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The Psychology of Tit for Tat in the Mideast and Throughout the World

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Abstract. This article analyzes the cognitive-behavioral heuristic of tit for tat as it applies to seemingly intractable political conflict.

Many commentators on the ongoing political conflict between the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and Israel have cited tit-for-tat violence as something that must be stooped or at least held in abeyance so peace can be given yet another chance. One problem with this formulation is whether tit-for-tat violence is occurring at all.

Perhaps the commonest criterion for identifying tit-for-tat violence is asserting that there is a sequence of violence acts between the PNA and Israel. This criterion is problematic. Implicit assumptions include (1) a series of causal relationships--indeed, a reciprocity--between each violent act of one side and the following one of the other, (2) a sense of proportionality between each set of acts, and (3) moral congruence or equitability between each set.

Because of complicated processes of planning, personnel selection, training, management, intelligence, logistics, communication, and the like, one is actually hardpressed to advocate that mere temporal contiguity supports a reciprocal and causal relationship between temporal contiguous or proximal acts of violence. Further complications include the infinite breadth and depth of contextual factors that may potentially be moderating, modifying, or otherwise intervening variables impeding the validity of ascribing causality based on mere correlation of temporally contiguous or proximal acts. Moreover, it is at least possible that a violent act begetting another violent act may still be characterized as having other non-reciprocal and non-causal acts interceding between the begetter and the begotten.

The assumption of proportionality between sets of succeeding acts is also suspect. In general, PNA political violence comprises ground-based suicidal bombers and non-suicidal shooters and stabbers targeting Israeli civilians targets not directly engaged in political violence, as well as Israeli military, paramilitary, political, and law enforcement personnel. (This statement is predicated on the assumption that PNA political authorities could be doing significantly more to impede political violence by PNA operatives, operatives of other anti-Israel and anti-Jewish organizations, and various freelancers and impulsive actors.)

In general, Israeli political violence comprises ground- and air-based military, paramilitary, and police shooters against PNA targets and other targets who have engaged, are engaging, or will engage in political violence. There also are many PNA civilians who are killed or injured by Israeli attacks who are not directly engaged in political violence and are not the intended targets of Israeli attacks. Thus, proportionality between the political violence of the PNA and Israel in terms of types of targets, perpetrators, and violence seems questionable at best.

However, there is another type of proportionality founded on moral congruence or equitability. Comparative assessment here is extremely complex and difficult. The problem is that even identical, alternating, and reciprocal series of violent acts would not necessarily denote, connote, or even imply a

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specific moral judgment. As examples, Israel has more violent options than the PNA. In addition, there have been more fatalities through Israeli aggression than by PNA aggression. Also, very few significant Israeli politicians seem to sincerely desire in their heart of hearts for the emigration, murder, or (in other ways) destruction of all people who view the PNA and other anti-Israel and anti-Jewish groupings as their main political vehicle or for subversion of their political infrastructures. This probably cannot be validly supported for significant PNA politicians towards Israel and Israeli Jews.

The moral congruence and equitability of PNA and Israeli political violence might still be supported if one could morally equate the destruction of a Jewish Israel with what was offered by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to PNA. That is, both goals would equally good or bad. Or one might somehow develop a logical or illogical analysis to support an asymmetrical teleological assessment of these or other ultimate political intentions--i.e., the destruction of Jewish Israel may, indeed, be a morally superior purpose to that of providing a homeland to followers of the PNA and other groupings commonly labeled "Palestinian" conjunctive with the continued existence of a Jewish Israel.

The assertion that tit-for-tat violence is occurring between the PNA and Israel may be ontologically suspect regardless of one's stance on the merits of the distinction between a real and an apparent world--i.e., regardless of the merits of phenomenologically based data versus inferences of something happening beyond phenomenology. Even if there is no ontological validity or no validity in the very construct of ontology, it remains to be seen whether it is helpful to maintain the tit-for-tat inference among the various participants in the political conflict. (See Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3, 193-209; Cropazano, R., Byrne, Z.S., Bobocel, D.R., & Rupp, D.E. (2001). Moral virtues, fairness heuristics, social entities, and other denizens of organizational justice. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 58, 164-209; Greenberg, J. (May 30, 2001). Six killed in renewed Mideast violence. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Kristensen, K.B., Slife, B.D., & Yanchar, S.C. (2000). On what basis are evaluations possible in a fragmented psychology? An alternative to objectivism and relativism. *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 21, 273-288; Rasinski, K.A. (1987). What's fair is fair--Or is it? Value differences underlying public views about social justice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 201-211; Sontag, D. (June 2, 2001). 16 killed by suicide bomber outside Tel Aviv nightclub. *The New York Times*, pp. A1, A6.) (Keywords: Israel, PNA, Political Violence, Tit for Tat.)