



Psychology of Terrorism

Terrorism is a tactic; a means to an end. Terrorism is practiced by people who don't hold power and who believe they cannot obtain power within the current political system. They rely on intimidation, usually through violence, to create fear, instability, and uncertainty in the minds of the common man, and, thereby, create pressure on political leaders for accommodations or social change.



Some acts of terrorism target police and other governmental agencies. However, it is the random acts of violence, aimed at common citizens, that are most effective at creating the kind of fear and uncertainty that prompts strong dissatisfaction within the populace and serves as a catalyst for change.

Terrorism is an extreme form of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is designed to inconvenience the masses. Sit ins at restaurants or shutting down access to bridges or key roads were tactics used by civil rights protestors in the 1960's, for example. The general public might have been inconvenienced by such activities, but, otherwise, could work around the obstructions. The essence of terrorism, however, is the invocation of fear within the populace. Violence in the form of seemingly random shootings or bombings at large public venues creates fear in people, who easily can imagine themselves going to a concert or attending a community cele-

bration of some type. Examples include shootings at a concert in Las Vegas several years ago or bombings, such as occurred at the Boston Marathon some time ago. The randomness of violence at public events creates a sense of vulnerability in the populace, and it is this sense of vulnerability that makes terrorism such a powerful tactic for political change. When violence is targeted in a random manner, it is difficult to avoid.

The most effective terrorist actions come without warning, and, therefore, are very difficult to combat. When discussing how to combat terrorism, two approaches come to mind immediately. Both approaches are preventive in nature. First, we pay attention to the needs of those less fortunate in our societies, thereby minimizing the discontent that underlies the sense of injustice that can blossom into emotions strong enough to inspire violence as a means to an end. By giving a voice to those who currently are not benefitting from the structure of the

current social system, we underscore the theory that, what benefits those lower on our social totem pole, serves to strengthen the larger system as a whole. Secondly, a well constructed and effective intelligence network is important at alerting social leaders when emotions are percolating and growing to the point where advocates might choose violence as a way to make changes in the larger social network. Ideally, this gives leaders an opportunity to address the negative emotions in ways that reduce the possibility of violent eruptions.

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