merciful' and 'compassionate'. Why do we find no reflection of that among jihadis who claim to struggle in his name? Jihadis only possess a pseudo sense of empathy. They may appear to be empathic but it is a narcissistic empathy, for they are only empathic within their own group; it does not extend anywhere into their external world as evidenced by their murderous destructive behaviors.[1] Their stoic, dissociated affect shows neither compassion nor remorse as their fellow brethren engage in wanton beheadings and executions. In shame honor societies where children are humiliated and laughed at for having feelings and emotionality, it is no wonder that the capacity for empathy did not develop during their early years. Research by neuroscientists and mental health experts has shown strong links between violence and early childhood. The following observations seek to apply this perspective to jihadist terrorism.

Keywords: Terrorist personality; Profiling, Radicalization; Shame culture; Honor Killings; Autism; Empathy.

Introduction

There are many factors that can impede the development of real empathy in young people—genetic disorders, early disruptions in the child-mother bonding, trauma during stages of separation, environment issues, including pervasive shaming, brain development, epigenetics, etc. Much research still has to be done in these underlying aspects in order to gain a better understanding as to all the ingredients that result in empathy. Early traumatic experiences in children may contribute to abandonment and annihilation anxiety and terrors during their early years. Such experiences can have a crippling effect on them, leaving them riddled with persecutory anxiety, feeling that they are continually under attack as they grow into adulthood.

Through projective identification these children grow up with feelings of revenge. "Now it's my turn to watch other people suffer the way I have!" This is the pattern by which they learn, in turn, to revenge against the world, to undertake jihad.

The jihadi wears many faces. Many are charming, warm, outgoing, and know how to embrace and invite people into their circle. Lurking behind that there might lie a raging violent man or woman ready to kill at a moment's notice. Instead of bonding with people in warmth and kindness, they bond to people violently. After a terrorist attack, neighbors have described the perpetrator often as the 'nice guy' who lived next door. A jihadi might look normal—but so does a serial killer. In analyzing cultures, empathy or the lack thereof may be an early diagnostic tool to evaluate how risky some people might be to others when grown up. Neuroscience has shown that empathy is acquired early in childhood by the age of one or two in the maternal attachment phase. The building blocks for morality are intimately related to the acquisition of empathy in these first years as well.[2] Indeed at the 16th Annual World Summit commemorating 9/11 sponsored by the International Institute for Counter Terrorism in Herzliya, Israel, the esteemed American counter terrorist expert Brian Jenkins told the attendees that neuroscientists can ascertain if a six month old baby will have problems with aggression and violence through brain imaging.[3] While this may sound like science fiction, it is not.

Autism, Shame Cultures and Honor Killings and their Possible Links to Terrorism

In 2010 Doïna Harap, the Montreal filmmaker, interviewed me for her documentary *Body Language*.[4] She also interviewed a series of specialists on autism, including Professor Marco Iacoboni of UCLA who has been credited with discovering mirror neurons for empathy in the human brain.[5] Faulty mirror neurons may be a contributing factor to autism. It is known that people who have autism lack empathy. Independent of the recent debate about the effects of mirror neurons, there is sufficient evidence that jihadis lack empathy. There are many parallels between autism and the jihadis.[6] Furthermore, the documentary *Body Language* explored the universality of nonverbal communication across cultures and demonstrated that we humans are more alike than we are different. Ninety-four percent of what we communicate is done nonverbally. Autism in particular demonstrates a breakdown in the facility to communicate and to be able to read and correctly interpret facial expression in particular. Professors Diego Gambetta and Steffan Hertog wrote a seminal paper entitled "The Engineers of Jihad" (which has recently been turned into a book) pointing to the role of schizoid autistic demeanor.[7]

Autism is a developmental disorder; it is not a psychopathology. Because of shame, both autism and mental illness are not subjects which are freely discussed in shame-honor cultures as it is too excruciatingly painful to air one's dirty laundry in public.[8] Of course not all who are diagnosed with autism will become violent, nor does autism itself cause violence, but the biological underpinnings may dovetail in this developmental disorder. Mass shooters and other terrorists, not necessarily jihadis, have been diagnosed with high functioning autism such as Chou of Virginia Tech, John Zawahri of Santa Monica, Breivik of Norway, the Unabomber—they all inextricably bonded violently to people.

In addition, the FBI has estimated that close to 60% of jihadis have had an encounter with law enforcement concerning domestic violence prior to engaging in terrorism. Indeed, in a report by the Center for Social Cohesion in the United Kingdom it was found that in areas where there were jihadis, there was also domestic violence.[9] The list is too long to quote here, but think of Tsarnaev (Boston Marathon), Mateen (Orlando), Bouhlel (Nice), and Rahami (New York) for starters. There is a significant body of literature concerning domestic violence and the perpetrator's lack of empathy.[10]

Also to be considered is an underlying propensity toward aggression and violence, which may erupt later during adolescent development among those who have been diagnosed with autism. This is in line with jihadis' lack of empathy as they are acting out their aggression and rage in the form of revenge. Their confused states between fantasy and reality, contribute to impaired thinking. It is as if they spill out their chaotic violent psycho-sexual internal world into the real world through their acts of terrorism, while justifying it under the banner of a political strategic agenda.

One factor to explore is whether jihadis missed a significant developmental step in early childhood–play. In shame honor cultures without sufficient opportunities to play and express one's self freely in a *relaxed, shame free environment* a child cannot develop optimally as he or she might. Certain human needs are portrayed as dirty and toxic and therefore must be evacuated, projected externally on to a scapegoat in order to purify oneself. Think of all the ideologies concerning purification. There are many barriers for a child to get his/her needs met in a healthy way in a shame honor culture where children are treated as objects without empathy and in turn they grow up at all too young an age. Later they risk becoming dysfunctional parents and treat their children how they were treated—as mere objects. *We, as the targets of jihadi attacks, are nothing more than objects to them. We are not real people with needs, wants and desires.* This marks the hallmark of the lack of collective empathy.

Shame honor cultures are highly enmeshed with the absence of personal, individual boundaries. The individual virtually is small to non-existent, becoming submerged by a group-think, a herd-like mentality that becomes dominant. The group self is more important than the individual self.

It should also not be forgotten that the devalued female in a shame honor culture grows up under the threat of death—the honor killing. This is not exactly conducive to stress free living. She is flooded with stress hormones. Yet the devalued, abused female is the one who influences brain development of the baby in utero and after birth to age two – a period when the baby's brain quadruples in size. The mother is the cultural interpreter for the infant and intelligence is passed on to the next generation mainly through the mother's genes. Mothers therefore need to be treated in the most optimal manner.[11] This is not to blame the female but to understand the dynamics in which she is culturally trapped. In shame honor cultures the devalued female only gains honor when she has her first male baby to whom she is psychologically wedded. As the source of her "honor," the male baby is objectified. However he has his own needs and one of them is <u>not</u> to be tethered to her for life just because he is her object of honor. There are indications that the intergenerational transmission of trauma occurs routinely in shame honor cultures.

Pryce Jones described shame honor entities like the tribe, the *qabil*, the *hamula*, the clan, and the Chechen *teip* as closed circles.[12] I would add that such closed circles are psychologically suffocating, and that is why jihadis scream for liberation.[13] While the Prophet Muhammad himself attempted to move beyond the tribe through his strategy of brothering [14], Islam has never really managed to move beyond tribal thinking.[15] As for the converts to Islam who radicalize, I have noted elsewhere, that we in the West also have pockets of shamed honor families—such as single mother families with absent (or polygamous) fathers.[16] In family homes such as these, children are more frequently manipulated and abused. They are not empathically responded to. Hence they do not know nor have ever learned what empathy is. They have been treated like objects.

Is it realistic to expect counter terrorist experts to have the time to study neuroscience, hormone shifts, brain development, depth psychology, maternal attachment, child rearing practices and early childhood development let alone learn the specific languages of each culture? It is a tall order and unrealistic. Yet analysts can be open to entertaining the idea that what goes on behind closed doors in a family when the baby is carried in utero and through the first three years of life establishes the personality of the fledgling child. Early childhood development needs to be factored into the equation concerning the "jihadi-in-the-making". *To grow up in a pervasively shaming environment it is as if its cultural practitioners have implanted a psychological IED (Improvised Explosive Device) in the soul of a child, which then detonates years later under the right configuration of stressors, which we have come to call 'radicalization'.* The prologue to violence is early childhood.[17] This is not disputed by neuroscientists nor by mental health experts. It might be time that some of those involved in terrorism prevention also start paying attention to this link.

Conclusion

Much research still needs to be done in the field of counter terrorism as it is a broad, complex interdisciplinary endeavor. Perhaps it is time to make room for a subfield within counter terrorism dedicated to exploring and researching early childhood development for the jihadi. Such an interdisciplinary endeavor can only be enriching to our task at hand – how to identify and stop the violence, and how to make earlier interventions. Some may wish to argue that child development should have no place in counter terrorism studies as a child is not yet politically motivated to carry out an attack. However, we have had child suicide bombers, child soldiers and now we have the Cubs of the Caliphate. Nevertheless, there is no need to redefine what political terrorism (with all its myriad of definitions) is. Rather a case ought to be made to examine and investigate the interlocking links of all kinds of violence, some of which feed into political terrorism of the kind propagated by the Islamic State that reverse our value system—what is good is bad and what is bad is good.[18] This might be partly due to the fact that as children, these jihadis never developed empathy. Because of that they are cognitively impaired. By understanding the roots of the jihadis' lack of empathy, we might might just get closer to dismantling ticking human bombs before they detonate.[19]

About the Author: **Nancy Hartevelt Kobrin, *Ph.D.*** *is a psychoanalyst, Arabist and Counter-Terrorism expert and author of The Banality of Suicide Terrorism (2010, Hebr. 2013 and Urdu forthcoming), Penetrating the Terrorist Psyche (2013), The Maternal Drama of the Chechen Jihadi (2014 and Urdu forthcoming) and The Jihadi Dictionary (2016). She was among the first to conduct prison interviews in Minneapolis concerning the recruitment of the Somalis to terrorism in 2005. She is also a graduate of the Human Terrain Program, Leavenworth, KS.*

Notes

[1] In my recently published *The Jihadi Dictionary: The Essential Intel Tool, for Military, Police, Governmental Agencies and Concerned Citizens,* I offered a four pronged entry for the word "empathy". The first prong is a standard dictionary definition, in this case from Webster' Dictionary: *"the feeling that one understands and shares another person's experiences and emotions; the ability to share someone else's feelings.".* The second prong gives a brief etymology of empathy introduced by the root symbol to facilitate thinking about the word's history and cultural context out of which it arose: √ *1908, modeled on German Einfühlung from Ein: in + Fühlung: feeling, coined 1858 by the German philosopher Rudolf Lotze as a translation of the Greek* word *empatheia***: *passion, state of emotion.* The third prong is a professional psychological definition introduced by the psi sign: Ψ *"Understanding persons from their frame of reference so we know where they are coming them."* The fourth prong for empathy is my "translation", so to speak, about how empathy and the lack thereof appear in jihadi culture and its mentality. This fourth prong is introduced by the symbol of two crossed swords representing the violence of jihadi's *qital.* –See: N. Hartevelt Kobrin. The Jihadi Dictionary: The Essential Intel Tool, for Military, Police, Governmental Agencies and Concerned Citizens. (Mamaroneck, NJ: MultiEducator Press, 2016), p. 86.

[2] M. Iacoboni. Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others. (New York: Picador, 2009. See also the work of Michael Meaney, URL: http://www.douglas.qc.ca/researcher/michael-meaney?locale=en On morality see A. Govrin. The ABC of Moral Development: An Attachment Approach to Moral Judgment. The Frontiers of Psychology, 24 January 2014; URL: http://journal/frontiersin.orgarticle/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00006/abstract

[3] B. M. Jenkins, Herzliya, ICT Sept. 15, 2016 in a presentation at the World Congress on Counter-Terrorism

[4] Doïna Harap, in collaboration with Iolande Cadrin-Rossignol, 2012. Body Language, Doïna Harap Productions. URL: https://vimeo.com/127794440 .

[5] M. Iacoboni, op.cit. See also A. Raine. The Psychopathology of Crime: Criminal Behavior as a Clinical Disorder. (Waltham, MA: Academic Press, 1997) and A. Raine. The Anatomy of Violence: The Biology of Crime. (New York: Vintage Press, 2014).

[6] N. Kobrin and N. Simms (2008). Jihaditism? Parallels between autism and terrorism, *Mentalities/ Mentalités,* 22(2) 1-47.

[7] D. Gambetta & S. Hertog. Engineers of Jihad, Sociology Working Paper Number 2007-10. Department of Sociology, University of Oxford; URL: www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/users/gambette/Engineers%20 of%20Jihad.pdf . See also their recently published The Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2016).

[8] G.R.A. Taha and H. Hussein. Autism Spectrum Disorders in Developing Countries: Lessons from the Arab World URL:. http://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4614-4788-7_98#page-1, accessed 28 August 2016.

[9] E.M. Saltman. Orlando and Nice attacks: Domestic violence links to radicalization. 22 July 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-36861840. See also: *The Centre for Social Cohesion,* Brandon, J. & S. Hafez (2008). *Crimes of the Community: Honour-based Violence in the UK.* London: Centre for Social Cohesion . See also: N. Hartevelt Kobrin, Political Domestic Violence in Ibrahim's Family, in Eroticisms: Love, Sex and Perversion: Psychological Undercurrents of History, (New York: iUniverse, vol. V, pp. 104-139.

[10] Dutton, D. G., & K.R. White (2012). Attachment insecurity and intimate partner violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior,* 17, 475–481. Dutton, D. G., & S. Painter (1993). Emotional attachments in abusive relationships: A test of traumatic bonding theory. *Violence and Victims, 8*, 105–120. See also the excellent thesis by V. George (2015). Traumatic Bonding and Intimate Partner Violence, M.A. Thesis: http://researcharchive. URL: vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/4398/thesis.pdf?sequence=1 . See also: N. Hartevelt Kobrin, The Banality of Suicide Terrorism, (Dulles, VA: Potomac, 2010) Idem.: Penetrating the Terrorist Psyche, (Mamaroneck, NJ: MultiEducator Press, 2013): Idem. The Maternal Drama of the Chechen Jihadi, (Mamaroneck, NJ: MultiEducator Press, 2014), and Idem: The Jihadi Dictionary, (Mamaroneck, NJ: MultiEducator Press, 2016).

[11] R. Lehrke. Sex Linkage of Intelligence: The X-Factor. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

[12] D. Pryce-Jones. The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs. (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2009).

[13] Sufat Chol [Hebr. Sandstorm] Dir. E. Zexer. "Two Bedouin women struggling to change the unchangeable." ; URL: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4365518/

[14] N. Hartevelt Kobrin. The Banality of Suicide Terrorism, p. 53 as well as N. Hartevelt Kobrin, The Jihadi Dictionary. (Mamaroneck, NJ: MultiEducator Press, 2016), p. 64.

[15] Personal communication Reuven Paz, 11 December 2006.

[16] N. Hartevelt Kobrin. The Banality of Suicide, p. 15.

[17] A. Stein. The Prologue to Violence: Child Abuse, Dissociation and Crime. (New York: Routledge, 2013). See also, W. Bohleber. Destructiveness, Destructiveness, Intersubjectivity and Trauma. (London: Karnac, 2010). See especially chapter 8 Ideality and destructiveness: Towards a psychodynamics of fundamentalist terrorist violence, p. 179-201.

[18] The term 'reverse superego' was coined by Joan Lachkar, Ph.D. See my entry for it in the Jihadi Dictionary, p. 212. It is striking how this idea that there existed people who twisted morality around is recorded in the Bible: "Woe unto them that call good evil and evil good; that change darkness into light and light into darkness." *Isaiah* 5:20.

[19] See also: R. Douglas Fields. Why We Snap: Understanding the Rage Circuit in Your Brain. (New York: Penguin, 2016. For an excellent newsletter concerning Force Science; see URL: www.forcescience.org.