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Suicide Bombing in Tel Aviv: Some Psychological Issues

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Abstract. Several recurring Issues in the political psychology analysis of terrorism are illustrated in another Mideast tragedy.

Issue #1. When is the best time for murder to subvert a peace process? The answer may be that it's always a "best" time, as long as certain principles of conditioning are followed. Terrorist murders of Israelis in 1996 occurred while the public discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was largely positive and optimistic. The March 21, 1997 murders occurred while the public discourse was at a very pessimistic point. In both cases, terrorism has helped to subvert the peace process, perhaps as explicated by various psychological constructs--(1) omission training, i.e., the removal of something positive; (2) punishment, i.e., the introduction of a noxious stimulus; and (3) intermittent reinforcement, viz., through a variable interval schedule--i.e., variable time intervals between each terrorist event--of omission training and/or punishment. (For a critique of behaviorist concepts applied to political behavior, see "Foreign Policy and the People's Republic of China: A Behaviorist Perspective" in IBPP, Vol. 1, No. 2.)

Some behaviorist psychologists might posit that too frequent or too much terrorism may have the same effects as implosive therapy, i.e., the intense presentation of noxious stimuli for therapeutic benefits-- generating a consequence opposite to what is usually obtained. An alternative construct from the social cognition literature is that of the activation of reactance, i.e., the tendency to resist the stated intent of an act, because the act somehow challenges one's sense of freedom or autonomy. Reactance often is presumed to lead to a consequence opposite to what is usually obtained. (Why one terrorist act often does not activate reactance may generate more of a theological or even cosmological debate than a psychological one.)

The psychological essence of implosive therapy or reactance may already have occurred to the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, leading to lack of significant support in its negotiations with the Peruvian government over hostages still being held (as of this writing) at the Japanese Ambassador's residence.

Issue #2. The Need to Subvert Causal Attributions. That a terrorist is responsible for terrorism--as defined as the political killing of so-called innocent people--might seem obvious. Yet in one variant of terrorist logic, no one is really innocent--some are taxpayers of a "repressive" regime, some have babies who may grow up to defend the regime, some are babies who are the regime's future defenders, some "have it coming" for not helping political organizations supported by the terrorists, and so on. Therefore, these others may be assumed to be as guilty or more guilty than terrorists. In fact, the former may be assumed to be the real terrorists confronted by terrorists who are really freedom fighters. (Of course, one can employ terrorism to achieve freedom, the escape from freedom, nirvana, or an honest day's pay.)

This logic variant was recently illustrated by Yasir Arafat's spokesperson, Marwan Kanafani, who was cited as stating, "The person ultimately responsible for this painful deed is Netanyahu himself,

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who.....led us all to this position and to this hopeless atmosphere that resulted in the loss of innocent lives." Implicit in this statement is that terrorism subverts existing rules and norms for attribution of blame and then redefines them, so that one who knowingly acts in a fashion inconsonant with the de sires of terrorists can be blamed for the terrorist behavior, not the terrorists. Given that the most well-researched and ecologically valid approach to moral judgment--that of Lawrence Kohlberg's--attributes rule-based and norms-based morality as the most common stages, this subversion of the majority regime's edifice of causal attributions is extremely significant. A false consciousness in others and even in the self is one true objective of terrorists.

Issue #3. Setting the truth free instead of the truth setting others free. The United States President has been cited as stating, "There must be absolutely no doubt in the minds of the friends or the enemies of peace that the Palestinian Authority is unalterably opposed to terror and unalterably committed to pre-empting and preventing such acts." Unalterably? Power structures such as governments and nongovernmental organizations, whether or not they have used terrorism--e.g., the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Israel--do not have unalterable characteristics of power orientation. The President's statement is rhetoric, perhaps correct rhetoric to help defuse some negative consequences of the terrorist act, but the truth? With the truth as victim, terrorists thrive even more than the guerrilla swimming in the sea of the people. (See Beattie, G., & Doherty, K. (1995.) "I saw what really happened": The discursive construction of victims and perpetrators in firsthand accounts of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland. Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 14, 408-433; Overgaard, P.B. (1994.) The scale of terrorist attacks as a signal of resources. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 38, 452-478; Schmemann, S. (March 22, 1997.) 4 are killed in a suicide bombing. in Tel Aviv. The New York Times. pp. 1;4.)(Keywords: Foreign Policy, Information Warfare, Terrorism.)

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