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Terrorism and Terror Management: Prescription for Misanalysis?

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Title: Terrorism and Terror Management: Prescription for Misanalysis?

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Abstract. This article describes some problems with a recent analysis of global terrorism issued by the United States Department of State.

The United States (US) Department of State's Patterns of Global Terrorism has recently been issued to shed light on what some term a scourge for human civilization. Yet the report may provide neither light nor heat.

One conclusion of the report is that there has been a significant shift from state-sponsored terrorism to terrorism sponsored by "far-flung and loosely structured webs of terror." Is this really the case? State-sponsored terrorism has long developed, nurtured, and supported webs of terror--far flung, loosely structured, and otherwise. This state sponsorship has been overt, covert, and clandestine. So what has changed? Are states less in the terrorism business than before? Are they covering their tracks in a more sophisticated fashion? Here the report is not helpful.

Another conclusion of the report is that there has been a shift from politically motivated terrorism to terrorism motivated by religion and ideology. But is not political motivation imbued with ideology and is not ideology constituted with a political world view and a political world even beyond the material world? And does not a religious belief structure qualify as well as ideology--an ideology that impels political belief and action? As well, does not any political ideology serve the purpose to varying degrees of a religion in and of the material world? Moreover, the report does not even cover the psychological fact that some significant portion of terrorists act purely out of malign affective complexes of revenge and hatred--others out of the desire for pure economic profit or even a sense of cultural relativism and nihilism. So what--if anything--has really changed?

A third conclusion is that the primary source of terrorist threat to the US seems to be located in the Middle East. Yet quantitative research suggests that specific terrorist attacks to US targets have occurred more often outside the Middle East. This may suggest that the primary source is still the Middle East but the source's agents operate elsewhere. However--as far as can be determined from unclassified data--the sources of acts effected elsewhere often seem to be located regionally proximal to the acts. Alternatively, has the US been much more successful at preventing terrorist acts whose origins lie in the Middle East? But this is an hypothesis that requires corroboration.

One could conclude from analyzing the report's conclusions that little has changed or even that little is accurate. Why might this be? Reports on terrorism help us manage terror. That is, the very act of providing conclusions about a phenomenon can seem to render that phenomenon easier to control and manage and influence. Unfortunately, success in the latter can render terrorism more successful--i.e., with the seeds of psychological victory one may reap physical defeat. (See Florian, V., & Mikulincer, M. (1997). Fear of death and the judgment of social transgressions: A multidimensional test of terror management theory. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 73, 369-380; On-the-Record Briefing on the 1999 Annual "Patterns of Global Terrorism" Report. (May 1, 2000). As released by the Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Department of State at

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<http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/2000/000501a.html>; Patterns of Global Terrorism. (April 2000). Department of State Publication 10687 at <http://www.state.gov/www/global/terrorism/1999report/1999index.html>; Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J., & Solomon, S. (1997). Why do we need what we need? A terror management perspective on the roots of human social motivation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 1-20; Wicklund, R. (1997). Terror management accounts of other theories: Questions for the cultural worldview concept. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 54-58.) (Keywords: Terrorism; United States Department of State.)