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# Finding the Feathers in “Birds of a Feather”: An Antiterrorist and Counterterrorist Dilemma in Profiling

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**Abstract.** This article describes a significant challenge for intelligence analysts attempting to identify individuals, groups, and organizations that have joined, are joining, or will join forces in terrorist enterprises.

The most commonly studied profiling attempt in the antiterrorist and counterterrorist literature comprises identifying an individual who might engage in terrorist operational or support activities. Such an individual is usually identified by static or dynamic traits. The former apply to characteristics that cannot be changed--e.g., where one was born, one's age, or the religion of ancestors who have died before one was born. The latter apply to characteristics that can change either objectively or subjectively. Objective examples include changes in one's religion, political ideology, or sexual orientation. Subjective examples include changes in how seemingly static traits are interpreted--e.g., the meaning of the place of one's birth, the meaning of one's patrimony. In fact, given the possibility of continuous social construction and reinterpretation of one's past, present, and contemplated future through a Jamesian stream of mentation, the very reliability and validity of static traits as identifiers of terrorism actualization or potential may fatally implode.

A less commonly studied profiling attempt comprises identifying individuals, groups, and organizations that might come together in the pursuit of terrorist enterprises. This attempt has been allocated high salience in contemporary public discourse about terrorism with global reach.

For example, the Bush Administration has sought to link al Qaeda with the Iraqi regime at least partially to garner more support for military intervention against Iraq--but has been less than successful in doing so. As another example, the Bush Administration has had difficulty in developing a consensus on whether a military intervention against Iraq might facilitate, impede, or have little effect on the potential for Iranian and Iraqi Shiites to join together in terrorist operations against United States (US) personnel, materiel, and national interests. Two complexities in what one might call the profiling of whom and what might join together yield a number of reasonable explanations for falling short in persuading large segments of the world about the al Qaeda-Iraqi regime linkage and in developing a consensus about an Iranian-Iraqi Shiite linkage.

One complexity embraces the criterion or criteria that profiling must predict. It might be easiest if there were large databases of terrorist behavior towards which combinations of predictive characteristics could be applied. The more data, the easier one might be able to engage in split

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

half reliability studies and validity studies wherein a host of primary, intermediary, and intervening variables could be controlled. However, not all terrorist behaviors are perceived or, if perceived, identified as such. Moreover, profilers and profiling organizations are both wittingly and unwittingly susceptible to mislabeling nonterrorism as terrorism as well as the converse for various political reasons. And there are potential biases and heuristics in choosing germane terrorist behaviors among all identified terrorist behaviors. For example, in studying the al Qaeda-Iraqi regime linkage, does one settle on seeming terrorist behaviors within a geographical sphere of interest in the Mideast? Or does one entertain behavior within the global political arena or some other geographical segmentation? It seems quite difficult to generate data to be predicted without assumptions about who might have authored specific acts of terrorism.

A second complexity embraces the role of logic in similarity as the pathway towards joining forces to engage in terrorism. It is facile to assume that similar believers will engage in similar behavior, while the dissimilar will not. One might assume that Iranian and Iraqi Shiites will not significantly join in terrorism because of dissimilarities in nationalist ideology or non-religious ethnicities. Or Iranian and Iraqi Shiites will significantly join as some consensual Shiite identity trumps other intrapsychic phenomena. A majority in the Bush Administration seem to be embracing the first attribution, many opponents to military intervention favor the second.

Concerning al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime, one might assume that the two could never join forces given their respective secular and sacred distinctions. Or one might assume that even disparate motives for attack against the US trump the secular and the sacred. The Bush Administration espouses the latter, while many of its political opponents embrace the former.

The difficulty in making the correct call based on logic in similarity relates to identifying which of many similarities and differences are robustly related to the behavior that must be predicted. Such robust relationships may change through time due to fluctuations in individual, group, and organizational psychologies as well as social, cultural, economic, political, and historical factors forming the context for psychological functioning. A secondary but important difficulty to establishing robust relationships is that social constructs such as al Qaeda, Iraqi regime, Iraqi Shiite, and so on can mask significant individual differences as to the shifting memberships constituting each construct. Yet a third difficulty comprises the intentional deceptive practices engaged in by all political animals.

To the above profiling complexities must be added the reality that political policymakers can operate on visceral reaction that contaminates adaptive logics and often enough can generate profiles to fit preconceived policy decisions. Birds of a feather may flock together, but identifying the birds, feathers, and flocks remains daunting for any political ornithologist. (See Anderson, J.L. (February 10, 2003). Letter from Iran: Dreaming of Baghdad. *The New Yorker*, 58-69; Bates, R., Greif, A., & Singh, S. (2002). Organizing violence. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46, 599-628; Blankenburg, W. (2001). First steps toward a psychopathology of "common sense". (A. Mishara, Trans.). *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 8, 303-315; James, W. (1955). *Principles of Psychology*. Dover; Lawson, A.E. (2002). The origin of conditional logic: Does a

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

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