Fear and the Psychological Response to Terrorism

A review of

The Psychology of Terrorism Fears
by Samuel Justin Sinclair and Daniel Antonius

Reviewed by
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Few would disagree that the induction of intense fear in a targeted population is a quintessential objective of terrorist organizations through which they hope to destabilize societies and pave the way to changes they strive to implement. In light of this fundamental strategic end, it is curious that research on psychological reactions to terrorism has largely neglected the concept of fear and focused instead on conventional indices of negative emotionality such as depression, anxiety, or stress.

Samuel Justin Sinclair and Daniel Antonius set out to rectify this omission in their volume The Psychology of Terrorism Fears. It is a contribution of considerable value to all those with a serious interest in understanding the impact of terrorism on its victims. Primarily, it offers a comprehensive review of issues, concepts, models, and empirical findings pertinent to the effects of terrorism on individuals and communities.
The coverage of the volume is quite broad, and it reviews the manifold reactions to terrorism that have received an immense amount of scholarly discussion and research attention since 9/11. The topics covered in the seven chapters of the book include theoretical paradigms for understanding reactions to fear, conceptual models of those reactions, the challenge of communicating terrorism alerts, and the social, emotional, cognitive, and neurobiological processes involved in coping with fear. In addressing these topics, Sinclair and Antonius contribute a useful reference volume that should be of considerable utility to most terrorism researchers.

Apart from reflecting the considerable plurality of approaches to terrorism, Sinclair and Antonius’s book offers insights into a number of intriguing debates and discussions on reactions to terrorism. These subjects include the quagmire of defining terrorism, the paradoxical impact of (excessive?) vigilance, and the alertness to the mere possibility of a terrorist attack that prompts societal self-terrorization. Also helpful and informative are debates about the positive benefits of trauma (do they exist?) as well as distinctions between resilience and recovery and between fear and posttraumatic stress disorder.

It is encouraging to learn that the heterogeneous work on reactions to terrorism (whether actual or anticipated) is beginning to yield some converging findings (albeit not in all of the research domains). Thus, it seems increasingly clear now that (a) the incidence of psychiatric disorders increases immediately following an attack, (b) there is a decline of reactivity over time, (c) the impact of a strike is proportionate to one’s physical and/or psychological closeness to the attack, (d) social connectedness helps ameliorate the negative affectivity produced by an attack, and (e) an attack prompts a quest for social support and connectivity.

That said, the plurality of topics and approaches featured in this volume is largely refractory to integration, and no single model or theory emerges that would highlight the commonalities, overlaps, and intersections between the different lines of research. Yet such commonalities may well be there. For instance, I wondered what exactly is the object of the fear invoked by terrorism? If it is the fear of annihilation, then the fear construct approximates closely the notion of mortality salience in terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), which begs the question whether this terror management theory hasn’t already articulated a comprehensive theory of fear effects, and, if not, what might it have missed?

I also wondered whether the psychology of terrorism targets (the topic of the present volume) and the psychology of terrorists (seemingly outside its scope) aren’t curiously parallel. After all, fear of an enemy bent on one’s destruction and anger at such an enemy are quite similar to fear and anger stoked in recruits and converts to terrorism by terrorist propagandists and ideologues.

Admittedly, the desirable response to such emotions differs for victims and perpetrators. For victims, it requires rethinking the negative thoughts that come to mind in
accordance with principles of cognitive behavioral therapy; perhaps for the perpetrators, it means joining or carrying on with the fight against the enemy, the more the better.

In other words, though Sinclair and Antonius do not deal with terrorists’ psychology as such, the antecedent conditions of their agitated states seem to have a great deal in common with the psychology of the victims. Further research could pick up on those commonalities and differences that potentially could be exploited, to the end of creating empathy between these two adversarial positions. This could be a project for the future.

For now, however, the authors are to be congratulated on an important scholarly contribution that takes stock of the last, exceedingly fruitful, decade of research on the response to terrorism. Researchers of terrorism, and more broadly all those who are interested in terrorism’s psychological effects on its victims, would benefit from this comprehensive book.

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