2-23-2001

Trends. Profiles of Terrorist Profiles: The Case of Khalil Abu Elba

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Recommended Citation

Title: Trends. Profiles of Terrorist Profiles: The Case of Khalil Abu Elba
Author: Editor
Volume: 10
Issue: 7
Date: 2001-02-23
Keywords: Israel, Khalil Abu Elba, Palestine, Profiling, Terrorism

Abstract. This article describes some of the complexities in developing profiles of actual and potential terrorists.

Recently, many journalistic accounts have described a Palestinian bus driver who drove his vehicle onto a sidewalk in Tel Aviv, Israel, and killed at least 8 people and wounded 20 others. Of special interest is that many observers seem to have viewed this individual as representing minimum threat as a potential and as an actual terrorist. They cite his being a "family man," having a track record of no previous work-related incidents, and having just passed a strict Israeli security-clearance assessment as supporting this view. In other words, he didn't fit a common terrorist profile.

However, there seem to be insurmountable problems in developing terrorist profiles that may defy epistemological ingenuity. Characteristics of the actual terrorist usually are employed to develop a profile of the potential terrorist. The main problem is identifying which among the infinite characteristics of the actual terrorist are the ones causally related to specific terrorist behavior. The main problem in this identification concerns identifying which among the infinite characteristics of the actual terrorist's context--viz., social, cultural, historical, political, economic, and so on--interact with characteristics of the terrorist as the causal pathway to terrorist behavior. The main problem with both identifications is that the same characteristics may have different causal loadings through time with terrorist behavior. Virtually if not totally without exception, the very high false positive rates of the characteristics making up terrorist profiles guarantee the political and legal fallout observed in cases attributed to "racial profiling" and even can contribute to increasing the very incidence and prevalence of terrorist behavior. That is, in this last case, the egregiousness of profiling error has the seeds to attenuate this error, but only in an unfortunately deadly way.

Another significant problem in developing terrorist profiles is identifying which behaviors are, indeed, terrorist. As an example of this, let's assume that terrorist behavior comprises violent behavior or its threat, that such behavior is conscious and premeditated, and that the motive--again conscious and premeditated--is to achieve a political goal. Was Mr. Abu Elba's behavior terrorist? Perhaps not, if he "just snapped" in some mindless manner, as some analysts have posited. Perhaps not, if his motive was only to express his own personal demons. Perhaps not, if there was some immediate precipitant similar to something like road rage. Perhaps not, if context characteristics were close to orthogonal with political and historical trends bearing on political power. The point here is that whatever characteristics of Mr. Abu Elba are termed causally related to the violent behavior and, thus, conceived as constituting a terrorist profile, may not be such at all.

It may well be that the enterprise of developing terrorist profiles is more often an exercise to further the prestige of various academic disciplines and professional careers or to manage terror--i.e., to prevent the existential dread inherent in believing that predictability of violence and its threat is too often but a pipe dream. (See Akhtar, S. (1999). The psychodynamic dimension of terrorism. Psychiatric Annals, 29, 350-355; Crenshaw, M. (2000). The psychology of terrorism: An agenda for the 21st century. Political Psychology, 21, 405-420; Hoffman, B. (1999). The mind of the terrorist: Perspectives from social

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

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