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Identifying Terrorist Motivation and Psychopolitical Impediments to the War on Terrorism

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Abstract. This article illustrates how the psychopolitics of public discourse on motives of terrorists can impede successful antiterrorism programs.

Surely there are many intrapsychic routes to committing to supporting terrorism and/or engaging in terrorism support and operational activities. The notion that there's a one-size-fits-all psychology of terrorism has long been jettisoned by various experts—even if not by all members of our global citizenry.

Identifying these intrapsychic routes—i.e., the motivations towards terrorism—are significant from both antiterrorist and counterterrorist perspectives. As to antiterrorism, identifying the routes presents the opportunity to engage in actions that make it less likely that elements of the routes and their linkages occur. As well, the opportunity presents as to attenuating or disestablishing the elements and linkages of these routes. As to counterterrorism, identifying the routes can facilitate identifying elements of support and operational terrorist functions. Once these functions are identified, it becomes easier to capture and, if necessary, kill terrorists.

(One caveat in this analysis is that there is no necessary assumption that there always are psychological commitment and intrapsychic routes to terrorism. There may well be examples of little if any mental calculation—experiential interludes of mindlessness. Against such individuals, motivational analysis will not be valuable—save for getting to the point of realizing that it will not be valuable. One might, however, still engage in antiterrorist and counterterrorist activities based on data bases of prior terrorist activities, intelligence collection on incipient and other future terrorist activities, and the presumed vulnerabilities of potential targets of terrorist support and operations.)

One significant problem in accurately identifying terrorist motivation is the contamination of the process through engagement in public discourse on terrorist motivation. In other words, talking about terrorism can but only change terrorists, terrorism, and observers of them, but also the people who actually are attempting to fight it. To this last matter, the passive reception as well as the active construction of terrorist motivational hypotheses in the public domain can unwittingly affect one's private cognitive deliberations with trusted advisers as well as within one's thoughts.

An example of this problem in public discourse has played out in Western mass media concerning the Issue of Muslims as terrorists. Since 9/11, public assertions from the Executive Branch of the United States Government (USG) have taken the stance that terrorism and Islam have nothing to do with each other. Instead, the 9/11 terrorists, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and others networking with these entities are hijacking Islam and hiding behind it “to create fear and chaos and death” (On high-speed, 2003).

One political rationale for this is an attempt to downplay other public assertions from members of the so-called Islamic World that the USG is really engaged in a war against Islam—thus meriting an anti-USG jihad. Another rationale is to publicly promulgate the value of tolerance and of accepting and desiring to ally with all freedom- and democracy-loving people whomever and wherever they are. That, in the

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immediate aftermath of 9/11, the US Department of Justice engaged in a round-up of people most of whom believe largely in variants of Islam and that there continue to be USG representatives who publicly share that that in their heart of hearts the USG is engaged in a mortal struggle against Islam as both a false religion and as Satan does not belie the USG attempt to separate Islam and terrorism.

But one can make a strong cases that certain interpretations of Islam as to the meaning of constructs such as enemies of Islam, jihad, fatwa, and crusade do constitute intrapsychic routes towards terrorism. This certainly has been the case when analyzing the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by representatives of variants of many other religions.

The assumed need on the part of the USG to publicly separate Islam and terrorism can not only lead to a public communication policy of this separation but policies on how motivation-related information on terrorism is to be collected, analyzed, produced, and transmitted to security decision makers who, in turn, have been directed not to publicly link Islam and terrorism in policy and practice. As the resulting policies and practices are developed and complied with—grudgingly or not—two further events occur. The accurate identification of the intrapsychic routes to terrorism become ever more difficult. And a belief in the separation can actually begin to be believed by people who initially did not believe in it. A final consequence is a greater difficulty in the development, implementation, and evaluation of effective antiterrorism and counterterrorism. (See On high-speed trip, Bush glimpses a perception gap. (October 24, 2003). *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Pech, R.J. (2003). Inhibiting imitative terrorism through memetic engineering. *Journal of Contingencies & Crisis Management*, 11, 61-66; Post, J.M. (2002). Differentiating the threat of chemical and biological terrorism: Motivations and constraints. [B] *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 8, 187-200; Post, J.M. (2002). Ethical considerations in psychiatric profiling of political figures. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 25, 635-646.)

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