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Trends. A Small Playbook for Terrorists?

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Recent events in the world of terrorism suggest that little is new in that world. For example, the recent takeover of the hospital in Ratchaburi, Thailand was effected by a group of ethnic Karen rebels called God's Army. The Army is allegedly led by a set of 12 year-old twins who have apparently propagated the belief that they are invulnerable. (The twins did not test this belief in the takeover, for they were not part of the operation.) This notion of holy protection has been a common vehicle in the history of terrorism-e.g., several Ugandan anti-government terrorist groups confronting the Musevini Government--and of conventional war as well.

Interestingly, the use of this vehicle can persist when injury or death occurs. Cognitive mechanisms responsible for this persistence include a loss in faith by the injured or killed and the call to some heavenly glory by the Divine. These mechanisms may be quite resistant to seemingly disconfirming information. However, the intrusiveness of technical monitoring devices may maximize obtaining disconfirming information that breaks the resistance of cognitive persistence mechanisms.

Another example of the old as new is the recent takeover of an Indian Airlines jet--allegedly by members of Harkat ul-Mujahedeen. The leadership of this organization had changed its name from Harkat ul-Ansar after the latter had been placed on the United States Department of State 1997 list of terrorist groups. To change an organization's name also has been a common political and security vehicle in the history of terrorism--e.g., the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo changing to Aleph--and of deception strategies and tactics in conventional war. In an era of ever more sophisticated computerized data bases and real-time telecommunications, however, the fate of this second vehicle may be somewhat uncertain.

Terrorism has existed throughout history because of its advantages to the power-challenged. That its disadvantages have existed concurrently provide hope for its foes. (See Akhtar, S. (1999). The psychodynamic dimension of terrorism. Psychiatric Annals, 29, 350-355; Burmese rebels seize hostages in Thailand. (January 25, 2000). The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Ihanus, J. (1999). Water, birth and Stalin's thirst for power: Psychohistorical roots of terror. Journal of Psychohistory, 27, 67-84; Perlez, J. (January 25, 2000). U.S. says Pakistan backed hijackers of Indian jetliner. The New York Times, p.A1; A10; Suedfeld, P. (1999). Toward a taxonomy of ethnopolitical violence: Is collective killing by any other name still the same? Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 5, 349-355.) (Keywords: Terrorism.)

1