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Trends. Death Penalties for Purveyors of Death? Not for Many Terrorists

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Author: Editor

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How best to deter terrorism? How best to minimize untoward consequences of terrorism--especially the political sequelae that are the ultimate telos of terrorism? Some terrorism experts answer both questions by advocating the killing of terrorists through summary execution or as the penalty after conviction through a legal trial. However, killing has a significant downside.

First, killing precludes terrorists from being an ongoing source of information about their terrorism-related knowledge and from indirectly contributing to antiterrorism and counterterrorism initiatives. Second, killing often facilitates the reification of terrorists as martyrs and nurtures terrorist recruitment and terrorist motivations. Third, killing often nurtures witting and unwitting support activities for terrorism--including the increase of mass media coverage, propaganda effectiveness, political support, and fund solicitation. Fourth, killing even models the notion of violence as political solution that can undermine rationales against terrorism and increase the incidence and prevalence of political violence. Fifth, killing can elicit revenge killings.

While there is some psychological research suggesting that the death penalty and its implementation may deter some terrorist killing and other types of political violence, one might hesitate to support policies and laws that require the penalty across the board. (See Clinton, W.J. (April 24, 1996). Statement on signing the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 32, 719-721; Eisenman, R. (1993). Why we need the death penalty. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 11, 61-64; Idelson, H. (June 15, 1996). Provisions of terrorism law. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 54, 1713-1714; Radelet, M. L., & Borg, M. J. (2000). The changing nature of death penalty debates. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 43-61; Ross, S.D. (Winter 2001). In the shadow of terror: The illusive First Amendment rights of aliens. *Communication Law and Policy*, 6, 75-122.) (Keywords: Death Penalty, Deterrence, Terrorism.)