



# In the Shadows of Jihad: Illuminating the Influence of Substance Abuse on Jihadist Behavior

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Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in), [www.isca.me](http://www.isca.me)

Received 16<sup>th</sup> August 2023, revised 15<sup>th</sup> September 2023, accepted 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023

## Abstract

*This topic delves into the profound impact of Terror Management Theory (TMT) on risk behavior, substance abuse, and the emergence of terrorism. TMT posits that individuals grappling with the anxiety of mortality seek avenues to mitigate this unsettling sensation. Consequently, some individuals resort to engaging in risk-taking behaviors, such as substance abuse, and even resorting to acts of terror. Moreover, TMT underscores the significance of cultural worldviews in bolstering self-esteem and diminishing death anxiety. This comprehensive exploration unravels the intricate interplay between TMT, risk behavior, substance abuse, and the intricate web that connects them to terrorism. By delving into these psychological mechanisms, this topic sheds light on the multifaceted nature of human responses to mortality salience and offers insights into potential avenues for psychological intervention and mitigation strategies. Understanding these dynamics holds the key to fostering safer and more resilient societies in the face of these complex challenges.*

**Keywords:** Substance abuse, Death anxiety, Radical Muslims, Risk behavior, Self-esteem, Extremist ideologies.

## Introduction

Herrington, in his thought-provoking book "Understanding Islamist Terrorism in Europe," introduces a transformative model called Martyrdom Terrorism. Through a thorough examination of existing terrorism frameworks, Harrington presents his model, illustrating how Jihadists transition from state A as unobservant drug abusers to state B as abstinent extremists. Ultimately, they reach state C, where individuals become martyr terrorists. By considering jihadism as a process, Harrington explores the emergence of the desire for substance abuse at various stages of radicalization. Additionally, Harrington posits that Islamic fundamentalism offers a pathway leading to isolation, obsession, resentment, and, ultimately, martyrdom; according to his findings, between 2012 and 2017, at least 75% of Muslim terrorists had a documented history of chronic substance abuse<sup>1</sup>.

However, a pressing question arises: In light of Islam's prohibition of certain risky behaviors, how can Islamic terrorists exhibit such a significant prevalence of drug abuse and alcohol consumption?

Furthermore, what is the relationship between engaging in risky behavior like carrying out assassinations and substance abuse?

Undertaking a unique research endeavor, I embarked on journeys to Afghanistan and Iraq from 2013 to 2022, exploring factors that have been overlooked by previous scholars. Maintaining ongoing online communication with participants, I conducted qualitative research. In this chapter, we aim to

address these questions by employing a combination of my fieldwork experiences in Afghanistan and the application of Terror Management Theory.

**Jihadist:** Extensive research conducted on terrorists has revealed that the overwhelming majority do not exhibit personal pathologies or psychological disorders. In fact, they were relatively ordinary individuals prior to being recruited and indoctrinated by terrorist organizations<sup>2</sup>. The average profile of a terrorist within a cult exhibits normalcy across various aspects, including economic, social, and psychological domains. They do not typically display overt signs of mental illness such as anxiety, neurosis, anger, or a split personality<sup>3</sup>.

On one hand, the influence of a religious belief in an eternal afterlife alone may not be entirely compelling to justify sacrificing one's life for a cause. However, it does generate a significant level of anxiety regarding death and subsequent experiences in the afterlife. On the other hand, within the realm of terrorists, Jihadists, and radical Muslims, their constant exposure to news of war and death, along with their study of Islamic principles on jihad and warfare, contributes to a heightened familiarity with the concept of mortality. Furthermore, their engagement in solemn rituals such as sheep sacrifice serves as a catalyst, prompting deep contemplation on the nature of mortality and arousing a profound preoccupation with death.

This intertwining of experiences and practices becomes a significant factor that intensifies their apprehensions about mortality, leading to what is known as mortality salience<sup>4</sup>.

## Methodology

In conducting this study, a comprehensive research methodology was employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This dual methodology was chosen to provide a holistic understanding of the research subject. The quantitative aspect involved the collection and analysis of numerical data through structured surveys and statistical tools, enabling the quantification of trends and patterns<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile, the qualitative component employed in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analysis to delve into the intricacies of participants' perspectives and experiences, allowing for a rich and nuanced exploration of the research topic<sup>6</sup>. By harmoniously integrating these two approaches, the study aimed to offer a well-rounded and insightful examination of the subject matter.

## Terror Management Theory (TMT)

**TMT & death anxiety:** At the core of Terror Management Theory lies the notion of a fundamental psychological conflict arising from the coexistence of a self-preservation instinct and the realization that death is an unavoidable and somewhat uncertain fate. This conflict gives birth to profound terror, which individuals strive to manage through a dual mechanism of escapism and reliance on cultural beliefs. These cultural beliefs serve as powerful shields, countering the stark biological reality by instilling profound meaning and enduring value into their lives<sup>7</sup>.

Death anxiety emerges as a natural response when confronted with the existential reality of finite lives. In the midst of daily routines and the assumption that tomorrow will always arrive, awareness of mortality tends to be suppressed. However, when this shield of denial is forcefully shattered by an event or experience that renders death too prominent to ignore, a surge of anxiety can be experienced. The concept of death anxiety encompasses not only the apprehension surrounding one's own demise but also concerns about the dying process and the grief associated with the passing of others, such as news about fellow Muslims living in different countries. It can take the form of a transient response that diminishes once the threat subsides or persist as a prolonged state, enduring for extended periods of time<sup>8</sup>.

Jihadists must confront the inevitability of death. As they navigate the path of their chosen ideology, the prospect of mortality looms ever closer. This confrontation can elicit a range of emotions, including anxiety, a diminished sense of security, and even profound fear. In the realm of psychology, this state of mind is commonly referred to as death anxiety<sup>6</sup>. Death anxiety encompasses both conscious and unconscious psychological states that arise as a defense mechanism when individuals perceive a threat to their existence. Recognized by the North American Nursing Diagnosis Association, death anxiety is characterized as a profound sense of unsafety,

anxiety, or fear intertwined with the concept of death or near-death experiences<sup>9</sup>.

According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), individuals can mitigate the potential impact of death anxiety by centering their attention on cultural worldviews and strengthening their self-esteem. This deliberate focus acts as a protective barrier against existential distress. Moreover, the Mortality Salience (MS) hypothesis posits that when thoughts related to death become more prominent and accessible, individuals tend to respond by intensifying their efforts to defend their cultural worldviews and actively pursue the enhancement of their self-esteem<sup>10</sup>.

Within the realm of understanding, it is recognized that heightened exposure to contemplation of mortality salience within individuals a deep-seated anxiety surrounding death. In an endeavor to assuage this disquietude, individuals instinctively turn to the nurturing embrace of their cultural beliefs and worldview, thus fortifying their self-esteem. Through this mechanism, the weight of mortality's torment is alleviated, providing solace and a sense of empowerment.

## Terror Management Theory (TMT)

**Self stem:** As per Terror Management Theory (TMT), the sense of secure immersion within a meaningful construct of reality, often referred to as the cultural worldview, serves as a safeguard against anxiety stemming from the existential awareness of human mortality. This theory posits that by embracing and aligning with a collective belief system that provides purpose and significance, individuals can mitigate the distress associated with contemplating their eventual demise. In essence, the cultural worldview acts as a protective shield against existential anxiety, allowing individuals to find solace and navigate their lives with a greater sense of security<sup>11</sup>.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) suggests that self-esteem plays a crucial role as a multifaceted defense mechanism against anxiety. It posits that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem tend to experience lower levels of anxiety. Substantial correlation evidence substantiates this proposition, revealing a consistent negative association between self-esteem and various manifestations of anxiety, including anxiety-related difficulties and insecure attachment. Essentially, individuals who possess higher self-esteem are more likely to exhibit lower levels of anxiety and demonstrate better psychological well-being. These findings highlight the protective nature of self-esteem in buffering against anxiety and its related consequences, shedding light on the significant impact it can have on an individual's overall mental health and emotional resilience<sup>3,12</sup>.

In the context of self-esteem, if smoking is perceived as a means to enhance one's sense of self-esteem, the presence of mortality-related cues (such as on-pack warnings highlighting the dangers of smoking) could paradoxically elicit more favorable attitudes

towards smoking. This counterintuitive response can be attributed to the phenomenon of mortality salience, where individuals, when reminded of their own mortality, may exhibit an increased willingness to take risks and engage in behaviors like smoking<sup>12</sup>. The underlying mechanism is rooted in the desire to cope with existential anxiety and assert control over one's mortality through defiant or rebellious actions. Consequently, exposure to reminders of mortality may inadvertently reinforce positive attitudes toward risky behaviors<sup>13,14</sup>. As reflected in the following excerpt from my ethnographic study conducted in Afghanistan on Jihadists:

Sayyed Rasool, a student of a religious school in Herat, appeared to be around twenty-three years old when he embarked on his first terrorist act, intending to kill an influential American employee at five o'clock in the morning. Despite firing from a close range of less than two meters, he was unsuccessful in his attempt. However, during the court proceedings, he proudly confessed to three previous successful terrorist operations. Interestingly, Sayyed Rasool never engaged in drug use or smoking. He was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment in Zangar prison, located eighty kilometers from Kabul. Following the Taliban's capture of Kabul, he was eventually released and is now involved in the political landscape of the Taliban government. Doubts regarding his claims of three previous successful terrorist attacks emerged among his close friends, who happened to be his family members. They questioned the veracity of his statements, casting skepticism on the validity of his asserted track record in carrying out previous acts of terrorism. This uncertainty among those closest to him raises questions about the credibility and accuracy of his self-proclaimed involvement in prior terrorist operations. The presence of doubt within his inner circle underscores the complexity of evaluating the truthfulness and reliability of such claims, necessitating a thorough investigation and corroborating evidence to ascertain the factual basis of his assertions. It is worth highlighting that in Afghanistan, the widespread use of a narcotic drug known as *nas* is a notable phenomenon. *Nas*, or *Neswar*, is an extremely addictive herbal drug derived from tobacco leaves. It is typically placed between the lips and teeth, where it induces a euphoric effect before being expelled. However, it is intriguing to mention that Sayyed Rasool did not encounter instances of *nas* usage during his experiences. *Nas* is identifiable by its vibrant green color, distinctive spicy taste, and aromatic scent<sup>15</sup>.

In contrast, there is another individual named Syed Tavakoli, who, despite appearing to be around fifty years old, is highly regarded as one of the top jihadists among mosque-goers. He is known to indulge in traditional drug use. According to local accounts, Syed Tavakoli possesses exceptional accuracy in his actions, thanks to his reliance on substance abuse.

Curious about the Islamic stance on drug consumption, I once asked Syed Tavakoli how Islam reconciles the prohibition of alcohol with the permissibility of using drugs. In response, he

asserted that while alcohol is forbidden in Islam, the use of substances such as opium or other drugs for medicinal purposes is considered permissible (*halal*)<sup>14</sup>.

Based on the provided information, there appears to be a significant relationship between substance abuse and the likelihood of carrying out a successful terrorist activity. Sayyed Rasool, a young student who did not engage in drug use or smoking, failed in his attempt to kill an influential American employee. In contrast, although, a renowned jihadist known for his traditional drug use, is highly regarded for his accuracy in carrying out acts of terror.

These contrasting cases suggest that substance abuse may play a role in enhancing the effectiveness of terrorist activities. The involvement of drugs or other substances could potentially provide individuals with heightened focus, courage, or other psychological states conducive to successful execution. However, it is essential to note that individual factors, training, and specific circumstances also contribute significantly to the outcome of such acts<sup>15</sup>.

Further research and analysis are necessary to explore the complex relationship between substance abuse and terrorism and to understand the underlying mechanisms that may contribute to the perceived success of terror activities. Based on the data compiled from an extensive list of suicidal terrorists spanning the years 2000 to 2018, I would like to present some key findings. The Excel database was sent to me by Dr. Lewis Harrington, the author of the "Understanding Islamist Terrorism in Europe: Drugs, Jihad, and the Pursuit of Martyrdom".

Based on a comprehensive analysis of data encompassing the years 2000 to 2018, it was found that the age range for carrying out terrorist operations predominantly fell between 20 and 30 years. This age group accounted for a significant proportion of individuals involved in acts of terrorism during the specified time period. It is noteworthy that within this age range, individuals demonstrated a higher propensity for radicalization and engagement in extremist activities. The findings highlight the importance of understanding the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of young adults and the need for targeted interventions aimed at countering extremist ideologies during this critical stage of development.

Among the various substances, cannabis stands out as the most widely consumed drug in Europe. The consumption of cannabis surpasses that of other substances, indicating its popularity and prevalence across the continent.

The countries exhibiting the highest number of terrorist operations, as indicated in the table above, are France, England, Spain, and Belgium.

According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), radical young Muslims, deeply preoccupied with the thoughts and anxieties

surrounding death, employ various strategies to alleviate the unpleasantness and enhance their self-confidence. Alongside the use of accessible drugs, another prominent means they utilize is an unwavering commitment to their religious worldview. This steadfast faith serves to reinforce their sense of self and bolster

their confidence. This research sheds light on the interconnected nature of substance abuse, profound religious beliefs, and their impact on the successful execution of jihadi operations. The findings emphasize the multifaceted dynamics at play within the psychological and ideological realms of radicalized individuals.

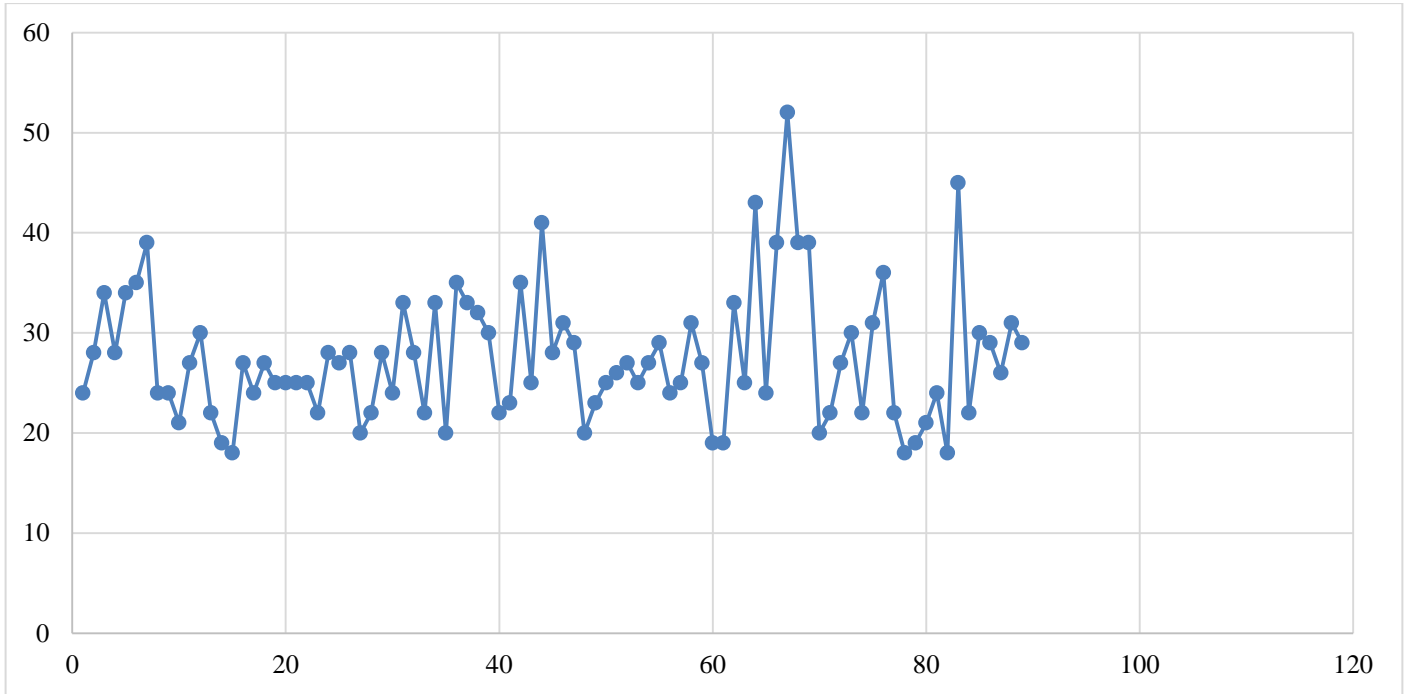


Figure-1: The Demographic of Terrorism.

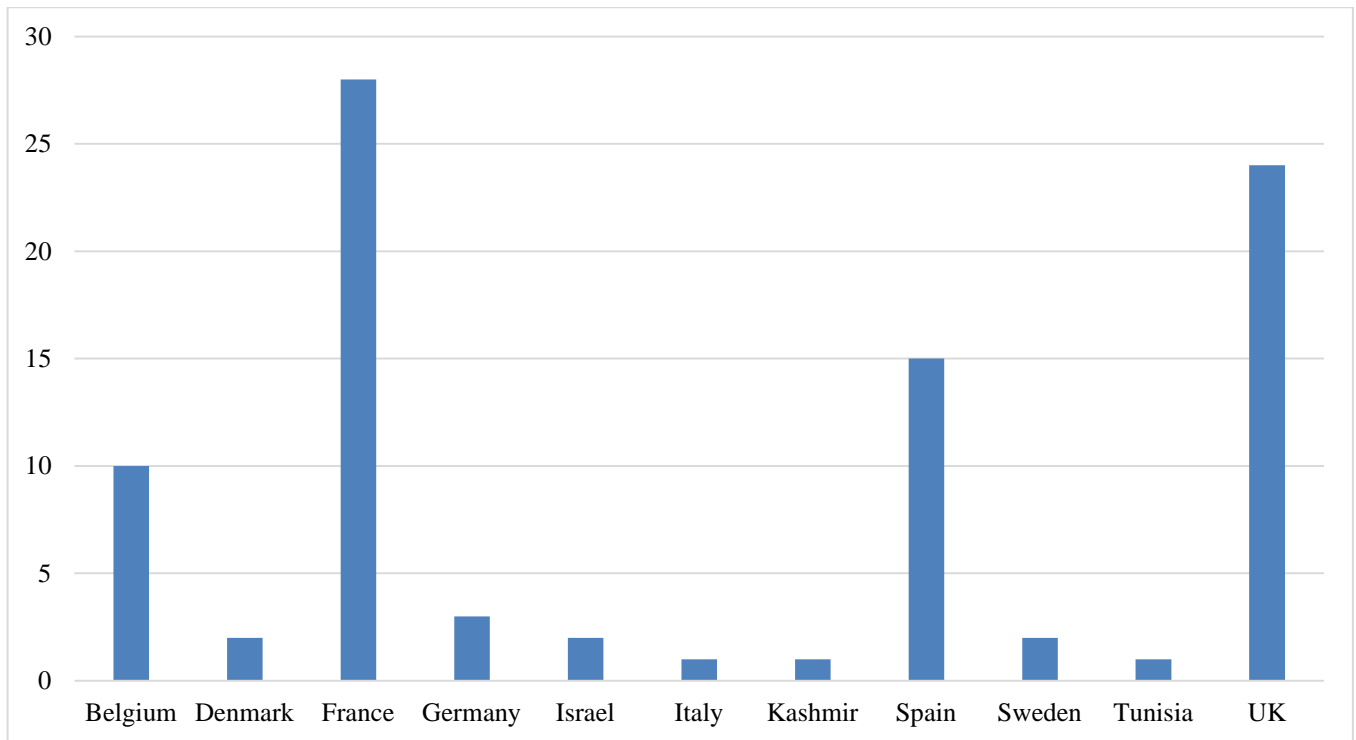


Figure-2: Geographical Concentrations: Terrorism Hotspots Worldwide.

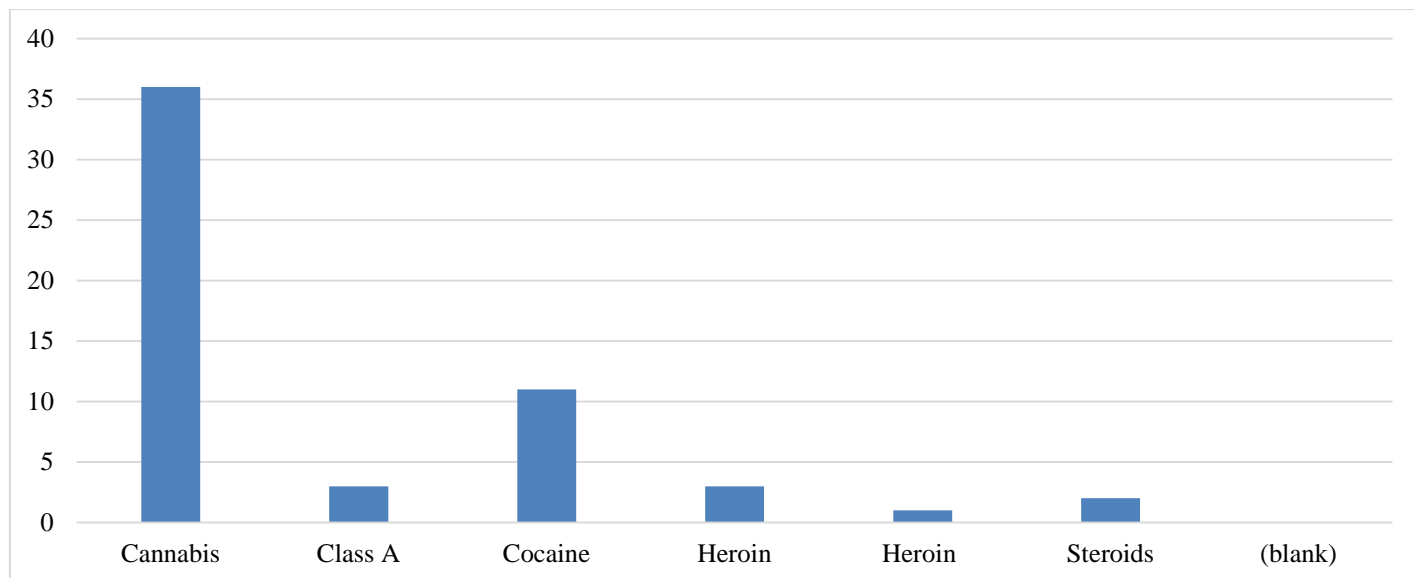


Figure-3: Diverse Arsenal: Materials Used in Terrorism.

### Terror Management Theory (TMT)

**Risk behavior:** The terror management theory elucidates the underlying motivations behind high-risk behaviors such as taking lives through acts of assassination and engaging in substance abuse. While these actions may seem disparate, they are connected through the lens of managing existential dread and anxieties surrounding mortality. The theory posits that individual's resort to extreme measures as a means to confront and mitigate the overwhelming fear of death. By understanding the complex interplay between these behaviors and existential concerns, we gain insights into the psychological mechanisms at play within individuals driven towards such risky actions<sup>1</sup>.

The findings of the study revealed a significant link between mortality salience and an increased inclination to engage in risk-taking behaviors. When individuals were confronted with the awareness of their mortality, it influenced their decision-making processes, leading them to exhibit a higher propensity for taking risks. Individuals may be more willing to step outside their comfort zones, embrace uncertainty, and pursue actions that carry higher potential rewards or consequences. The implications of these findings shed light on the intricate interplay between mortality salience and risk-taking tendencies, providing valuable insights into human behavior under existential conditions<sup>16</sup>.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) not only highlights the relationship between mortality salience and increased risk-taking behavior but also introduces a dual-defense model that elucidates how individuals safeguard themselves against the anxieties associated with death. When confronted with the awareness of their mortality, individuals may be inclined to engage in risky behaviors as a means of asserting their existence

and seeking a sense of significance. However, TMT suggests that defense mechanisms come into play, influencing the specific response to mortality concerns. The nature of this defense mechanism is contingent upon whether the concerns about death are conscious or unconscious<sup>17</sup>. When individuals are consciously aware of their mortality, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that reinforce their cultural worldviews, bolster their self-esteem, and seek meaning and purpose in life. These conscious defenses serve as a psychological shield, providing a sense of security and reducing the anxiety associated with mortality salience<sup>18</sup>.

Returning to my field notes in Afghanistan, I encountered the notable Abu Amri Mosque, which held significance not only for the operational members of the Taliban but also for the Taliban's business community.

As a non-Muslim, attending the mosque seemed prohibited to me, considering their perception of my faith as that of an infidel. Despite this, I made an effort to visit the mosque and engage with those who frequented it, seeking to gain insights and broaden my understanding.

During my observations, I noticed that a significant portion of the sermons delivered by the priests revolved around the concept of life after death, emphasizing its importance in the congregation's spiritual discourse<sup>19</sup>.

Intrigued by the widespread use of nas, a substance with drug-like properties, I approached one of the worshipers who was indulging in it. With curiosity, I questioned why they would use nas when Islam explicitly forbids alcohol consumption. In response, he explained that Islam does not explicitly prohibit the

use of drugs, leaving room for their usage based on necessity and individual discretion.

These encounters and reflections added rich layers to my field notes, shedding light on the religious practices, cultural nuances, and personal beliefs that shaped the dynamics within Afghan society<sup>20</sup>.

Young terrorists, immersed in an environment where death looms prominently, find themselves ensnared in the inescapable grip of death anxiety. They immerse themselves in the narratives of mortality, be it through tales shared within the sacred walls of mosques or the chilling news of fellow Muslims perishing in distant lands. The weight of these contemplations burdens their minds, leaving them vulnerable to the haunting specter of death's apprehension.

In their quest to alleviate the discomfort of death anxiety and restore a semblance of self-assurance, these young individuals embark on treacherous paths. They engage in perilous endeavors that serve a dual purpose: assassination and substance abuse. By undertaking such high-risk activities, they momentarily escape the clutches of mortality's grip, bolstering their sense of self and attempting to conquer the unnerving whispers of their mortality.

In this poignant narrative, we witness the intricate interplay between the relentless contemplation of death, the pursuit of self-confidence, and the harrowing choices made by these young terrorists. Their path, veiled in darkness, becomes a desperate attempt to wrest control from the clutches of mortality's thought, even if it means embarking on treacherous journeys of violence and substance-induced solace.

**Summary:** This chapter delves into the exploration of various aspects related to terrorism, death anxiety, and substance abuse, drawing insights from field observations and research. It begins by discussing the Terror Management Theory (TMT), which suggests that individuals mitigate the impact of death anxiety by embracing cultural worldviews and bolstering their self-esteem. The chapter highlights the role of self-esteem as an anxiety buffer and its negative correlation with anxiety levels. It also examines the concept of mortality salience and its influence on individuals' defense mechanisms and striving for self-esteem and worldview protection.

The chapter then transitions to the connection between terrorism and substance abuse. It explores how radical young Muslims, driven by their preoccupation with death anxiety, may resort to drug use as a means to alleviate unpleasant feelings and enhance self-confidence. The significance of worldview defense is also highlighted, explaining the strong religious faith exhibited by these individuals. The chapter presents the prevalence of drug use, specifically *nas* (Neswar), in Afghanistan and its cultural context. Additionally, it sheds light on the correlation between drug use by jihadists and the execution of successful terrorist operations.

Furthermore, the chapter explores the dual-defense model proposed by TMT, explaining how individuals safeguard themselves against death concerns. It distinguishes between proximal defenses, which aim to eliminate threats from focal attention, and distal defenses, which involve finding meaning in worldviews and enhancing self-esteem. The chapter emphasizes that the specific response to death concerns depends on whether they are conscious or unconscious, and how individuals activate defense mechanisms accordingly.

The chapter concludes by emphasizing the interplay between death anxiety, substance abuse, and risk-taking behaviors. It underscores the potential link between mortality salience and a greater willingness to engage in risky actions. The importance of conscious and unconscious concerns about mortality and the utilization of proximal and distal defenses are emphasized as individuals navigate their anxieties surrounding death.

Overall, this chapter provides a comprehensive examination of the relationship between terrorism, death anxiety, substance abuse, and defense mechanisms. It offers insights into the psychological factors that shape individuals' behaviors and responses in the face of mortality, shedding light on the intricate dynamics at play in these complex phenomena.

## Conclusion

Having explored the intricate relationship between terrorism, death anxiety, and substance abuse, the focus now shifts toward understanding the model of substance abuse and the level of death anxiety among young radical Muslims. By delving into their level of attention to news about death and their engagement with mosque preachers, valuable insights can be gleaned regarding the potential for future terrorist operations. Additionally, this chapter delves into the importance of psychological treatment as a means to address and mitigate the underlying factors contributing to radicalization and extremist ideologies. Through a comprehensive analysis of these aspects, a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding terrorism and potential avenues for intervention can be attained.

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