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Trends. The Color of Terror

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One response of the United States Government to controversy concerning sharing homeland-security-and-defense-threat information with state and local officials has been the recent creation of a color-coded, national alert system. Is this initiative an improvement on the sharing of such information?

Before the color-coded system was created, many state and local officials expressed concerns that merely receiving notification to be on increasing, decreasing, or maintained alert status was insufficient. According to these officials, the lack of (1) behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions associated with threat information and (2) behavioral descriptors dealing with the nature of the threat more reliably engendered what might be termed free-floating anxiety than a more useful response to threat.

In response to the above, the color-coded system may be an improvement. There are behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions--e.g., increasing surveillance of critical locations for Yellow and closing government facilities for Red. However, enough of the prescriptions and proscriptions are general or generic enough--e.g., deploying specially trained teams for Red and exercising planned protective measures for Green--to not fully defuse the perceived need for behavioral descriptors dealing with the nature of the threat. In this regard, specific information about the nature of the threat could help fine tune finite security-related resources and procedures. On the other hand, the public disclosure of specific information or of the deployment of specific, security-related resources and procedures could compromise intelligence sources and methods. Such public disclosure also could provide useful information to adversaries who may even have inserted threatening information into intelligence channels to test antiterrorist and counterterrorist response.

The greatest benefits of the color-coded system--especially its aspects of explicit certainty and formal structure--may be to foster reassurance and serve as an unconscious psychodynamic container for the noxious cognitive-affective complexes of the general public. However, one should color an optimal system for sharing threat information as still uncolored. (See Bizman, A., & Yinon, Y. (2001). Perceived threat and Israeli Jews' evaluations of Russian immigrants: The moderating role of Jewish and Israeli identity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 25, 691-704; Ross, C. E., Mirowsky, J., & Pribesh, S. (2001). Powerlessness and the amplification of threat: Neighborhood disadvantage, disorder, and mistrust. *American Sociological Review*, 66, 568-591; Ruitter, R. A. C., Abraham, C., & Kok, G. (2001). Scary warnings and rational precautions: A review of the psychology of fear appeals. *Psychology & Health* 16, 613-630; Simon, H. (March 13, 2002). Ridge says state, local officials will get all 'credible' data via new alert system. *Homeland Security & Defense*, 1(7), <http://www.AviationNow.com/hsd>.) (Keywords: Terror Alerts, Terrorism.)