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## Trends. Talking Terrorism: The Case of Osama bin Laden

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Many terrorist analysts have berated the United States Government (USG) for publicizing the exploits of Osama bin Laden. These analysts assert that publicizing such exploits clearly works to Mr. bin Laden's advantage--as publicizing terrorists' exploits in general work to terrorists' advantage--and against USG interests. In fact, evaluating such an assertion and the consequences of publicizing terrorists' exploits is more complex.

How can publicizing terrorists' exploits help the USG? Publicizing exploits can increase political concerns and moral outrage of many populations towards terrorists. These concerns and outrage can facilitate antiterrorism and counterterrorism programs that will swim in the sea of more supportive peoples.

Publicizing terrorists' exploits can create and reinforce perceptions of the terrorists, other terrorists, and many populations alike that antiterrorist and counterterrorist intelligence and counterintelligence assets are formidable. How does this occur? If the publicized information is true, terrorists and others are likely to be favorably impressed with information quality and may likely muse on what else may be known. In the cases of terrorists, this musing may act as a deterrent to terrorist action. If the publicized information is untrue, nonterrorist populations may likely believe it anyways--without privileged information to the contrary--and the formidability of antiterrorist and counterterrorist intelligence is still reinforced in their eyes. Meanwhile, terrorists cannot immediately demean the quality of adversary intelligence and counterintelligence. Instead, they must consider whether their adversaries are implementing disinformation and other deception operations.

Publicizing terrorist exploits can also function as an impediment to terrorist operations. As the notoriety, fame, and *modi operandi* of terrorists increase, cover, camouflage, deception, and surprise become less immediately available for terrorist operations.

How Can Publicity Hurt the USG? Publicizing terrorist exploits can reinforce perceptions of terrorists' operational formidability in the eyes of many populations. Reinforcement of such perceptions can increase aspects of psychological terror that facilitate the achieving of terrorist political objectives. Reinforcement also can facilitate development and maintenance of financial and other terrorist support structures that can contribute to achieving political objectives. Finally, reinforcement can attenuate all the benefits that can be accrued by the USG through publicizing terrorist exploits and through other means.

A consequentialist analysis of not publicizing terrorist exploits is at least equally complex. For example, this approach might have unacceptable impact on civil liberties and freedom of speech. On the other hand, the approach might remove much of what often is a crucial terrorist resource--viz., awareness of terrorist threats, activities, and putative and real noxious consequences.

It is most likely that publicizing the exploits of Osama bin Laden is having different consequences with different populations--through time, even different consequences with the same population. If so, the policy of publicity is neither a disaster nor an unmitigated boon. This conclusion may be one of the few

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realities in an area in which perception is so often the only reality. (See Anderson, S. K. (1998). Warnings versus alarms: Terrorist threat analysis applied to the Iranian state-run media. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 21, 277-305; Bearden, M. (August 13, 1999). Making Osama bin Laden's day. *The New York Times*, p. A19; Coggins, M. H., Steadman, H. J., & Veysey, B. M. (1996). Mental health clinicians' attitudes about reporting threats against the president. *Psychiatric Services*, 47, 832-836; LaTour, M. S., & Rotfeld, H. J. (1997). There are threats and (maybe) fear-caused arousal: Theory and confusions of appeals to fear and fear arousal itself. *Journal of Advertising*, 26, 45-59; Roloff, M. E., Paulson, G. D., & Vollbrecht, J. (1998). The interpretation of coercive communication: The effects of mode of influence, powerful speech, and speaker authority. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 9, 139-161; Schoenbachler, D. D., & Whittler, T. E. (1996). Adolescent processing of social and physical threat. *Journal of Advertising*, 25, 37-54.) (Keywords: Publicity, Terrorism.)