

## Positive Emotions Motivate Terrorism

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### Overview of Issue

We want to believe that terrorists are blinded by irrational hatred (for example, the hatred of our freedom). Indeed, crowds in the Arab “street” express hatred as they burn American flags and chant hostile slogans in front of television cameras. Yet the men recruited to carry out terrorist missions usually do not come from the “street.” They are usually better educated, and they usually do not show particularly high levels of hatred or hostility to the West or the United States. Furthermore, some terrorist recruitment and training manuals make little or no attempt to arouse anger or vengeance. In fact, “Atta’s Manual” specifically commanded the 9/11 hijackers to “sacrifice” American victims without anger or vengeance, to make it a gift to God, rather than a pleasure for the self. The work of several recent scholars (McCauley, 2002; in press; Pape, 2005) suggests that the motives that lead terrorists to kill are in general like those that lead soldiers to kill: not hatred of the enemy, but love of God and country and loyalty to comrades are the most powerful motives.

In recent years, emotion research has expanded from its traditional emphasis on negative emotions to a new appreciation of the power and diversity of positive emotions. Positive emotions have been shown to motivate people to pursue long-term plans (rather than deal with immediate threats, as the negative emotions do); to develop the skills necessary to succeed in those plans; and to form close relationships with those who can help them succeed (Fredrickson, 2001). Positive emotions are thus likely to be an important part of the network building and skill development that characterizes terrorist networks. Two related positive emotions seem particularly relevant: moral elevation, and admiration. Moral elevation is the warm, pleasant feeling we get when we see acts of courage, virtue, love, or moral beauty more generally. Seeing a person sacrifice himself for his family, his cause, or his nation is spiritually uplifting; it makes people want to behave in a more generous, less selfish way themselves. Elevation is almost always a benign, peaceful, pro-social emotion. However, in a small pilot study, Hasan and Haidt found that 35 Palestinians interviewed at a mosque in Northern Virginia felt moral elevation and admiration when they heard about suicide bombers in Israel in 2001. Many said that their feelings made them wish they could do such noble deeds for the Palestinian cause themselves.

Research on elevation and admiration is in its infancy (Algoe & Haidt, 2005). It may help illuminate the moral motivations that lead people to sacrifice their lives to kill strangers, and the motives that lead surviving members of their group to revere and copy them.

### Recommendations and applications

- 1) Terrorism is a form of psychological warfare. We must understand the psychological mechanisms by which successful attacks feed back to motivate additional terrorist recruits. Positive emotions such as elevation and admiration may be one such mechanism.
- 2) There may be ways of undermining the “elevation value” of suicide “martyrs.” Some of them had less than pure motives, and these could be exposed indirectly.
- 3) Elevation and admiration can be used to encourage Americans and bring them together, as happened during the widespread idolization of firefighters, and of the heroic resisters of United flight 93. A leader who is conspicuously self-sacrificing, and who calls for shared sacrifice in the national interest, becomes a great leader if he can do it effectively.

## References

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