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# Assassination: A Tool of Terror Management or of Counterterrorism?

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Abstract. This article describes Issues relevant to evaluating assassination as a viable tool of governmental security policy to counter terrorism. The creative inspiration and much of the research for this article was accomplished by IBPP Research Assistant and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University student Lou Adesso III.

With the publicization in mass media sources of an international terrorism network funded and organized by Osama bin Laden, the topic of assassination as a viable security policy tool of government to counter terrorism is a common topic among that network's real and alleged targets--and the network itself. There are two main criteria to which assassination as policy should be held. Do the capabilities exist to effect assassination? How likely can assassination effect desired political consequences? Each criterion must be tempered in an ethical/moral crucible.

Capabilities. The biggest shortfall of assassination capabilities is that of intelligence. Whose demise would seriously weaken a terrorist network or terrorist capability? Where are these people? How can they be approached? What kind of counterintelligence and security apparata protect them? What are their psychological vulnerabilities that may be exploited? Answers to these and related questions depend on satisfactory intelligence collection and analysis capabilities, yet these capabilities often are anything but satisfactory. A prime factor impeding these capabilities are the compartmented, cell-like structure of networks comprising individuals characteristics--e.g., decades of intimacy and shared religious, cultural, and social rituals and belief systems--that cannot be easily emulated or simulated by human intelligence operatives of a political entity seeking to plan an assassination. Even if intelligence capabilities were satisfactory, ethical and moral considerations might obviate their use as inimical to a preferred or idealized way of life. A strategic-moral calculus would be engaged in to resolve conflict within political authorities and, perhaps, those they represent.

Consequences. Once an assassination is effected, the consequences may be problematic beyond the philosophy of science Issues comprising development of causal attributions, causal typologies, and dynamics of cause and effect. A martyr may have been created--inducing many more to take his or her place. The assassination may lead to an escalation in violence of the victim's organization towards the assassination's sponsor. News of the assassination may induce changes in local, regional, and international alliances and correlations of forces that are detrimental to the assassination's sponsor. Moreover--given the assumption that terrorism may be the only effective tool of representatives of an oppressed population--assassination may be consequentially and inevitably ineffective regardless of robustness of capability. Finally, engaging in assassination may stimulate self-change mechanisms within the sponsor that are self-injurious. For example, a political entity espousing a high valuation of human life may find that valuation compromised--destroying from the inside what it was protecting from the outside and exemplifying once again an ethical/moral dilemma.

With all these contraindications, why is assassination so seriously considered by governmental targets of terrorism? Perhaps because a problematic counterterrorist policy may still deliver psychological sustenance. In this regard, social psychology's construct of terror management theory bears analysis.

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The theory suggests that certain belief systems, information processing styles, and behavioral patterns are embraced to manage the terror stemming from the awareness that death is inevitable--from whatever means--sooner or later. So, developing and implementing a counterterrorist policy--e.g., a problematic one based on taking life--may provide solace and an ease of existential dread. One may die anyway, one may die through terrorism anyway, but whistling in the dark (even if out of awareness) manages the terror even as it may have no effect on the terror's source. Ultimately, through a crude survival of the fittest that confounds and conflates constructions of psychological and physical realities, one seeks to kill to seek to kill a terror-inspiring inevitability that is part of life--only one of life's many paradoxes. (See Assassination as a national security tool: When is killing time the right time? (October 10, 1997). IBPP, 3(11); Florian, V., & Mikulincer, M. (1997). Fear of death and the judgment of social transgressions: A multidimensional test of terror management theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73, 369-380; Political assassination: Primary prevention in representative democracies. IBPP, 3(8); Pyszczynski, T., Wicklund, R., Floresku, S., et al. (1996). Whistling in the dark: Exaggerated consensus estimates in response to incidental reminders of mortality. Psychological Science, 7, 332-336; Simon, L., Greenberg, J., Arndt, J., et al. (1997). Perceived consensus, uniqueness, and terror management: Compensatory response to threats to inclusion and distinctiveness following mortality salience. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 23, 1055-1065.) (Keywords: Assassination, Terrorism.)

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