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Terrorist Explosions in Nairobi: How Secondary Goals Become Primary Ones

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Abstract. This article describes a psychology of terrorism whereby achieving secondary goals can ineluctably lead to achieving primary ones.

Assuming that the explosions in Nairobi, Kenya of August 7, 1998 were planned and perpetrated by terrorists, what were the primary goals--proximal and distal? Likely candidates include: (1) decreasing United States (U.S.) support for Israel; (2) decreasing U.S. political and cultural imperialism; (3) ultimately destroying the US as a foe of Islam; (4) punishing the US for facilitating criminal justice adjudication against various terrorists; (5) deterring the US from further efforts to thwart various sources of terrorism; (6) engaging in the reinforcement of personal needs to express aggression and to overcompensate for feelings of inferiority. Goals (4) and (6) may already have been achieved. The other four goals may be somewhat closer to achievement. Note that all six goals relate to situations largely independent of Kenya.

But a secondary, perhaps unintended goal does concern US-Kenyan relations--the cooling of those relations. These relations--even with sporadic tensions between President Daniel arap Moi and U.S. representatives like former U.S. Ambassador Smith Hempstone--have largely been positive. Even more positive have been the relations between most Kenyans and U.S. citizens--the latter in country as tourists or to engage in public or private business. Yet quotes attributed to Kenyans soon after the Nairobi explosions suggest that a nexus of negative beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and feelings towards the US may be growing--at least in the short-term. Note the following: "all of this problem [the bombings] happened because of them [the US]"…"they [the US] should take the war elsewhere"…"[Kenyans were] paying with their lives for U.S. foreign policy decisions"…"US did too little to dig out Ufundi [the building adjacent to the U.S. embassy]"…"the U.S. embassy should be moved from the center of town"…"Down with the Americans". These quotes explicitly or implicitly attribute blame to the US and help the terrorist perpetrators in several interrelated ways: (1) The terrorist target is being blamed, not the terrorist. (2) The terrorist's argument that the target should be blamed because the target's traits and/or behavior invited terrorism is being supported. (3) The notion that less contact with the US may result in less terrorist threat in Kenya is quite compatible with a cooling of relations between Kenya and the US. And can even facilitate further anti-US terrorist operations.

Success towards the above secondary goal may--through vicarious conditioning--influence other countries similarly. The message is: Stay away from the US. The US brings only trouble. And, suddenly, achieving the secondary goal significantly contributes to achieving primary ones. (See Bonner, R. (August 11, 1998). As rescuers' final hopes fade, investigators' toil begins. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Kordacova, J. (1995). Coping strategies in internal dialogue. Studia Psychologica, 37, 202-205; McKinley, J.C., Jr. (August 10, 1998). As lives ended, many more changed forever. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; McKinley, J.C., Jr. (August 8, 1998). Two U.S. embassies in East Africa bombed. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Moi urged to recall House. (August 10, 1998). Daily Nation(Kenya), http://www.nationaudio.com/News/DailyNation; Quigley, B.M., & Tedeschi, J.T. (1996). Mediating effects of blame attributions on feelings of anger. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22, 1280-1288; Winkel, F.W., & Denkers, A. (1995). Crime

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victims and their social network: A field study on the cognitive effects of victimisation, attributional responses and the victim-blaming model. International Review of Victimology, 3, 309-322.) (Keywords: Kenya, Nairobi, Terrorism.)