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Trends. Psychological Pathways to Suicidal Terrorism

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The history of suicidal terrorism, as well as contemporary examples and future expectations, drives a curiosity about why an individual might choose to engage in such an act. There are at least three areas of psychological research that may help sate or at least inform this curiosity.

Research on the psychology of moral judgment suggests at least five psychological pathways to suicidal terrorism. (1) An individual engages in the act to ward off punishment for not engaging in the act. (2) An individual engages in the act as a means of obtaining a reward. (3) An individual engages in the act to conform to the behaviors and behavioral expectations of others. (4) An individual engages in the act because of a belief that that act is the right thing to do because it is the right thing to do without any other accompanying rationale. (5) An individual engages in the act because it is compatible with self-held values that transcend social or culture-bound notions of what is right or wrong. The nurturer of suicidal terrorism may seek to create conditions wherein one or more of these pathways are salient among various individuals.

Research on social cognition and social learning suggests the salience of a number of intrapsychic mechanisms, such as dehumanizing of self and victim, reifying the self and dehumanizing the victim, distorting the consequential nature of the act, generating act-syntonic notions of victim's blame and worth, resolving psychological conflict, and instrumentally achieving needs satisfaction. Many of these mechanisms can alternatively be explicated through psychodynamic constructs such as defense mechanisms.

Research from philosophical psychology on the nature of mind and of the mind-body problem also is relevant to the Issue of psychological pathways for suicidal terrorism. The materialist and identity approaches to mind and body could minimize the significance of human life and, thus, facilitate the act. The dualist approaches that might give ontological validity to mental and even spiritual phenomena might impede choosing a target worthy of the act but facilitate the pressure to commit the act, if one believes that one will thereby earn secular or sacred rewards.

The multitude of psychological pathways to suicidal terrorism intensifies the challenge to antiterrorism experts and policymakers--especially as to developing response and policy components that do not concurrently impede some pathways while facilitating others. (See Crenshaw, M. (2000). The psychology of terrorism: An agenda for the 21st century. *Political Psychology*, 21, 405-420; Dale, S. F. (1988). Religious suicide in Islamic Asia: Anticolonial terrorism in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32, 37-59; Hazani, M. (1993). Sacrificial immortality: Toward a theory of suicidal terrorism and related phenomena. In L. B. Boyer, & R. M. Boyer, (Eds.). *The psychoanalytic study of society*. Vol. 18: Essays in honor of Alan Dundes (pp. 415-442). Hillsdale, NJ, USA: Analytic Press, Inc.; Reich, W. (1990). *Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind*. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press; Saper, B. (1988). On learning terrorism. *Terrorism*, 11, 13-27.) (Keywords: Political Psychology, Psychological Pathways, Suicide, Terrorism.)