

Terrorism and Identity Diffusion

Volkan and Harris (1993) in the monograph on terrorisms say that "... one factor to be born in mind is the age of the terrorist. Since those directly involved in acts of terrorism are rarely older than 25, adolescent identity problems may complicate and underlie the overt ethnic identity crisis in the terrorist's psyche. The political authority under attack, may represent to the terrorist, for example, either a despotic father or the authorities who humiliated a weak father."

The monograph describes terrorism "as violence directed against civilian targets and others not actively engaged in warfare by members of clandestine groups of political motives with the intention of inducing shock. " It adds "We can better understand why this happens if we think figuratively in terms of learning, from childhood on, to wear two layers of clothing. The first garment which belongs only to the individual who wears it, fits *snugly*. This is his or her self-identity. The second set of "clothes" is a loose covering that shelters many individuals. It is, if you like, a large canvas tent. This is the individual's group or ethnic identity..... the column that supports the tent is held by the group's leaders. As long as the tent remains strong and stable, the members of the group pay it little heed. They go about their daily lives without constantly rehearsing and proving their ethnic identity." This is not enough to explain terrorism There is definitely other common factors as well as wide range of individual differences.

In spite of the general agreement that terrorists are not essentially crazy and the claims introduced by Crenshaw (1986) that there is no common terrorist personality, certain characteristics are worth mentioning without any invitation for superficial generalization. It is said that continued hostility against the "other group" is fueled by a narcissistic focusing of empathy upon one's own people and a consequent inability to identify with the sufferings of the other group. The less one's people are the more the distance from the common hazy tent exists.

It is also said that most terrorists have experienced severe internal "wounds" or, in more technical language, narcissistic injuries (Pearlstein, 1991). These injuries lead to identity diffusion, i.e., the absence of an integrated sense of self and others. Many who have no personal identity diffusion gravitate towards the terrorist group as a potential "cure" for their ethnic wounds (Volkan and Harris, 1993).

Rage directed at the individual victimizer within the family or the enemy group is compounded, in the one who lacks an integrated sense of self, by the psychological need to kill his or her own projections. Adults who suffer from what is known as "malignant narcissism" repair and maintain their sense of self-esteem by repeated acts of aggression and by the collection of "aggressive triumphs" (Volkan and Harris, 1993). Pearlstein (1991) writes "the fateful decision to become terrorist constitutes a firm rejection of an individual's establishment, assumption and maintenance of a new omnipotent, as-if other self."

More speculations and hypotheses may fit terrorism as it manifests itself in Egypt especially in the last two decades.

1- Whenever the common national(or ethnic) tent is not held strong and stable one is inclined to make his own special group, that is his private tent that he believes it provides him with his right to be sheltered. As such he is separated from the shaken or pseudo common tent and thus behaves as some foreign body or special small ethnic group.

2- It is not simply an external tent which is lacking but the hypothesis extends to claim that the intrapsychic parent (or parental ego state) is also poor or lacking. There is foggy perception of the state organization as a well circumscribed definitely structured parental authority. In addition there is definite declining role of the parents, especially the father, in Egyptian families as a result of the transitional cultural transformations as well as the personal existential injuries the parents are suffering most of the time.

3- In Egypt there is generalized identity diffusion, not only for adolescents but also for adults due to lack of actual participation in decision taking as well as the lack of some major national project. This would lead to a trial to belong to small groups as compensation for the identity diffusion.

4- One can add both identification with the aggressor and projective identification as perpetuating causes for fueling and maintaining terrorism. The torturing authorities could be responsible for exaggerated use of both mechanisms. On one hand the terrorist group could perceive torture as reinforcers of denying their identity. Projective identification refers to the identification by one person with what is projected onto him or her by another such that he or she behaves as the other expects. This is again the responsibility of the projection the media and the authorities are performing most of the time instead of objective evaluation.

5- The perpetuation of terroristic activity could also be related to fear of success. "If the need to belong is so important a motive for the terrorists, then the survival of the group to which the terrorist belongs will also be of central psychological importance. This goes along way towards explaining what Post (1990) calls the threat of success. He notes that the achievement of terrorist groups's stated goals rarely leads to the dissolution of the group. Moreover such groups often protect themselves against success by making impossible demands or intensifying their violence when faced with a potentially successful peace initiative. Post comments: To succeed in achieving its espoused cause would threaten the goal of survival. Some authors relate this avoidance of actual success to the need to maintain the "gulf between efficacy and aspiration " to maintain the group as a victim hence more supporting and protecting. Then the unspoken goals may simply be the survival, at all costs, of the group approval for sanctioned acting out.

This controversial position is not focussed at during management of this dangerous phenomenon. The terrorists seem to continue their activity endlessly instead of achieving any ultimate success which means losing their special compensatory tent.

To conclude, attention should go beyond dealing with political conflicts underlying terrorism. It should not be confined to condemn terrorists as criminals, anti-social or crazy but to identify what is lacking in the mode of our upbringing as well as to study objectively the lacking role of the state as a common national tent. A national tent should not exclude minorities as foreign bodies under any condition. Such tent does not only protect individuals from being foreign bodies but it also supplies enough information to establish properly functioning intrapsychic parent.

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