

Psychological Warfare and Terrorism

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This brief article demonstrates that there are common psychological principles that can be effectively and directly applied to illustrate the utility of terrorist activities. One key contention is that terrorism should be considered the pinnacle of strategic behaviors within any protracted campaign emphasizing psychological warfare. A variety of mechanisms and concepts are utilized to make this point and to demonstrate that the field of psychology provides clear benefits in explaining how terrorist acts can influence the thoughts and behaviors of audiences that are targeted by terrorist actors.

Within the body of literature on terrorism and counterterrorism, there seems to be an unending search to determine the etiology of terrorist behavior (Hudson, 1999; Nacos, 2004; White, 2003). In this search for causal factors, it is sometimes the case that scholars, practitioners, and the general public portray terrorist actors as if they were somehow out of touch with reality or as if they have some sort of mental impairment (Hudson, 1999; White, 2003). However, nothing could be further from the truth. These same types of incorrect attributions are also made when considering other criminals that commit acts of serious violence (Bartol, 2002). But it should be pointed out that criminal behavior (including terrorism and other violent criminal activities) is not necessarily the same as psychologically disordered behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Baker, 2004; Bartol, 2002). In fact, criminal behavior may be quite utilitarian, and can even be considered adaptive and functional in some environments (Barker, 2004; Bartol, 2002).

When considering acts of terrorism, it is important to keep in mind that such acts tend to be methodical and planned (Hudson, 1999; White, 2003). Further, these acts typically have an underlying point and purpose that goes beyond the mere completion of the act (Hudson, 1999). This purpose is to have a message heard by a given audience and to obtain that audience's attention through fear-invoking and threatening behavior (Hudson, 1999; White, 2003). Thus, terrorism seeks to use psychological leverage (albeit this leverage is obtained from fear) to gain the attention of a target audience and to – in optimal conditions – encourage changes in behavior among members of that audience (Bartol, 2002; Hudson, 1999; White, 2003). When one also considers that this objective of terrorism is often steeped in ideology and the desire to impress that ideology on the target audience, it becomes clear that terrorism is simply a form of psychological warfare designed to intimidate a target group into behavior change (Gaynor, 2002; Schmid, 2005). This is actually very similar (if not identical) to various forms of psychological experimentation that examine operant conditioning of mice and other lower-order organisms (Barker, 2004). The skillful use of negative reinforcements (the threat of future terrorism that is only removed if the public's behavior changes in a manner suitable to the terrorist group) and positive punishments (inflicting harm or damage in response to public behavior that the terrorist's seek to deter from occurring in the future) are simple tools of behavior shaping that can be found in any variety of texts on learning psychology (Barker, 2004).

Therefore, terrorism is simply a psychological weapon aimed at both its immediate victims as well as a much wider audience, in the hope of obtaining some sort of behavior change from that audience (Boyd,

1994; Wilkinson, 1985; Gaynor, 2002). Thus, it is not so much that the act of terrorism employs psychological warfare, but more the case that terrorism is the quintessential and perhaps most base form of psychological warfare that can be inflicted. As noted previously, the entire act of terrorism is based on manipulation and the modification of a group's behavior due to threats or actual harm against a minority of that group's population (Gaynor, 2002; Schmid, 2005). Terrorism exploits the psychological vulnerabilities among both enemy and friendly populations as a means of compensating for physical or material disadvantages. In this regard, terrorist forms of psychological manipulation hope to demoralize their enemy or paralyze that enemy with fear (Boyd, 1994; Gaynor, 2002). Simultaneously, these acts are thought to be effective in motivating the terrorist's allies and friends (Boyd, 1994; Gaynor, 2002; Schmid, 2005). Thus, it is that terrorism is a form of psychological warfare that fulfills dual objectives; one objective being to demoralize the terrorist's enemy and the other objective seeking to improve the morale and commitment of the terrorist group's membership.

Wilkinson (1986) states that "... terrorism is... a preeminent mode of psychological propaganda warfare. The terrorist and the government fight a war of wills..." (p. 69). The term psychological warfare has been given numerous definitions. However, it was probably most aptly defined by Boyd (1994) as those activities directed against the forces of the enemy that aim to cause chaos within their ranks, thereby demoralizing and/or disorganizing the enemy. Likewise, the term propaganda consists of those activities that are designed to gain possible support for- or at least understanding of- the political objectives associated with the terrorist organization while also establishing a moral standing that justifies – or at least makes understandable – the actions taken by the terrorist group. This is important because psychological warfare is often tied with the use of propaganda (Boyd, 1994; Gaynor, 2002; Schmid, 2005). Likewise, the terrorist seeks to gain the attention of their target through fear and intimidation but simultaneously hope to build understanding through the paired use of impressionistic propaganda.

Schmid (2005) notes that while there are numerous definitions for propaganda, most of these refer to verbal or visual forms of persuasion rather than emphasizing the use of broader psychological activities to influence public attitudes toward political or military objectives. Schmid (2005) goes on to say that such use of propaganda is, in effect, psychological warfare. This highlights the interrelated nature of terrorism, psychological warfare, and propaganda in achieving the objectives of terrorist organizations. Schmid further makes this point by noting that violence and propaganda are complimentary to one another. Indeed, the use of violence is presented as one possible technique within the propagandists' agenda. Since terrorism seeks to coerce large numbers of persons due to violence used against a select target, this makes the immediate victim merely an instrumental object in a calculated effort to influence the decisions of a much wider audience; either by demoralizing this audience or by eliciting their support (Nacos, 2004; Schmid, 2005).

Gaynor (2002) demonstrates that much time and forethought go into the psychological dimensions of terrorist activity. Gaynor notes that terrorists carefully observe their target population to find weaknesses and cracks in the society that can be exploited (2002). With this in mind, the terrorists will study the target population's media so that its effects can be maximized when transmitting a message to the broader population. Further, dissenting views and criticisms of the local, regional, or state government may be collected in an effort to undermine the social cohesion that may exist among the target group (Gaynor, 2002; Schmid, 2005).

Gaynor (2002) makes one interesting point that belies the mindset of the terrorist organization itself; leading members clearly know that their objectives will not be obtained purely by using terrorist attacks. When optimally orchestrated, the terrorist group will enlist the help of the victim group itself. Thus, according to Gaynor, "a victory that would be impossible by military means is thus brought within reach through a protracted, gnawing campaign of psychological warfare – a war of attrition that gradually erodes the target population's will to fight and turns the tables against the stronger power" (p. 3).

Terrorists seek to psychologically motivate the target audience by exploiting that group's emotional fear response to threatening stimuli and/or negative stressors (Barker, 2004; Hudson, 1999). The successful use of fear is dependent on the degree to which the fear-response to these negative stressors can be magnified beyond the actual likelihood of those stressors being encountered. This fear, tends to fall within two basic categories; rational and irrational (Gaynor, 2002). Rational fear is the simple acknowledgment that the threat does exist along with the understanding of the likely outcome should such a threat be encountered (Gaynor, 2002). In a region that experiences acts of terrorism, a degree of anxiety is not only understandable, but it is actually quite adaptive since this fear response in part of our "fight or flight" system of response to threatening stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Barker, 2004; Selye, 1946). Threat recognition, appropriate assessment of that threat, followed by a defensive response (either through confronting the threat or by escaping from the threat) are part and parcel to any healthy form of coping and adjustment (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Barker, 2004).

Irrational fear and anxiety, on the other hand, bears no true relation to the actual statistical probability that a person will be subjected to a terrorist act or that any such act will occur within a given region (Gaynor, 2002). It is the onset of this irrational fear and anxiety that is desired by the terrorist since this is what puts the target audience in a prone and vulnerable position where enhanced focus and attention is given to the terrorist (Nacos, 2004). It is in this state that the target audience is then also most likely to be susceptible to the message and/or demands of the terrorist. The more magnified the fear the more isolated individuals will become as they seek safety and desire to avoid the potential harm associated with surprise attacks on public places (Nacos, 2004). This translates to deficits in social coping and weakening of cohesion among the target group; the added stress and strain being likely to lead to questions of those in authority and disagreement on the best course of action that should be chosen (Barker, 2004; Boyd, 1994; Gaynor, 2002). It is in this manner that terrorism uses the imagination of the target audience as a tool to further influence the thoughts of that audience while also seeking to elicit subsequent changes in behavior. It is also in this manner that terrorism is, in and of itself, nothing less than the purest form of psychological warfare.

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