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Birth of the Suicidal Terrorist: A Self-Justification Approach

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Abstract. This paper describes social psychological techniques employed by recruiters to select, solicit, and shape suicidal terrorists.

Even if some suicidal terrorists may be born "that way," political psychologists can still profitably study what "that way" comprises. Even if "that way" largely turns out to be some genetically induced diathesis, there would still be the need to study environmental factors which could exacerbate or moderate the consequences.

In fact, psychological research on suicidal terrorism often has reflected the search for "smoking-gun" personality traits and social cognition phenomena. Both of these--alone or in combination, their essence or their consequence-- are partially related to temperament--itself bearing a significant genetic load. Environmental factors--from cerebral infarct, family upbringing, socioeconomic status, the historical moment, through electromagnetism allegedly inducing cerebral events and epiphenomenal personality change-- might form the salient context in which genetic diathesis was expressed.

But instead of splitting hairs about variants of nature-nurture combinations and appropriate levels of analysis--too often an ideological exercise--one might profit from exploring the social psychological techniques of selecting, soliciting, and shaping the suicidal terrorist. These are the weapons of the "talent scout" or "tout" representing or fronting for an organization employing suicidal terrorism among other methods used to achieve political objectives. (Note here that even suicidal terrorists who believe they are acting totally alone--without external guidance--would be necessarily affected through social learning, vicarious conditioning, innate constraints or predilections, and imaginal interludes involving factual or fictional events encompassing other people. And, in turn, these very components can be influenced by others unwittingly or in a premeditated fashion.) These weapons--these social psychological techniques--would be relevant to some "final common pathway" of suicidal behavior; some congruence of psychological and behavioral expression; some instilling, strengthening, or activation of whatever "that way" is.

One might assume that most suicidal terrorists are not completely "that way" when first approached, if for no other reason that they have not yet engaged in such behavior--at least successfully. For the talent scout, however, research on self-justification points away.

Self-justification denotes the motivation to justify one's actions to oneself. This motivation often becomes quite significant when somehow one has engaged in a behavior or generated behavioral consequences that appear contradictory to some important aspect of one's self. Self-justification options can include (1) changing the self in a direction more compatible with behavioral or behavioral consequences or (2) relabeling the behavior, behavioral consequence, or their proximal and distal targets and observers in a direction more compatible with the self.

So how does the talent scout or tout employ self-justification to select, solicit, and shape the suicidal terrorist? The terrorist candidate who has a self- concept comprising beliefs of being a decent,

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compassionate human being with high self-esteem must be influenced by the techniques to act in a self-contradictory manner. And more than this, the candidate must perceive this behavior as engaged in (1) voluntarily, (2) with much effort, (3) inevitably, and (4) with noxious consequences for someone who initially might not have seemed to deserve it.

Of special note is characteristic (4). Through (4), self-justification often takes the form of derogating the innocents who have been harmed, which, in turn, increases the probability that hurtful behavior will be engaged in towards them in the future. Why? Because more and more to our candidate, they seem to deserve it.

So far, terrorism, not suicidal terrorism, is being reinforced. To reach that final step, two further psychological phenomena need to occur--also through self-justification. First, the candidate's sense of being decent and compassionate with high self-esteem must be gradually reinforced by behaviors that would have earlier been perceived as self-contradictory. In essence, the cognitive-emotional schema of decency, compassion, and self-esteem are being changed. Second, the candidate's sense of past--however good it might seem--must be shaped to pale before the goodness awaiting a martyr's death. In a crude sense, the candidate is engaged in revising the past self as a relatively failed contrivance compared to the glorious entity of the future. With all the above, cognitive dissonance is being reduced through different options to self-justification.

As the talent scout or tout is well aware, suicidal terrorism is by no means a selfless act. On the contrary, it sows the death of others to reap a glorious, eternal life for the new self. (See Aronson, E. (1995.) *The social animal*. (7th Ed.) pp. 175-246; Crenshaw, M. (1992.) Current research on terrorism: The academic perspective. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 15, 1-11; Jost, J.T. (1995.) Negative illusions: Conceptual clarification and psychological evidence concerning false consciousness. *Political Psychology*, 16, 397-424; Rapoport, D.C. (1988.) Messianic sanctions for terror. *Comparative Pol*, 20, 195-213; Stone, J.A. (1994.) Self-esteem, self-accessibility and reconsidering one's alternatives: Examining the temporal sequence of events in post-decision dissonance. *Dissertation Abstraction International*, Section B, 54 (10-B), 5435.) (Keywords: Cognitive Dissonance, Personality, Self-Justification, Terrorism, Typology.)