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Personality Profiles of Three Al-Qaida Leaders

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Personality assessment of three al-Qaida leaders in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States provides evidence for a rudimentary model of the leadership roles required for a major terrorist operation. This model has implications for combating terror.

Osama bin Laden

Assessment of Osama bin Laden (Immelman 2002a), founder and leader of al-Qaida, shows he is highly ambitious and exploitative (i.e., narcissistic), with adventurous and dissenting (i.e., antisocial) tendencies. *Narcissistic* leaders are bold, competitive, self-assured, and frequently charismatic; they easily assume leadership roles, expect others to recognize their special qualities, and often act as though entitled. *Antisocial* leaders are bold, courageous, and tough; are minimally constrained by the norms of society; routinely engage in high-risk adventures; are not overly concerned about the welfare of others; are skilled in the art of social influence; and are adept at surviving on the strength of their talents, ingenuity, and wits.

Bin Laden's blend of narcissistic and antisocial personality patterns suggests the presence of the *unprincipled narcissist* syndrome. This character complex combines the narcissist's arrogant sense of self-worth, exploitative indifference to the welfare of others, and grandiose expectation of special recognition with the antisocial personality's self-aggrandizement, deficient social conscience, and disregard for the rights of others.

A major implication is that bin Laden neither fits the profile of the highly conscientious, closed-minded religious fundamentalist, nor that of the religious martyr who combines those qualities with devout, self-sacrificing features; rather, it suggests that bin Laden is adept at exploiting Islamic fundamentalism in the service of his own ambition and personal dreams of glory. In the war on terrorism, information operations can be used to undermine the moral authority of the charismatic leader.

Ayman al-Zawahiri

Assessment of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri (Immelman & Kuhlmann, 2003), reportedly chief strategist for al-Qaida operations prior to 9/11, shows he is highly contentious and oppositional (i.e., *negativistic*), with highly dominant and controlling (i.e., *sadistic*) tendencies.

The amalgam of negativistic and sadistic personality patterns in Zawahiri's profile suggests the presence of the *abrasive negativist* syndrome. For these personalities, minor frictions easily exacerbate into major confrontations and power struggles. They characteristically take the moral

high ground, dogmatically and contemptuously expose their antagonists' perceived hypocrisy, and contemptuously, derisively, and scornfully turn on those who cross their path.

The Zawahiri study offers an empirically based psychological framework for conceptualizing Ayman al-Zawahiri's antagonistic negativism, single-minded commitment to a cause, and inflammatory rhetoric. The major implication is that it highlights the importance of a committed, persuasive, "true believer" in a strategic position close to the charismatic leader.

Mohamed Atta

Assessment of 9/11 hijack ringleader Mohamed Atta (Immelman 2002b) indicates a highly conscientious (i.e., *compulsive*), introverted (i.e., *schizoid*) individual with secondary self-denying (i.e., *masochistic*) features.

Atta's personality profile suggests the presence of the *puritanical compulsive* syndrome. This composite character complex is rooted in deep ambivalence between obedience and defiance and characterized by the dual ego defenses of reaction formation against forbidden thoughts and sadistic displacement of hostile impulses. The masochistic elements in Atta's profile provide a partial, personality-based explanatory framework for his willingness to sacrifice his life as a martyr for his cause.

The major implication of the Atta study is that political socialization experiences that produce a compulsive character structure – one manifestation of which is the classic authoritarian personality – may predispose a person to suicidal acts of terror (so-called "martyrdom") when molded by a political culture that promotes religious fanaticism. In the war on terrorism, the ability of security personnel to identify the external manifestations of this personality pattern can increase the likelihood of detecting terror operatives inside the United States or at points of entry.

Summary and Formulation

Collectively, these three studies suggest three critical roles in a global-reach terrorist operation: (1) a narcissistic, charismatic leader devoid of core values beyond personal self-interest, adept at exploiting others in pursuit of his grandiose ambitions (e.g., bin Laden); (2) a strategic-thinking "true believer" without constraints of conscience regarding the level of violence he is willing to employ in his single-minded pursuit of mission (e.g., al-Zawahiri); and (3) unobtrusive, disciplined operatives willing to sacrifice themselves for a higher cause (e.g., Atta). The presence of three such radically different, distinctive personality types occupying key roles in a terrorist organization has important practical implications for combating terror.

References

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