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Terrorist Explosions in East Africa: An Asynchrony Among Language, Thought, and Action?

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Abstract. This article describes an asynchrony among the language of foreign leaders responding to an event of terrorism, the inferred thought underlying the language, and the action necessary to effect successful antiterrorism and counterterrorism programs.

The language spoken by foreign leaders responding to an alleged event of terrorism is very predictable. From the example of the recent East African explosions, we learn that terrorism is "cowardly" (French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin; German Foreign Minister, Klaus Kinkel; English Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook), "senseless" (official South African statement), "heartless and indiscriminate…against innocent civilians" (United Nations Secretary General), and "perverted" (official Egyptian statement).

Assuming the above referents of terrorism are not mere postterrorist boilerplate, one might assume that foreign leaders possess terrorism-related thought significantly unrelated to reality.

Is terrorism cowardly? Terrorism is a strategy and tactic of choice when confronted with an adversary with far superior military assets. If this choice is cowardly, then the choice to fight in the open and to surely die in the fight without achieving one's objectives--when other options are available--is not heroic but instead dysfunctional and suicidal. One may even argue that not engaging in terrorism is cowardly for it suggests a less than full commitment to do what it takes to achieve an objective.

Is terrorism senseless? Terrorism has been a strategy and tactic of conflict throughout history--at least partially because it makes a lot of sense and contributes to achieving significant political goals.

Is terrorism heartless, indiscriminate, against innocents? Terrorists' hearts often are burning with anger or joy and rarely are absent from planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Death and destruction often are heart-impelled. A sine qua non of terrorism is discrimination--the careful choice of targets and analysis of consequences. Deaths are not indiscriminate for this reason, nor are casualties innocent. In the logic of the terrorist, one is either part of the problem or part of the solution. Not supporting the terrorist is being part of the problem.

Is terrorism perverted? Early social science research often sought to support hypotheses that terrorism and subpopulations of terrorists were imbued with emotional and mental disorder--although not necessarily disorder directly related to sexuality. Today this research is usually viewed as crude and quaint. If the referent of perverted is that which violates what is right or good, the Egyptian claim ranges from tautological to self-serving.

In so far as language and thought impel action, foreign leaders seem destined to engage in antiterrorism and counterterrorism activities based on dubious premises. These dubious premises may be fueled by the leaders' conscious and unconscious aversions to perceiving similarities among themselves and terrorists. Besides noting that some leaders and some political entities represented by these leaders have terrorist backgrounds, one should also note that leaders and terrorists both practice politics

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wherein some people are hurt for the benefit of others. Terrorists merely make this politics more difficult to relabel and reinterpret.

Is the leaders' asynchrony among language, thought, and action a compromise symptom formation in lieu of a cognitive-emotional awareness of the literal and/or figurative blood on one's own hands? As Lady Macbeth states in Act V, Scene I of Shakespeare's Macbeth, "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?" At least some terrorists know it and may be calling our power to account. And all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten our own moral dilemmas. (See Around the world, leaders express outrage. (August 8, 1998). The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com.; Comay, M. (1976). Political terrorism. Mental Health and Society, 3, 249-261; Harris, A., & Aron, L. (1997). Ferenczi's semiotic theory: Previews of postmodernism. Psychoanalytic Inquiry, 17, 522-534; Lucy, J.A. (1997). Linguistic relativity. Annual Review of Anthropology, 26, 291-312; Markova, I. (1997). Language and authenticity. Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 27, 265-275; Shakespeare, W. (1995). The Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth (K. Muir, ed.). NY: Routledge. (Original work published c.1606; Tesone, J.E. (1996). Multi-lingualism, word presentations, thing presentations, and psychic reality. International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 77, 871-881.) (Keywords: Kenya, Tanzania, Terrorism.)