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Causality-based Counterterrorism

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Causality-based Counterterrorism

What is terrorism? Many definitions of terrorism are in use both domestically and around the world, but our law enforcement and intelligence communities agree upon and are guided by the Justice Department's definition found in 22 U.S.C. § 2656f(d). That statute defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents" (DOS, 2007). The FBI defines terrorism as, "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a Government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" (FBI, n.d.). The two definitions are very similar, although the FBI places more emphasizes on methods; the intelligence community appears to be more interested in motivation.

This represents how we see terrorism today. However, it was not always so. The term "terrorism" began to be widely used during the French Revolution. Rather than unlawful violence against a government, terrorism was leveraged by fledgling governments as a means of controlling counterrevolutionaries, and carried a distinctly positive connotation. The revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre firmly believed that in times of revolution, virtue must be aligned with terror for democracy to succeed. In 1794 Robespierre wrote that "virtue, without which terror is evil; terror, without which virtue is helpless" and as well, "terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and

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inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue” (Hoffman, 2006). Robespierre was arrested and executed later that same year.

Do terrorists today perceive themselves to be virtuous? Certainly. They often perceive themselves to be the instruments of God serving an altruistic purpose. Or is that perception a justification for the much more pragmatic belief that terrorism is an effective tactic to enable the few to affect many? Perhaps the cause of terrorism is actually the effect of terrorism.

Terrorism is influenced by many factors including political, economic, religious and social factors. Terrorism spawns from many different pools; there is eco-terrorism, religious terrorism, ethno-nationalist /separatist terrorism and more – however, terrorism consistently remains a fundamentally politically-motivated phenomenon (Cronin, 2004). Although it is a commonly held belief that poverty, despair and hopelessness leads individuals to commit acts of terror, Federic Smoler, a professor of history at Sarah Lawrence College and Senior Fellow of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies asserts that this belief isn’t supported by study data. Smoler concludes through research that although convictions about social injustice and economic despair may fuel terrorism, poverty is not in fact a cause of terrorism.

It is commonly believed that terrorism results from pathological psychology or aberrant behavior of individuals, but analysis reveals that pathological psychology is no more prevalent among terrorist groups than among others. Rather, research shows that

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one is most likely to become a terrorist not because of psychological factors, but because of one's involvement with organizations influenced by external factors (political, economic, religious, social, etc.) leading to politically-motivated strategic decisions (Cronin, 2004).

Group identity within organizations plays a significant role in fomenting acts of terror. Within a group, guilt may be spread across many members, devaluating both guilt and the humanity of terrorism's innocent victims (Cronin, 2004). Politically motivated organizations that wield so little power that they could not seriously hope to successfully challenge a national or transnational political platform, may perceive terrorism as a potentially effective method for a small minority to affect a large majority. To be effective at the international level however, the group often requires state sponsorship. State-sponsored transnational terrorism may be a viable tactic for a weak state to challenge a much stronger one.

When cultures and civilizations clash on a global scale, and the stage of revolution expands beyond single nation boundaries to include seats of global power, transnational terrorism may be chosen as a weapon to add to the arsenal of weaker causes. In the case of Muslim extremist organizations prosecuting campaigns of terrorism against Israel and America, the decision to use terrorism as a weapon is fueled by a profound hatred. This hatred is not something that may be readily appeased. It is likely the product of things that we can not or will not change; as Smoler so eloquently puts it,

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that hatred is likely based on “our wealth, which is imagined to be the mere product of successful predation, our maddening decadence and sexual egalitarianism, our status as the incarnation of a seductive and infuriating modernity” (Smoler, 2002). This is what America faces today in the War on Terror. Note that is a war on “terror” rather than on terrorism. This is a significant distinction because the War on Terror also includes within its scope rogue states, “axis of evil” nations as well as nations and organizations engaged in offensive weapons of mass destruction development efforts.

Our national strategy for combating terrorism includes measures to prevent attacks by terrorist networks, deny weapons of mass destruction to rogue states and terrorist allies who seek to use them, deny terrorists the support and sanctuary of rogue states, and deny terrorists control of any nation they would use as a base and launching pad for terror (White House, 2006). These high-level strategies include layers of subordinate strategy and they are all sound. They are also incomplete.

Analysis had shown that the cause of terrorism is much more than economic depression, individual and cultural despair and hopelessness. It is not caused by religious, ethnic, or national oppression, social upheaval or revolution. These factors may feed terrorism, but terrorism happens because it works for those who choose to wield it.

Terrorism is caused by expectations of its effects. As such, the only effective strategy to combat it must include tactics to prevent it from achieving its goals. Professor Smoler urges us to make it clear to the world that the use of terrorism delegitimizes even

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the most legitimate cause. Any cause that uses or condones terrorism as a tactic should be treated by America as an enemy cause. Our executive leadership must set an example for the American people, our allies and news media; expressing sympathy for the conditions which allegedly drive terrorists and careless assumptions concerning the causes of terrorism serve as a measure of apology by America and the West and only strengthens terror's effectiveness as a weapon. We must deny terrorism's effectiveness to those that would choose it. Terrorism must never be rewarded with appeasement, retreat, sympathy, fear, cowardice or indecision. These reactions are the hopes of terrorists, why they use terrorism and ultimately represent the most effective means of defeating terrorism – by denying them to those who choose terrorism.

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