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**THE VIOLENT TRUE BELIEVER:
HOMICIDAL AND SUICIDAL STATES OF MIND (HASSOM)**

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Abstract

This is an independent advisory paper prepared during the week following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It was submitted to the Behavioral Analysis Program of the National Security Division, FBI, on Sept. 21, 2001. The paper was subsequently circulated to other intelligence agencies, both in the U.S. and abroad. The purpose of the advisory paper was to marshal as quickly as possible psychological knowledge concerning “the violent true believer” and his homicidal-suicidal state of mind. It concludes with behavioral and psychological characteristics that, when combined with factual evidence, could be used to guide the investigation of one or several individuals suspected of terrorist activities. It was not prepared as a scholarly submission, therefore no references are cited.

Key Words: terrorist, terrorism, threat assessment, mass murder

The Violent True Believer: Homicidal and Suicidal States of Mind (HASSOM)

In the wake of the terrorist bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the authors agreed that an advisory paper on homicidal and suicidal states of mind for the FBI intelligence effort was important to the national interest. The content of this paper is based upon the authors' knowledge of research as well as their combined forensic and clinical experience. Its purpose is to provide practical, yet in depth psychological information to aid the domestic and foreign intelligence communities which represent the interests of the United States. It is not intended for public dissemination.

Origin and Limitations

This advisory paper was neither sought, commissioned, nor funded by the FBI nor any other government entity. Financial support for the authors' time was provided by Forensics, Inc., a nonprofit public benefit corporation based in San Diego, CA which is directed by the first author. The purpose of Forensics, Inc., which has been incorporated since 1998, is to further forensic psychological and psychiatric research. Its stated mission is to "research contemporary criminality and targeted violence." Due to the severe time constraints imposed by the current national and international events, this paper is informally written and contains no explicit scholarly references. Many of the opinions expressed in this paper, moreover, are solely the authors', and are not based upon published findings. If the reader wishes to discuss the basis for any opinion, or seek scholarly references or other published sources of information, he or she should contact the first author (jrmeloy@san.rr.com). All readers who find this paper of any value should feel free to disseminate it to other professionals.

Outline

The paper has two sections. First, the authors identify and illustrate when possible various characteristics of the violent true believer and his homicidal and suicidal state of mind, with a particular focus upon terrorism as perpetrated by Muslim fanatics. Second, the authors propose a list of profiling characteristics which cumulatively could establish probable cause for further intelligence gathering, interview, or possible detention as a material witness when combined with other specific evidence.

Characteristics of HASSOM

The published research on homicidal and suicidal states of mind falls into three categories:

1. Domestic incidents-these are the most common forms, usually committed by a rejected male against a rejecting female. Depression, jealousy, and paranoia often play a motivating role, sometimes to a psychotic degree. In one study, these are referred to as "consortial homicide-suicides." Another variation on the domestic incident is the killing of children by a suicidal mother. Usually she is both depressed and psychotic.

2. SMASI-sudden mass assaults by a single individual are perpetrated in the U.S. by both adolescent and adult males. These acts have increased in the past decade, despite the progressive decrease in U.S. homicide rates (The deaths on Sept. 11, 2001, however, will increase the annual homicide rate by at least thirty per cent). The trigger for both adolescent and adult SMASI in the U.S. is a humiliating event concerning a personal relationship or employment (a school event for adolescents). The act occurs within hours or days of this event, usually in the morning on a weekday, and in the aftermath there will be discovered a history of both paranoia and depression for the adults. The adolescents show histories of both antisocial behavior and depression.

For both groups there is often a “warrior mentality” which pervades their psychology, represented by long standing interests in weapons, war, and violence. In some cases of adult SMASI, the perpetrator will dress as a “pseudo-commando” prior to the violence. In all cases of adolescent and adult SMASI, the violence is predatory rather than affective: it is planned, purposeful, without intense emotion, and in the majority of cases, no direct threat is communicated to the victims before the assault. In a recent study, we found that one out of four mass murders committed by adolescent males were done in pairs. The majority of adult mass murderers will commit suicide or die at the scene; this is not the case for adolescent mass murderers, who typically are subdued and arrested.

Outside the U.S., SMASI has historically been referred to as amok, a Malaysian word meaning to engage furiously in battle. It has been used to describe sudden, unprovoked outbursts of uncontrollable rage and aggressive behavior, often leading to the deaths of others. It appears to have its origins in the cultural training for warfare which the Javanese and Malays adopted from the Hindu states of India. SMASI and amok are similar in that the acts are perpetrated by males, military training is common, social alienation is pervasive, and depression is common. They are motivated by anger and compensatory narcissism (grandiose fantasies to overcome feelings of helplessness and dependency), and there is much depressive and paranoid psychopathology.

3. SMAGI-sudden mass assaults by a group of individuals are typically motivated by a political, religious, or ideological belief that consciously justifies the killing of civilians to reach a particular goal. Such goals may include the demoralization of a populace to cause political and economic instability, or simply to annihilate an object (perhaps a country) that is perceived as an imminent threat. When attached to religious doctrine, this threat becomes “evil,” further justifying its eradication. The prototype, for instance, of the Hamas suicide bomber has been a young, single male who has found a religious antidote for his anger and desperation, and has been promised security for both his family and sexual bliss in the afterlife if he kills Israelis (Muslim suicide bombers are often promised a multitude of “black-eyed virgins” after they kill themselves). Suicide bombing seems to historically reach back to the 11th century, when the hashashin, or users of hashish were the Fida’is, the devoted ones, members of the Ismailites, a sect of the Shi’ite Muslims. Founded by Hassan-i-Sabbah, the sect trained young peasant males to obediently kill certain political rivals in the southern region of the Caspian Sea, in

what is now Iran. The Middle Ages brought an end to the rule of these Ismailites, the first assassins.

Certain forms of SMAGI are a product of cults, wherein the leader, usually described as charismatic, grandiose, paranoid, and narcissistic, will prepare his followers for violent confrontation. He may claim that he is divine, or others may cast that appellation upon him. Cult members are typically vulnerable, dependent, isolated, physiologically deprived, and instilled with extreme and rigid belief systems wherein a perceived constant threat from the outside is used as a cohesive force within the group. Many cult leaders have turned out to be charismatic psychopaths in retrospect, such as Jim Jones and David Koresh. They engage in little personal sacrifice, although they give the appearance of being quite ascetic.¹ The cult leader's theology is often a perverse and embittered misinterpretation of a mainstream religion, which is then used to justify the death of the self and the enemy. This theological model likely fits what is known of Osama bin Laden. Typically such individuals are neither mentally ill nor psychotic, and do not come from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. A religious warrior identity ("violent true believer"), however, may hide what is known as a personality or character disorder; just as so-called religious beliefs may provide the conscious rationale for a very personal, angry, and frightened desire to kill others whom one perceives to be a part of a paranoid threat. In this context, the term paranoid pseudo-community is useful: this describes a large group of individuals who are viewed as posing a threat to the paranoid. The reality is that they don't, and the group may be linked to one another by the loosest of connotations, e.g., "Americans," "infidels," etc. The symbolic meaning of the target is often evident in the aftermath of the attack, such as the September 11 selection of targets which represent global capitalism (World Trade Center) and American militarism, respectively.

¹One area in which such charismatic psychopaths are not ascetic is sexuality and reproduction. Koresh convinced the male members of his cult to refrain from sex with their wives, and instead let him have sex with their wives. Osama bin Laden has arguably produced 54 offspring with multiple women, imitating his father's reproductive success. Although one could assert that this is only due to religious belief, it is also quite probable that both evolutionary and personal narcissistic factors play a role, such as fantasies of immortality and omnipotence through subsequent generations of biological offspring.

Although some small, leaderless cells, such as Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, commit sudden mass assaults as a group, they separate themselves from the focus of this advisory paper because they did not **use planned and purposeful suicide as the principal weapon of mass assault against others**. This is also one of several factors that distinguishes the military and police officers from our discussion. In these latter cases, although the sacrifice of one's life may occur, intentional suicide is not the principal weapon of choice.

HASSOM is characterized by:

A. **Tactical Understanding** of suicide as a weapon of terrorism. Ehud Sprinzak, a terrorism expert and dean of the Lauder School in Israel, noted in an article in Foreign Policy magazine last year, that there are three advantages to suicide terrorism: 1) no escape routes or rescue operation is required (post-offense planning); 2) no risk of captured perpetrators divulging valuable information to the enemy; 3) extraordinary helplessness is induced in the civilian population. We would add that civilians, in response, experience anger and fear, shock, and survivor guilt, and will become less mobile, avoid large gatherings, and reduce their economic activity, thus fostering recession.

B. **Envy**. This often misunderstood or ignored emotion was defined by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein many years ago as "the wish to destroy goodness." Successful individuals, institutions, and countries will stimulate envy in others, who perceive something that they deeply desire, but do not have themselves. For Muslim fanatics, such perceptions of Americans could include wealth, prosperity, democracy, and individual liberties. The strong impulse of those who envy is to damage or destroy the envied object or target; then it was not worth having in the first place. Envy is typically not consciously felt, but often the degree of devaluation or degradation that is stated and acted out toward the target is a measure of the intensity of the envy.

C. **Helpless Dependency**. As a result of personal suffering and deprivation (abusive parents, poverty, or an occupying force) or religious indoctrination (often more intellectual and abstract, at least initially), HASSOM comes to feel that he is helplessly dependent on the object of his envy. This conditioning causes deeply felt rage and fury, which can then become hatred, a term that the psychoanalyst Glen Gabbard has referred to as the holding on to an object in a unforgiving way. A common example from our experience is the fury that may overtake us when our computer suddenly doesn't work, or our cell phone doesn't ring, or some other technological device that we have become very dependent upon, lets us down. This is the fury of helpless dependency (it is emotionally very young). If this is translated into the events of September 11, any historical suffering of the terrorists was likely attributed to the hated, although omnipotent object: the United States. Helpless dependency is impotent, but finds strength in its fury by simplifying the focus of its hatred.

D. **Omnipotence**. As the terrorist pilots of the American Airlines and United flights were about to crash into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they likely felt a sense of

being all powerful; and for a moment in time, they were. Thousands of people had no choice but to die with them. This sense of omnipotence, although momentary, is the last sense of self while alive, and overcomes chronic helpless dependency and any remaining shreds of envy. The omnipotence of this moment also overcomes any fear, especially if religious beliefs promise martyrdom laced with sexual bliss. There is also a group omnipotence in their imitation of terrorists who have preceded them, as they join a very select group of martyrs and become a “Shahid,” one who dies for Allah’s holy name.

Each successful homicide-suicide act creates a momentum of imitative acts.

E. Despair and Depression. Although this may seem contradictory when placed in the context of the previous characteristics, it is important to note that mental and emotional states are dynamic and changeable, and may exist outside of conscious awareness. We think it is likely, given the suicidal task ahead, the biology of the terrorists, and their relative isolation from their home community while in the U.S., that they experienced both despair and, at times, clinical depression. No religious indoctrination, or idealization of a charismatic leader, will completely overcome the affiliative, affectional, and survival needs of an individual homo sapien. The beliefs may be rigid, moralistic, and extreme, but the basic biology in all of us is the same.

F. Entitlement. This is an aspect of what we call “pathological narcissism,” which is generally an inflated view of the self and one’s role in the world, despite the facts of one’s life. In the case of HASSOM, this pathological narcissism is likely compensatory; in other words, it compensates for not being successful in work or in love, and perhaps feeling generally hopeless about the future, at least here on earth. Entitlement in the violent true believer is the specific belief that one has the right to kill others, even civilians, to further a particular cause.

G. Grandiose Fantasy. In the case of the suicide bombers as Muslim fanatics, these fantasies are likely consciously thought about, perhaps repetitively, and are suffused with expectations of pleasure, power, and knowledge in an afterlife. Grandiosity is defined as “inflated importance or magnificence” (Webster’s Dictionary), and in this context is fueled by the belief that one is a special agent of an omnipotent god (Allah) and is carrying out his will. These fantasies are also buttressed by the knowledge of joining a select group of martyrs. Most individuals and nations will invoke their special relationship with God to assure themselves and manage their own collective fear and anxiety before they go to war.

H. Some Psychopathy. Most terrorists are not psychopaths because they form a very intense bond to one another: an attachment to others within their cell that can propel them into the suicidal behavior, even if they feel very ambivalent. There are, however, terrorists who are psychopaths. A psychopath is a severely antisocial individual who is emotionally detached from others, often cruel and aggressive, has low anxiety, seeks high levels of sensation and excitement, may be sadistic, manipulative, deceptive, grandiose, and has a completely callous disregard toward the rights and feelings of others. He feels no guilt, and can kill without any remorse. A psychopath in a terrorist organization will play one of two roles, both of which usually do not involve the sacrifice of his own life: 1) he will be a leader, organizer, or

“operative” who prepares the designated suicide; 2) he will carry out the cruelest, most exciting acts of violence that do not jeopardize his life.

Psychopaths represent about 1% of the world’s population, and exist in every society and culture. They are more violent than most individuals, but have no deeply held beliefs. If they espouse a certain religious belief, such as a fanatical Islam which advocates a fatwa against all Americans, one should assume the belief is very superficial and masking the true motivation: power over others (social dominance, wealth, etc.) and control.

Psychopathic terrorists, although dangerous, are typically not trusted by other members of their cell due to their emotional detachment and cruelties; they do, however, provide us with an avenue for intelligence gathering and covert activity within the cell because their allegiance is false. They will typically work for the highest bidder. Psychopathic members of a terrorist group are tolerated by other terrorists because they are often charismatic, frightening, or are willing to carry out acts that others hesitate to do. The danger in recruiting psychopaths as covert agents within terrorist groups is their propensity to lie, and to “put something over on someone,” even if it is their current employer.

There were likely psychopaths among the affiliates, supporters, and handlers of the 19 HASSOM identified terrorists that carried out the Sept. 11 attacks, but not among those who went to their deaths.

I. Callousness and Emotional Detachment. In order to carry out suicidal-homicidal terrorist missions, both a detachment from others and an emotional detachment from the self is necessary. This may be induced through religious indoctrination or other group behaviors, particularly in the hours and days preceding the terrorist act. A callous disregard for the rights and feelings of others is critical so that no empathic feelings, even momentarily, interfere with the homicidal behavior. Others are not viewed as human beings, but are clinically dehumanized into objects or targets.

J. Violent True Beliefs. We would consider the terrorists to be violent true believers: individuals who are committed to an ideology or belief system which advances homicide-suicide as a legitimate means to further a particular goal. As long as the belief system does not waiver, the violence espoused will not. Violent true believers cannot tolerate ambiguity or factual evidence that may contradict their beliefs. For them such evidence cannot be true. Fanatical Islamists who are violent true believers living in the U.S. are unlikely to meaningfully associate with outside individuals to maintain the integrity of their sleeper cell. They will typically isolate within small groups of other young Arabic males, but maintain a group cohesiveness to: a) remain alienated from the larger American society and foster their disdain; b) advance their mission; c) maintain a homicidal-suicidal state of mind, individually and collectively.

They will also remain mobile, will respond evasively to questions from outsiders concerning both their past and their plans for the future, and any association with women or children will be of secondary interest.

Most importantly, the violent true believer will make a conspicuous (although false) adaptation to western values and society. He will not appear or behave in ways that would associate him with the Islamic faithful. He will expend energy to not stand out. Examples of this behavior would include western dress, excellent english language skills, and an interest in the American pop culture. As reported during the recent federal trials of the bombers of our embassies in Africa, the Al Qaeda training manual stated, “when you’re in the outer world, you have to act like them, dress like them, behave like them.”

The violent true believer, to borrow the phrase of Frederick Calhoun at the U.S. Marshals Service, is a hunter, not a howler.

K. Predatory Violence. The violence of HASSOM is predatory: planned, purposeful, emotionless, not driven by an imminent threat, not defensive, and probably evident in low levels of autonomic arousal². It is highly disciplined and will search for opportunities to strike vulnerable civilian targets. It is not highly emotional or impulsive at all. It is the consummate attack behavior. Individuals who are predatorily violent will often engage in private rituals (prayer, symbolic gestures, dress) to fuel their sense of specialness and grandiosity. Among Muslim fanatics, these behaviors are likely to have a strong religious aspect to them, and will be done either alone or within the cell in the hours before the attack. A 1995 report circulated by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, “a day or two before the appointed time of the attack, the bearded young man begins the mental and physical preparation for his ascent in a storm to Heaven. It begins with a fast. Between prayers the designated suicide hears sermons on religious and political topics from the lips of his ‘operator.’ These sermons are said to inflame his anger and strengthen his resolve to sacrifice his life.” Although the rituals which preceded the morning of September 11 are unknown, we are quite certain they did exist, were attended by the handlers or operators in addition to the suicide bombers within each cell, and used peer group identification, and perhaps pressure, to carry the acts forward in a disciplined, unemotional manner.

²Psychopaths make very good predators, but are not sought after recruits for a terrorist cell because they do not form bonds and cannot be trusted. Research has shown that they do have low levels of autonomic arousal, and their violence tends to be predatory. Low levels of autonomic arousal are found in habitual criminals, sensation-seekers, and bomb disposal experts. It is biologically necessary to have low autonomic arousal to develop into a psychopath, but many people have this largely inherited characteristic and are not psychopaths.

Most importantly, individuals who are predatorily violent, especially toward public targets, do not communicate a threat directly toward the target; they do, however, often leak information concerning the attack in the days or hours beforehand to third parties. Often this leakage is a product of anxiety and attempts to manage it through the excessive use of alcohol. In the September 11 bombings, there may have been evidence of this the night before. Osama bin Laden also appears to have a pattern of making oblique threats several months before a terrorist attack without giving specifics. This serves two purposes: a) it enhances his sense of omnipotence within himself and his followers; b) it frightens and taunts his adversary, the United States. Most importantly, it does not deter from the tactical success of the terrorist mission, but instead shocks, impresses, and intimidates.

L. Paranoia. Osama bin Laden and his ilk are by definition paranoid: they have an unreasonable fear of imminent assault. Paradoxically, their paranoid fears have now been translated into a reality. They are likely to be attacked. Paranoids are very adept at creating self-fulfilling prophecy through their own violence toward others. They bring a conflagration upon themselves, and if religiously based, will justify this attack as a holy war that could not be prevented, but only predicted.

Paranoia is an immature way of dealing with others. The basic psychological mechanism involved is projection: the attribution of characteristics in oneself (hatred, fury, violence, prejudice, aggression, etc.) onto others. Paranoids who become charismatic leaders, however, are very dangerous because they accumulate power that can be used to stimulate attacks against them and cause massive destruction and loss of life. Paranoids also will stay mobile, have very few attachments, are chronically angry, and have a deeply felt sense of being better than others, often felt by others as arrogance.

Paranoids incubate their personal emotional slights and wounds for years, and tend to view the world in very stark, black and white terms: goodness vs. evil, us vs. them. The complexities of the world are simplified into the victims and the victimizers. In Osama bin Laden's case, members of the Islamic faith are the victims, despite their considerable religious influence and wealth throughout the planet. Facts that do not support his paranoid view of the world are dismissed, ridiculed, or considered a false product of some other conspiracy. From a mental health perspective, paranoid disorders and personalities are notoriously difficult to treat. Paranoids are also very hypervigilant, and are always searching for details that will confirm their paranoid stance.

M. A Sense of Foreshortened Future. HASSOM has no future, particularly as the date of the attack approaches, and will begin to engage in behavior that quietly suggests this: he may get his affairs in order, give personal items away, write a suicide note or complete a suicide video, send his wife and children away, pay in cash, or forget to take change after a financial transaction. In a real sense, he is a "dead man walking." This may be coupled with increased levels of anxiety, which will be managed through self-abusive behaviors, such as excessive drinking or very casual, even coercive sex. Behaviors without a future, such as one-way airplane

tickets, are obvious in retrospect.

Profiling Advisory

We would like to offer behavioral data that may help in the profiling of THE VIOLENT TRUE BELIEVER: HASSOM. Obviously terrorism is a low frequency, but very high intensity event, and there are likely to be many false positives: individuals questioned, detained, or arrested who were not, in fact, involved in any terrorist activity at any level.

Long term, more stable characteristics of HASSOM would include:

1. Arabic male, age 18-45, probably single
2. Mobile life style, meaning he has not lived in one place for more than 12-18 months; travel to and associations with known or suspected terrorist cells, sponsors, or supportive countries.
3. Immigrated to the U.S., legally or not, within the past five years
4. Appears to have average or above average IQ, but shows no strong interest in the accumulation of material goods or career development
5. Later life training (30 years or older) in a job, such as aviation, that typically involves males of a younger age; or older life involvement in typically younger life activities, e.g., a 40 year old attending graduate school on a student visa.
6. Only socializes with other single Arab males
7. Questionable or unknown sources of income
8. Women and children, if present in life, are secondary activity to male bonding
9. Evasive when questioned concerning past history and future plans; or such information is not realistic or verifiable.
10. Use of aliases.
11. Educated; excellent english as a second language.
12. Conspicuous adaptation to western values and culture.
13. Expends energy to not stand out as a Muslim, despite professed Islamic beliefs.
14. Evidence of boundary probing: behaviors which approximate or gather intelligence for the terrorist act to come.

Short term, more dynamic characteristics of HASSOM are based upon three certainties for him: a) he will suicide; b) he will kill others; c) he will be a hero and welcomed like his predecessors into heaven.

Suicidal indicators:

1. He may let intimates know of his plans or leave a suicide note or video.
2. He may give possessions away.
3. He may get his affairs in order and send dependents away (wife, children)
4. He may indulge in worldly sins near time of the terrorist event, such as sex, drugs, alcohol use. Sex will be solicited through escort services or strip bars.
5. Emotions will be labile, changeable: periods of elation mixed with anger or sadness. Emotional outbursts may occur.
6. Pays in cash, and is indifferent to change.
7. May seem to be in a dreamlike state, and may perceive reality that way:
“A dead man walking.”
8. Acts are consistent with no future.

Homicidal indicators:

1. Bragging to third parties, usually under the influence of alcohol, about his power, knowledge, and his dislike of America.
2. Purchase of weapons or materials to use in the terrorist act.
3. Arrogance toward those he hates more apparent in speech and demeanor.
4. May have problems tolerating proximity to those he hates, e.g., waiting in checkout lines with Americans.
5. Will engage in private ritual alone or within his cell. Behaviors could include bathing, fasting, head shaving, praying, listening to the preaching of his “operator,” meditation, or review of plans and preparations³. There is likely to be much religious exhortation and condemnation of the infidel Americans.

Going to Heaven as a Hero:

1. Increased frequency of prayer and religious behavior as the event approaches.
2. Leakage of his own fantasies concerning his immortality, his joining of other martyrs, and special relationship with his god to third parties he trusts, probably others of the Islamic faith.
3. This process of indoctrination and purification is done at the same time as the final aspects of the logistical operation are completed.

³Even members of one cell may not know what each other’s precise role is in the terrorist act, nor the exact time, date, or location of the target. Planning and preparation for the terrorist act in the weeks and months before may also involve individuals who know none of the cell members, but out of religious belief, nationalistic anger, or monetary need, may carry out one piece of the puzzle—e.g., surveilling the security in a particular area of an airport, passing a credit card from one unknown person to another, locating the addresses of private flight schools.

Please note that this profiling advisory is likely incomplete, and additional characteristics, both static and dynamic, may emerge which are quite relevant to the intelligence community. The authors, moreover, have not been privy to classified information in the development of this profiling advisory.

A Final Cautionary Note

The modus operandi will change. The way in which terrorist acts in the U.S. will be carried out in the future will be determined by the leaders', operators', and handlers' perceptions of their HASSOM success, failures, and vulnerability to detection and capture. For example, cell phones provided a technological advantage to the terrorists due to federal law limitations surrounding wiretapping, while cell phone usage by the victims on the four airplanes provided immediate intelligence concerning where some of them were sitting on the airplane. Cell phones of victims may be confiscated during the next attack. Another example: Arabic males may be supplemented by female HASSOM.⁴

It is very important that intelligence thinking remain fluid and proactive, rather than assuming that the modus operandi will not change.

⁴San'ah Muheidli, a 17 year old female, exploded her car next to an Israeli troop convoy in outer Lebanon on April 9, 1985, killing two soldiers. She had completed a will in the form of a videotape in which she urged her mother to rejoice as if it were her wedding day.

