

LETTERS

Probing the Mentality Behind a Massacre

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To the Editor:

Re [“What Drives Suicidal Mass Killers?”](#) (Op-Ed, Dec. 18):

Adam Lankford argues that suicide terrorists like the 9/11 attackers or other jihadis share a triad of psychological peculiarities: mental health problems, a sense of victimization and a desire for glory.

I've interviewed failed and would-be suicide terrorists, their families and friends across Eurasia and North Africa. Apart from desire for glory, highly developed among jihadis and their ilk but less so among lone-wolf killers like the Newtown murderer, there is little similarity.

Field interviews and controlled psychological experiments indicate that members of violent extremist groups are motivated by a cause (but so are millions of others who fail to act), and kill and die for and with their friends and fellow travelers. They show no reliable history of psychopathy, suicidal tendencies, personal humiliation, sociopathy or any of the other psychosocial problems frequently associated with lone-wolf killers.

We must make every effort to understand what motivates mass murder in order to stop it, but simple and superficial comparisons will not assist.

SCOTT ATRAN

New York, Dec. 18, 2012

The writer is a presidential scholar at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a visiting professor of psychology and public policy at the University of Michigan.