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Profiling Profiling and Suicidal Terrorism

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Abstract. This article describes chronic flaws in developing profiles that are intended to help prevent or minimize suicidal terrorism.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks within the United States (US), some self-identified and other-identified experts on terrorism have been declaiming on a new type of Islamic suicidal terrorist. They assert that the prototype has been a young, single male who was caught up in religious zealotry and fanaticism; was indoctrinated for short but intense periods between recruitment and the operational mission; and was characterized by socioeconomic desperation. Yet the operational participants in the hijacking of four US commercial aircraft appear to have been older, experienced a long and less intense period between recruitment and mission, possessed or had access to significant socioeconomic opportunity, worked not alone but in small groups, and have recently engaged in behaviors proscribed by their religious faith including socializing at strip clubs and drinking alcoholic beverages.

Assuming the differences between the September 11th perpetrators and the pre-September 11th prototype stand up to comprehensive data collection and intensive analysis, one might surmise that a new era of suicidal terrorism has begun. However, one would be premature in this assumption.

At Issue are principles of profile development related to suicidal terrorism. The cardinal feature of profile development appears to be the quest for the "true positive"--what do suicidal terrorists have in common? In closely reading the last 40 years of research and commentary on the quest for the "true positive," one might note that the commonalities searched for and identified most often involve demographic and psychological attributes. These attributes are founded on the very small numbers of suicidal terrorists who have been studied and identified, as opposed to those who were not or have not yet been identified.

Besides the small numbers and unlikely representativeness of suicidal terrorist samples, one might also note that both historical and political phenomena and virtually unknowable phenomenological images, and scripts are usually ignored and discounted as causal elements. Analysts of critical psychology would suggest that the former reflects the reinforcement of a hegemonic perspective that protects political authorities--who often pay profilers--from the blame attributions of those who have less power. In addition, philosophers of science would suggest that profilers are allowing their methodologies to dictate reality as opposed to the converse.

As well, the quest for the "true positive" is usually taken without the statistical and practical checks and balances provided by assessing a specific profile against one other index of accuracy and two other indices of error. The index of accuracy is the "true negative"--those identified as not being suicidal terrorists who really are not suicidal terrorists. The indices of error include the "false positive" and the "false negative." The former denotes those people falsely identified as suicidal terrorists, while the latter denotes those falsely identified as not being suicidal terrorists. Comparative estimates of all four are necessary for prudent policy decisions concerning profiling implementation.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

One may then conclude that there is not sufficient available data to posit a new psychological era of suicidal terrorism. And the old profile may have been incorrect and/or misleading. The new profile also may be. However, if the old and new profiles are accurate--and there is a disparity--are we now in an era in which the potential pool of suicidal terrorists is growing beyond the traditionally wretched of the earth? It may be more likely to recognize that in different situations we are all potential suicidal terrorists. Perhaps, we need to better work to minimize those profiled situations that can activate such a deadly potential. (See Canter, D., Coffey, T., Huntley, M., Missen, C. (2001). Predicting serial killers' home base using a decision support system. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 16, 457-478; Hing, N., & Breen, H. (2001). Profiling lady luck: An empirical study of gambling and problem gambling amongst female club members. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 17, 47-69; Smith, B. L., & Morgan, K. D. (1994). Terrorists right and left: Empirical Issues in profiling American terrorists. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 17, 39-57; Watanabe, K., & Tamura, M. (1999). Profiling offenders in case of rape against children under thirteen: 1. An analysis on offender traits and criminal history. *Reports of the National Research Institute of Police Science*, 40, 67-81; Wilgoren, J. (September 16, 2001). A terrorist profile emerges that confounds the experts. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Profiling, Terrorism.)