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Assassination as a Tool of Antiterrorism and Counterterrorism Policies: A Primer of Supporting Cognitions

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Supporters of legitimizing assassination of terrorist leaders and operational cadre as a tool against terrorism may choose from a number of social cognitions.

There's the social cognition that assassination of leaders and operational cadre, as opposed to a full-scale war against terrorist supporters, is deontologically ethical. This cognition is most often based on faith in its ethical nature or on some attributed expert authority.

There's the social cognition that assassination of leaders and operational cadre, as opposed to a full-scale war against terrorist supporters, is consequentially ethical. Given that there are fewer leaders than followers, fewer people will be the targets of killing through the assassination policy. This cognition is most often based on reason and logic. Another consequentialist rationale is that the consequences directed generated by terrorist action are consequentially and/or deontologically worthy of prevention and extirpation.

There's the social cognition that assassination of leaders and operational cadre, as opposed to a full-scale war against terrorist supporters, is ethical solely because there is an ongoing war in which assassination immediately loses any of its deontological or consequentialist unsavoriness.

There's the social cognition that assassination of leaders and operational cadre, as opposed to a full-scale war against terrorist supporters, is strategically sound. By cutting off the head, the body will follow.

There's the social cognition that assassination of leaders and operational cadre will show the world that "America"--i.e., the United States (US)--means business. This is asserted to have positive strategic consequences for the US as a superpower. It can also be asserted to have a deterrent effect on terrorist operations and on individuals' intentions to become terrorists.

There's the social cognition that assassination of leaders and operational cadre will play well to domestic political needs. These needs facilitate both support for a government's policy initiatives and the probability of re-election for oneself, one's political party, and like-minded allies.

All these and other social cognitions supporting assassination reflect one's belief system. Part of this system is open to confirming and disconfirming information, part is not. Part of this system is accessible to consciousness, part is not. In fact, the same may be said about the many social cognitions that support an anti-assassination stance.

This leaves the quantity of money and the quantity and quality of personnel undergirding political advocacy--both within the context of the vagaries of the historical moment and its frequently emotional sequelae--as the salient arbiter in whether assassination becomes or remains policy. In so far as social cognitions facilitate the existential task of terror management--i.e., to attenuate the dread of a

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meaningless, unpredictable, uncontrollable, or unknowable world--policy formulations about terrorism are really about our own terror. And terrorists may realize this better than many of their adversaries. (See Goldenberg, J. L., Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Kluck, B. (2001). Cornwell, Robin I am not an animal: Mortality salience, disgust, and the denial of human creatureliness. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 130, 427-435; Pontius, A.A. (1974). Threats to assassinate the king-president while propitiating mother: Some aspects of dangerousness. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 19, 38-53; Risen, J. (September 16, 2001). Lawmakers seek to loosen rules on C.I.A. *The New York Times*, pp. 1, 4; Somasundaram, D.J. (1996). Post-traumatic responses to aerial bombing. *Social Science and Medicine*, 42, 1465-1471; Westermeyer, J. (1973). Assassination in Laos: Its psychosocial dimensions. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 28, 740-743; Zahr, L.K. (1996). Effects of war on the behavior of Lebanese preschool children: Influence of home environments and family functioning. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 66, 401-408.) (Keywords: Assassination, Social Cognitions, Terrorism.)