

Who Will Become a Terrorist? Research Yields Few Clues

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The New York Times:

WASHINGTON — The brothers who carried out suicide bombings in Brussels last week had long, violent criminal records and had been regarded internationally as potential terrorists. But in San Bernardino, Calif., last year, one of the attackers was a county health inspector who lived a life of apparent suburban normality.

And then there are the dozens of other young American men and women who have been arrested over the past year for trying to help the Islamic State. Their backgrounds are so diverse that they defy a single profile.

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“After all this funding and this flurry of publications, with each new terrorist incident we realize that we are no closer to answering our original question about what leads people to turn to political violence,” Marc Sageman, a psychologist and a longtime government consultant, wrote in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* in 2014. “The same worn-out questions are raised over and over again, and we still have no compelling answers.”

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In 2005, Jeff Victoroff, a University of Southern California psychologist, concluded that the leading terrorism research was mostly just political theory and anecdotes. “A lack of systematic scholarly investigation has left policy makers to design counterterrorism strategies without the benefit of facts,” he wrote in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

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“We talk a very good game,” said John Horgan, a professor at Georgia State University who has conducted numerous government-funded studies. “But from the national security standpoint, we still have a scorecard mentality of early identifications and sting operations.”

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