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Trends. Suicidal Terrorism and the Death Penalty

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses why an established death penalty for terrorists who would, by their own actions, suicide might be appropriate.

At first blush, the title of this article may seem absurd. Why support a policy that mandates a death penalty or offers it as a possibility to those who perpetrate the act of suicidal terrorism? After all, operationally successful suicidal terrorists will not be available to experience a death penalty administered by the criminal justice system of some governmental entity. And individuals committed to engaging in a suicidal terrorist act might view the prospect of the death penalty as extraneous, moot, or even an element deterring not the terrorist act but the act of un-committing to an act that one has committed. Still other individuals, who are deemed by personality assessors to be high in the trait of sensation-seeking, might be activated to engage in suicidal terrorism as they might to engage in other behaviors that are labeled high-risk through being coupled with an extreme prospective penalty.

However, the death penalty may well have its place. The psychology of some individuals who might otherwise travel down the route of commitment towards suicidal terrorism will be deterred by the public policy of the death penalty from reaching the point of commitment. As well, some planners and supporters of specific acts of suicidal terrorism may well be deterred from planning and support, if the death penalty applies to them as well. Finally, the death penalty as public policy can serve as a guidon and signifier that a society considers certain types of behavior so reprehensible that removing the behavioral actor from the living world is deemed appropriate.

In truth, the consequences of a public policy wherein death is allotted to convicted suicidal terrorists would be varied and largely unpredictable for specific individuals who may or may not travel down the road of commitment. More predictable are the types of individuals who may or may support such a public policy. (See McPherson, S.B. (2002). Heinousness in capital crimes: Myths of proportionality and social protection. *International Journal of Law & Psychiatry*, 25, 459-472; Moss, D. (2002). Notes on the death penalty in the context of the September 11 attacks. *Studies in Gender & Sexuality*, 3, 197-215; Patriot Act, Part II. (September 22, 2003). *The New York Times*, p. A18; Watson, P. J., Ross, David F., & Morris, R. J. (2003). Borderline personality traits correlate with death penalty decisions. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 35, 421-429.)

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