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Terrorist Victims

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Abstract. This article describes the varied classes of terrorist victims affected by terrorist operations or their threat.

While the ultimate victims of terrorism are usually intended (by the terrorist) to be those individuals who finally act in a manner that is both necessary and sufficient to achieve terrorist strategic goals, there are actually many classes of terrorist victims. Some of these classes are overlapping.

One class comprises those people who are killed or physically injured through the terrorist operation and, at times, through the counterterrorist counter-operation. (The mass media in depictions of terrorist events and political authorities in analyses of terrorist events frequently misclassify this class as the ultimate terrorist victims.)

Another class comprises those people who are deemed to be psychological casualties alleged to be directly caused by the terrorist operation. Here the perception of death, destruction, or the threat of either or both seem to lead but not be limited to anxiety, depression, anger, fear, hopelessness, or a constriction and even a disestablishment of preferred life style. In this class of victims, perception may be viewed by both a clinical and by a security analyst as the efficient cause of psychological sequelae set in motion by terrorist acts including terrorist threats of acts or by terrorist threat as surmised by people who perceive themselves or others as potential victims.

Yet another class of victims may be termed psychological casualties effected through self-fulfilling prophecies. One subclass comprises people who already believe (consciously or unconsciously) before a terrorist operation that they should react to terrorist operational stimuli in a specific way and then do react that way as if there were a self-motive to comply with these beliefs. They may have arrived at these beliefs through the common epistemological pathways of their own reasoning and logic, through accepting the opinions of experts and credible sources, through sheer faith in specific opinions, and through previous systematic and nonsystematic observations of terrorist operations via direct experience, telecommunications, and mass media.

The other subclass of victims related to self-fulfilling prophecies may harbor no significant beliefs before a terrorist operation as to how one should react to terrorism but may take their cues and take on their roles of psychological casualties after a terrorist operation from others in their immediate vicinity or from others experienced through the technology of telecommunications. Given that terrorism has become such a common topic of public discourse, this latter subclass is becoming more uncommon.

A special word must be offered here about the role of the mental health industry in setting expectations for becoming a psychological casualty of terrorism. Although many members of the industry are sincerely seeking to prevent and mitigate subjective distress, their insistence on the necessity of psychological inoculation and debriefing sessions related to terrorist operations masks important empirical data. These data suggest that many people are not significantly affected in a psychological sense by terrorism or are affected in a positive manner contributing to more psychological hardiness.

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The insistence of the mental health industry on the need for psychological help may be part conscious and unconscious ambulance chasing, part management of industry representatives' own feelings of terror, and part predilection that unwittingly supports the designs of terrorists.

Still another class of victims comprise policy victims. One subclass comprises large masses of people or special interest groups that demand and apply direct and indirect political pressure for specific policies. The demand and pressure lead to a constriction of policy options among the political elite and often enough to the consideration, approval, and implementation of antiterrorist and counterterrorist policies and programs that are less likely to be effective than other policies and programs in a universe of possible options.

Another subclass of victims comprises the political elite that may be directly induced by a terrorist operation towards the problematic evaluation of past policies and programs, towards psychological salience of specific policy and program options that are problematic, towards inappropriate time of analysis and cognitive complexity of deliberation related to formal policy and program prescription and proscription, and towards the consideration, approval, and implementation of problematic policies and programs. The last consequence will have procedural, distributive, and substantive implications for the future—with procedural entailing problematic consequences for how future policies and programs are developed, distributive entailing who is and isn't involved and affected by policies and programs, and substantive entailing the very content of future policies and programs.

A last class of victims may comprise the terrorists themselves. Whether successful or unsuccessful in planning and implementing terrorist operations and in achieving the strategic goals of terrorism, terrorist support and operational cadre may experience deleterious psychological and behavioral consequences as defined by their own standards and on their own terms—as well as the standards and terms of others.

As a final point, all the above classes save the physical victims can arise through the threat of terrorist operations as opposed to operational implementation and all the above classes can arise via unsuccessfully implemented terrorist operations. (See Bjorkland, D.E., & Pellegrini, A.D. (2002). *The origins of human nature: Evolutionary developmental psychology*. American Psychological Association; Chirot, D., & Seligman, M.E.P. (2001). (Eds.). *Ethnopolitical warfare: Cause, consequences, and possible solutions*. American Psychological Association; Merari, A. (1999). *Attacks on civil aviation: Trends and lessons*. In P. Wilkinson & B. M. Jenkins, (Eds.). *Aviation terrorism and security*. Frank Cass; Reich, W. (1998). *Understanding terrorist behavior: The limits and opportunities of psychological inquiry*. In W. Reich, (Ed.). *Origins of terrorism*. (pp. 261-279). Woodrow Wilson Center Press.)

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