

Perspective



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Violent True Believers

By J. Reid Meloy, Ph.D.

Violent true believers (VTBs) are committed, or apparently so, to an ideology or belief system that advances the killing of self and others as a legitimate means of furthering a particular goal.¹ They are convinced that their truth is absolute and that no acceptable alternatives exist.² Violence, their method of change, will include homicide, suicide, or both. They commit such acts instrumentally, in the service of advancing the cause.³ Soldiers and police officers differ from VTBs; although, perhaps, also willing to die, they behave in a lawful context.⁴ The three principles of *jus in bello*—acceptable wartime conduct—include proportionality, responsibility, and discrimination and apply to soldiers and police

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officers, not to VTBs.⁵ Suicide accompanied by mass killings of civilians represents one method by which VTBs further their political, religious, or social goals; but, suicide is not necessary to fit the definition of a VTB.⁶

VTBs, such as members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), may base their ideology or belief system on a nationalist-separatist attitude concerned with seeking certain political and territorial gains or, as in the case of groups like Hamas or al Qaeda, on a theocratic attitude that seeks to promulgate worldwide a particular religious movement that ignores national or territorial boundaries.⁷

VTBs are terrorists, not activists who obey the law while protesting a grievance or extremists who break the law nonviolently to further a political, religious, or social objective.⁸

VTBs may operate alone, in an autonomous cell, or as part of a hierarchical organization. The accentuation of the individual or group depends on the degree that society emphasizes the autonomy of the single person or the power of the collective. For example, in the United States over the past decade, VTBs have included individuals like Timothy McVeigh, who believed that bombing the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, would make him the first hero of the second American Revolution.⁹ Internationally, members of groups, such as Hamas or al Qaeda, emphasize, for instance, that the intentional homicide-suicide of particular individuals as one method of attack will allow them to take their place among a *group* of true believers or martyrs that have preceded them. Economic and social

rewards also may be showered on family members left behind.

However, just as all individuals who ascribe to certain beliefs have their own personalities and unique backgrounds, VTBs all do not fit a particular mold. Psychology authorities long have known that all persons are both the same and different. One scientific method, referred to as classification or typology, helps to address this reality by sorting individuals into subgroups based upon certain shared characteristics while also emphasizing the differences among each group. Placing individuals into certain types furthers communication and understanding.

From a law enforcement or intelligence perspective, the development of types could help personnel refine their interview and interrogation techniques. To this end, the author offers different categories of VTBs and provides for each an overall description, identifies specific needs/sensitivities, and suggests appropriate interview approaches. The proposed types, based upon the research and ex-

perience of members of the law enforcement and intelligence communities, include unwavering true believers, affiliative true believers, opportunistic true believers, criminal true believers, betrayer true believers, psychotic true believers, and fledgling true believers.

Unwavering True Believers

This category consists of hard-core true believers motivated by deeply held, rigid beliefs that they consider completely justified. Those who base their beliefs on religion feel certain that they act

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as agents of their god, who sanctions the killing they participate in. For years, these VTBs study the books of their faith and commit to memory certain phrases and passages that justify their homicidal-suicidal intent. They ignore passages that contradict these actions. Such individuals do not think that their tightly held rationalizations are open to debate or questioning. In fact, they consider critical thinking forbidden and may believe that persons who exercise this skill are unbelievers worthy of death. Unwavering true believers hold in high regard and consider a measure of their commitment their absolute belief in the righteousness of their cause and the means by which they carry it out.

They have a deeply held sense of their own perfection and are quite narcissistic. However, this differs from the typical Western version of arrogance and abrasiveness. These individuals feel quietly certain of their destiny. They have an internalized, larger-than-life vision of who they are and the destined role they will play in the life-or-death drama unfolding before them. Their thinking operates on the principle of purpose, not cause. For example, floods or earthquakes do not result from changes in the weather or shifts in the earth's tectonic plates. Rather, they serve the purpose of eliminating certain lands or peoples. At a most primitive level, unwavering true believers may receive directions from their own dreams. They draw sustenance from their internal beliefs and images and do not consciously need external sources of gratification, such as money, power, or sex. These VTBs usually display understated visible symbols of authority and may be quite ascetic.



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They have learned to do without worldly comforts, choosing instead to practice self-discipline and to further the development of their spirituality.

Unwavering true believers may appear paranoid and, perhaps, entertain an irrational fear of imminent assault or believe that others are aggressing against them. This internal psychological operation, based upon their ability to attribute their own aggression to others, allows them to kill other people without ambivalence because their violence always is defensive in their minds.

They often see themselves as warriors, and, in this hypermasculine world, women function only as reproductive vehicles and caretakers of the next generation of warriors. Sexual activity for pleasure and affection is condemned. Women generally are not trusted, and their erotic appeal—rather than males' sexual aggression—must be contained and controlled at all costs.

They likely have superior intelligence and, perhaps, advanced academic degrees. Despite such successes, they shun worldly possessions and criticize those who use their education to further their access to worldly goods. Their life is one of sacrifice, and they often have severed relations with their family, who also may have rejected them. Instead, they assume the role of a benevolent father figure, and their followers become a substitute family.

Unwavering true believers' condemnation of those who do not believe is simple, absolute, and complete. In silence, they will demean interviewers as unbelievers and look for ways in which the behavior of those interviewing them justifies their

criticism. They may watch with great vigilance, but little fanfare, the interviewer's manners and customs, searching for telltale signs of gullibility and ignorance. They will assume interviewers have no knowledge of the VTBs' cause or mission; displays of this lack of knowledge will amuse them and further elevate their sense of specialness and perfection.

Although they ascribe to the homicidal-suicidal strategy in the furtherance of their cause, if they have attained a certain amount of power and influence through their charisma, they may command that others die so that they remain in a position of leadership. They do not acknowledge the selfishness of this decision. Instead, they will justify it as a more potent means of furthering their beliefs.

They have few needs and probably will not provide accurate information or intelligence. Unwavering true believers want or need little in the way of creature comforts. They simply will desire access to their religious books. There is little likelihood of a psychiatric or psychological diagnosis other than, perhaps, a personality disorder. These individuals have learned to contain and control emotion unless they want to use it to intimidate their adversary—the interviewer. They do not depend on attachments or bonds to other believers. These VTBs most easily can be identified because of the tenacity of their beliefs and the effort others expend to listen to them. They will hold a leadership position, and others may view them as blessed with a certain specialness or religious role without the commensurate formal education. Older individuals of this type recognize that acts

of homicidal and suicidal violence most likely will be carried out by young males—the focus of their recruitment efforts.

Interviewers should learn as much as possible about unwavering true believers' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes before meeting with them and then adopt the student's stance: "I want to learn from you and understand your beliefs." They may remain silent but, over time, may begin to talk in response to genuine interest. Tirades—intense, angry emotional expressions against their enemies—may occur and should be tolerated. Recordings of such events may yield factual admissions when

carefully studied. Interviewers should use caution when complimenting them and bolstering their ego or these VTBs quickly will recognize the manipulation. Personnel conducting interviews should acknowledge any cultural differences as "new things to be learned." Confrontation and threats typically will not work and will only solidify the unwavering true believers' silence.

Affiliative True Believers

Generally anxious and dependent on others, these individuals have joined the group to participate in the movement or cause primarily as followers. Often, these VTBs bond intensely to the leadership and, like a plant, need an external energy source. They tend to idealize others, putting them on a pedestal, and, typically, have a history of feeling disappointed and damaged by people they have looked up to in the past. Such believers respond in a very strong, positive, and emotional manner to older individuals who are nurturing and authoritative.

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Affiliative true believers often remain emotionally close to family members; however, like the unwavering true believer, they may feel angry toward them. Perhaps, these believers are the “black sheep” among their siblings. They probably have average intelligence and are prone to feeling depressed when removed from their group of “brothers.” These individuals need careful handling and direction when carrying out a homicide-suicide mission but likely are easy recruits due to their dependency needs and desire to belong. Often, periods of sadness with suicidal thoughts characterize their history; the latter desires to kill themselves have been re-defined as a source of pride in their training for martyrdom. Such thoughts of death are bolstered by grandiose fantasies of joining other martyrs in an idealized place guaranteeing sexual bliss.

They need many friends and at least one authority figure. Such believers likely will suffer from anxiety and depression when removed from those they depend upon emotionally. Their so-called extremist beliefs are nowhere near as solidified as those of the unwavering true believer and take second place to their emotional needs.

Ideally, an older male figure familiar with the family dynamics and culture of the individual will take a warm and affectionate, yet dominant approach to the interview. Much time with this type of believer will yield a bond, and one interviewer consistently should visit with these VTBs to stimulate the relationship. When an emotional connection is made, their beliefs easily can be influenced because these are secondary to their desire for attachment to others. These individuals

also may be willing to join a larger, more powerful group.

Opportunistic True Believers

Like the unwavering true believer, these VTBs are self-important but have joined the cause to enhance their wealth, power, control, property, dominance over subordinates, and other “narcissistic supplies.” Although they appear autonomous, they actually depend heavily on others for attention and admiration. In extreme cases, they want worship and look for followers and admirers to exploit. They can form attachments to others but not as intensively as the affiliative true believer.

For these individuals, the cause is themselves. They have no particular interest in violence and do not want to sacrifice their lives. The beliefs driving the mission of their group are secondary to their opportunistic desires and easily abandoned. They may be charismatic and eager to be the center of attention.

Among these individuals, intelligence varies widely depending on education and background, but values are not important in any deep or abiding sense. They are willing to alter them given changes in opportunities. Their roles in the group will vary from handling minor players to controlling the group’s money.

They need attention and admiration and depend on others to provide these. When such narcissistic supplies are not provided to them, they will become angry and sullen. They will have unmet desires (e.g., money, self-importance) that investigators can identify and use to recruit them. They may want certain things provided to their family.



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There unlikely will be a psychiatric condition other than a personality disorder.

Interviewers can use flattery to let them know that others clearly see their attributes. A younger interviewer eager to learn from them can provide these accolades. Much time and attention should focus on understanding their personal history and its relationship to their present circumstances, with a keen eye to identifying their unmet desires. These VTBs also may conceal feelings of being betrayed or cheated by other members of their group, usually those above them in the hierarchy. They may respond to direct offers.

Criminal True Believers

These are the “berserkers” of the group.¹⁰ In milder variations, they will have a checkered criminal history of both violent and nonviolent offenses. Perhaps, they were gang members or street thugs. In severe cases, they will be psychopaths who take pleasure in committing violence and frightening the other members of the group. They also are sensation seekers and will carry out the most risky acts against the enemy. Other group members typically do not completely trust these VTBs because of their impulsive behaviors (e.g., emotional explosiveness, petty stealing). They also have the shortest lifespan in the organization; they either are forcefully removed from or killed by the group due to their unpredictable behavior.

“Criminal true believer” actually is a misnomer. They do not have any true beliefs, do not waste time thinking about or memorizing religious texts, and are interested only in action. They want to engage in jihad and are happiest when in battle.

Always believing in their own invincibility, they will be fearless in combat and will take risks that astound even their enemies. However, they have no interest in personal suicide to further the cause. They rather would just kill others.

Emotionally detached, they do not form bonds. They take pride in being a loner and prefer to be alone. This makes other members of the group uncomfortable. These VTBs spend time in solitary very well. They are like the opportunistic true believer, always focused on short-term gratification (e.g., food, sex, alcohol and other drugs, or pleasure through the dominance of another). They do not have long-term goals and do not reflect on the past.

Leaders often use them for internal discipline within the group, and these VTBs may know the darkest secrets of other members and use this knowledge against them. Groups recruit criminal true believers for their muscle and use them at the last minute for terrorist activity; if they are around too long, intelligence and discipline will suffer.

These believers often find gratifying their short-term desires sufficient reason to betray others. These individuals are chronically angry. They do not foresee the long-term consequences of their actions; therefore, their postoffense planning is poor. Their Achilles’ heel is their sense of invincibility, especially in battle. They will take physical risks that put themselves in extreme jeopardy.

Interviewers will find that short-term threats probably will not work, although these VTBs may have historically betrayed others for money, drugs, excitement, and power. They are the most

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dangerous of all of the VTB types for both reactive, emotional violence and more planned, unemotional (predatory) violence. Physical security is paramount when interviewing them. They will not establish a relationship with any emotional meaning; therefore, interviewers will waste time if trying to do this. They will attack or betray anyone if the “price” is right. Typically, they will be one of the most physically muscular members of the group and younger in age than most. Positive incentives that focus on their creature comforts work best.

Betrayer True Believers

Although not particularly wedded to a belief or a mission, these individuals know whom they hate and whom they want to betray. In this negative belief structure, the emotional focus is on revenge against someone who has hurt them or someone close to them. They feel victimized by past events and, typically, are quite passive. Although angry, they keep this hidden from others while planning acts of aggression to be carried out indirectly. These individuals are ideological assassins. They love duping or conning others. However, they fear direct aggression because it may stimulate a direct attack on themselves. Psychologists refer to this as a “passive-aggressive” personality. Their sense of betrayal likely is old, not tied to any current situation, and rooted in early family relationships (e.g., an alcoholic, physically abusive father). Initially, they may seem arrogant and condescending, but, as interviewers spend time with these individuals, their inadequacies and low self-esteem become more apparent.



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Initially, interviewers should appeal to these individuals’ fragile narcissism. They should look for ways to admire them and mirror their passive-aggressive style of relating. Investigators can identify ways in which others have betrayed these individuals in the past and try to empathically understand their anger. They should be careful not to injure their self-esteem, which, despite their arrogance, is quite fragile. This is the most difficult type of VTB to identify, and, at first, interviewers may misidentify them as another type, such as an opportunistic true believer. Investigators must remain wary of these individuals’ manipulations to betray them.

Psychotic True Believers

A psychiatrist or psychologist would diagnose these individuals with a major mental disorder, which, typically, manifests in severe abnormalities of perception, thinking, or mood. Symptoms may include auditory or visual hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that do not exist) or delusions (paranoid or persecutory fixed and false beliefs). Dozens of psychiatric diagnoses for these disorders exist, but common ones in this setting include various types of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (formerly called manic depression). Psychiatric disorders occur in a certain portion of the population throughout the world, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality.

Unfortunately, extremist beliefs, especially of a religious nature, may fit easily into the delusions of a person with a mental illness. For example, such people may believe that a certain leader is a prophet or an incarnation of a god. Delusions are

fixed and false, just as literal translations of religious texts can be the absolute truth in the mind of the true believer despite their falsity. Individuals with mental illness who believe they are a prophet and who receive auditory hallucinations commanding them to kill unbelievers may carry out this task with a certainty and vigor that other true believers can only wish for.

However, in stressful situations, like combat or captivity, individuals with mental illness will decompensate—they begin to fall apart. Fanatical religious beliefs become fantastic and bizarre, voices they hear begin to turn on and persecute them, their mood swings become more rapid and dramatic, they begin to disregard personal hygiene, and they behave in ways that provoke anxiety in others (e.g., smearing feces, talking to their voices). When this occurs, their so-called brothers typically will tease them and reject them from the group. The more criminal and anti-social members will exploit them in ways, such as stealing their food or clothing.

Psychotic true believers fear others, cannot cope with even moderate stress, and exhibit unpredictable behavior. Interviewers should meet their desire for safety; this can entail basic caretaking, such as food, shelter, clothing, and protection from others. Unfortunately, they are a poor source of credible information as it likely is distorted and mixed with delusions and hallucinations. Interviewers can have a difficult time sorting true and false information during interviews with these individuals.

Interviewers should isolate them from the others and psychiatrically treat them, either in a

hospital or on an outpatient basis. Gratitude for such treatment eventually may yield an alliance with the interviewer and credible information. Most major mental disorders will respond to appropriate medical treatment. Even severely mentally ill individuals have a capacity to form an emotional bond with the interviewer.

Fledgling True Believers

Fledgling true believers consist of immature or inexperienced persons, children, or adolescents who eventually may become one of the other six types of VTBs. Apparently, these individuals take shape in two ways: through personal suffering or indoctrination.

Personal suffering may be manifest through a history of physical abuse or neglect within the family or through its members' hardships through personal loss or economic deprivation inflicted by others. In both cases, the child learns to hate, and parents, teachers, religious leaders, or other childhood friends reveal and teach the target of that

hatred. If the suffering originates from one of the parents, children easily become convinced that another person or institution is to blame. They will protect their parents at all costs.

Indoctrination can range from mild social pressure from parents and teachers to learn certain "facts" that represent the reality of the world to intensive programming, or brainwashing. Often coming into play are the characteristics of a cult: physical deprivation, isolation, peer group pressure, a charismatic leader, a reward system, and the devaluation of an identified enemy constantly

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are used to instill hatred for a people or country the child has not seen. This is a less-deeply conditioned route to violent true belief than personal suffering and, therefore, is more amenable to change as the child grows up and has exposure to alternative perspectives and ways of life.

Fledgling true believers still are children. Even though their beliefs appear complete and absolute, they are not. They also are vulnerable to all of the desires held by children and adolescents: safety, security, stimulation, love, and attention. Their typical outlook for the future is saturated with their own inflated sense of power and control, yet their daily behavior may be impulsive and not a product of careful thought. They may entertain private fantasies that will not be revealed easily yet are reinforced by their handlers in the community. For example, their martyrdom will make them a hero, and their family will be taken care of after they die. Peer pressure is most powerful during adolescence, and they will want to join the group that has the most prestige among their peers.

They need adult attention, supervision, and control. If they personally have suffered, they may be diagnosed with a traumatic disorder, other anxiety disorder, or depression requiring mental health care. If they are a product of indoctrination, continuous exposure over time to other sources of gratification and views of the world may work. Employing one authoritative and caring adult willing to spend time with them and develop a bond will prove the most useful approach to gaining the child's trust and, perhaps, gathering useful information.

Conclusion

Law enforcement officers want to understand and, thus, deal effectively with today's violent true believer. To this end, based on law enforcement and intelligence experience, the author offers these seven proposed types of violent true believers. This area continues to evolve; no typology is

complete, and these types may change based on new information.

Gaining additional understanding of these individuals can help interviewers obtain information that can help keep this nation safe. As this knowledge increases, other needs/sensitivities and interview approaches may be identified in the future. ♦

Endnotes

¹ J.R. Meloy, K. Mohandie, A. Hempel, and A. Shiva, "The Violent True Believer: Homicidal and Suicidal States of Mind," *Journal of Threat Assessment* 1 (2001): 1-14.

² A. Bringuel, D. Gemeinhardt, G. Weaver, and J. Janowicz, "Spotting and Assessing Potential Confidential Human Sources Using the Group Analysis Protocol (GAP)," in *Terrorism Research & Analysis Project (TRAP): A Collection of Thoughts, Ideas, and Perspectives Vol. 1*, ed. A. Bringuel, J. Janowicz, A. Valida, and E. Reid (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010), 111-148.

³ J.R. Meloy, "The Empirical Basis and Forensic Application of Affective and Predatory Violence," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 40 (2006): 539-547.

⁴ Bringuel, Gemeinhardt, Weaver, and Janowicz.

⁵ Bringuel. Acceptable wartime conduct results from legal convention (treaties) and custom and is found in the contemporary Geneva Conventions I – IV (1949) and subsequent protocols. It also is historically described in both Christian and Islamic writings.

⁶ Bringuel, Gemeinhardt, Weaver, and Janowicz.

⁷ R. Robins and J. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); and Y. Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York, NY: Random House, 2001).

⁸ Bringuel, Gemeinhardt, Weaver, and Janowicz.

⁹ K.M. Puckett, "The Lone Terrorist" (study for the FBI's Counterterrorism Division, 2001); and J.R. Meloy, "Indirect Personality Assessment of the Violent True Believer," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 82 (2004): 138-146.

¹⁰ Berserkers were members of the ancient Viking communities who were used as bodyguards and warriors when needed.

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