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Trends. Carrots and Sticks: The Aftermath of Terrorist Acts

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Controversy over the Israeli government response to the terrorist acts on July 30, 1997 of two suicidal bombers in West Jerusalem reflect a basic psychological issue in cognitive-behavioral modification. Is it more effective to employ sticks--to punish and engage in omission training with those who are allegedly responsible for supporting the acts--or carrots--to engage in positive and negative reinforcement with these same people, in the latter case to rectify socioeconomic and cultural precursors of terrorism and to defuse individual and collective senses of injustice?

The Israelis have taken the stick approach, e.g., suspending the reimbursement of taxes and various fees owed and regularly dispensed to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and closing off to Israel the Gaza Strip and areas of the West Bank controlled by the PNA. The problem with sticks (see IBPP article cited below) is that its consequences are so unpredictable and varied. The targets of sticks may (1) experience learned helplessness and behave and believe as if their acts have no further consequences in the world, (2) identify with the aggressor and simulate Israeli ways of handling conflict, (3) incorporate Israeli value systems and out-Israeli the Israelis in both positive and negative ways, (4) comply with Israeli dictates, and (5) intensify support for terrorist acts and even render the support more undetectable in a seeming paradoxical consequence. (This list is illustrative only, not comprehensive.)

Problems with accepting critiques of stick approaches and advocacy for carrots include the (1) catharsis that surviving victims and targets of terrorism experience from the use of sticks on their real and alleged aggressors, (2) closure experienced by implementing at least a mild variant of the literal eye-for-an-eye belief held by many who profess living by the Old Testament, (3) reinforcement of beliefs in illusory control over political events of adversaries, and their (4) extreme unpopularity with majorities of most political electorates and politicians with various psychological insecurities..

Advocacy for carrots is not necessarily founded on assumptions that we live in the best of all possible worlds, should discount or disparage other uses of sticks, or embrace pacifism or turning the other cheek. This advocacy is founded on the assumptions that sticks often appear implicated in so-called intractable conflict and that carrots have not been used with enough frequency to establish a track record. This advocacy also is food for thought concerning completely different conflictual issues as well--e.g., the People's Republic of China's frequent use of sticks versus Taiwan's use of carrots in attempting to win the hearts, minds, and political compliance of Central American and Caribbean leaders. (See Foreign policy and the People's Republic of China: A behaviorist perspective. *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*, 1(2), 1-4; Jehl, D. (August 6, 1997.) Israel urged to ease pressure on Palestinian authority. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Jehl, D. (August 5, 1997.) Palestinians deprived of funds from Israel. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Rohter, L. (August 5, 1997.) Taiwan, China carry duel for recognition to central America. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Israel, West Jerusalem, Terrorism, Incentives, Palestine, Gaza Strip, West Bank)