

Comment

TV and terrorism: It takes two to tango

Terrorism is made-for-TV warfare. It's easily filmed, readily understood and fits in neatly between commercials. Becoming a TV terrorist is also the fastest way for those without any talent to gain stardom.

Equally important, terrorism works. Consider a few examples:

- The world utterly ignored the plight of the Palestinians until they began to hijack aircraft. Soon, the PLO was trapped in a cycle of mayhem: If it had stopped terrorist attacks, TV cameras would have gone elsewhere and its cause would have been forgotten.

- Israel holds prisoner more than 700 Shiite Lebanese taken captive in south Lebanon under its "Iron Fist" policy. According to Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin, these Lebanese are being held in Israel to assure the "security of the border zone" — in other words, as hostages.

- But the world remained largely unaware of these Lebanese hostages until their relatives and friends in Beirut hijacked TWA 847, offering to exchange American for Lebanese hostages. The U.S. only vented moral outrage when its own people became hostage.

- The massacre of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks during World War I was an event of only academic interest until two Armenian terrorist groups began murdering Turkish diplomats. It was only then that the world suddenly recalled the Armenian genocide.

Current media hysteria to the contrary, terrorism is neither new nor exceptional. Over the past few years America has abruptly become exposed to its murderous impact. Israelis, who have long seen their



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schoolchildren murdered, are painfully familiar with terrorism. So are Palestinians and Lebanese whose villages and families have been incinerated by Israeli napalm. Now it is America's turn.

But America, deep in the agony and humiliation of another hostage crisis, still has not come to understand that the terrorism being directed against it in the Mideast is not insane violence but part of a growing guerrilla war against its domination of the area — and a reaction to U.S. policy. Whoever heard of Shiite terrorists until the 1982 U.S.-backed Israeli invasion of their homeland and its occupation turned them into angry hornets?

Americans are now feeling a small part of the misery experienced for decades by Mideasterners, Israelis and Arabs alike. Is it really surprising that Shiites, subjected to a decade of fearsome suffering from civil war, Palestinian bullying and then brutal Israeli occupation, are using terror? After U.S. agents recently killed 80 Shiite civilians with a car bomb in Beirut, a sign, "Made in USA" was put up over a ruined building. The cycle of terror and counter-terror accelerated.

Like the Shiites, anyone with a grudge can gain

instant worldwide audience and credibility by resorting to acts of terror. This is how Idi Amin, Moamar Khadafy and the Red Brigades became overnight household names. But two are needed for this tango of death and the media must bear responsibility for breathlessly beaming every moment of agony and horror into our homes. Without the media, terrorism would be mere violence.

Look at the Soviet Union. Terrorism there is never, ever reported. Therefore, it does not happen. In our media-dominated democratic societies, the least act of terror becomes political theatre, particularly so when done in small, easily filmed sets like aircraft. And this week we saw the first ever live, on-camera bayonet murder from Japan — gleefully recorded by waiting TV crews.

Without powerful armies or a potent propaganda network, the only way for oppressed minorities, madmen or individuals to get their message across is by media-oriented terror: Stardom on the cheap. Accordingly, we may expect to see a great deal more acts of terror against the innocent — unless our free societies somehow opt to curtail one of our basic freedoms by limiting the TV reports that nurture or even generate terrorism.

We are back to the domestic debate about violence on TV. Are we showing reality or creating it? Denouncing "international terrorism," the wicked Syrians or sloppy Greek airports is nonsense. The real problem is media. As the old saw goes, "any publicity, good or bad, is better than no publicity." Just ask the formerly obscure group now holding the mighty U.S. to ransom. They know that TV is mightier than the sword.