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# You can't fight violence with violence

By Metin Basoglu



THE past two decades have seen an increase in mass violence around the world, including wars, armed conflicts, human rights abuses and terrorism. Effectively dealing with these problems requires an understanding of the motivations that drive people to violence – sometimes to the point of self-sacrifice, as in the case of suicide bombers.

Unfortunately, attempts to develop such an understanding rarely go beyond value judgements, ideological beliefs and vacuous labels such as “fanatic” or “religious extremist”. What we need instead is a scientific analysis.

Acts of violence do not occur in a vacuum. The mass violence that characterises the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay and international terrorism can all be understood in terms of strong psychological motivators that inevitably create and sustain cycles of violence.

My colleagues and I carried out a study of 1358 Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Serbs in countries of the former Yugoslavia, who had experienced a wide range of war events, including combat, torture, forced displacement, refugee status and bombardment. We examined the cognitive and emotional effects of these events, and this study sheds some light on the processes that drive people from peaceful coexistence in a multi-ethnic society into an orgy of killing, torture and other atrocities (*Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol 294, p 580).

Almost 80 per cent of participants reported a lack of sense of redress for the trauma they had experienced. When we asked them how they felt about this, 98 per cent expressed a strong sense of injustice and more than 80 per cent reported distress, demoralisation,

anger, loss of meaning in life, loss of faith in people, helplessness or pessimism. More than 3 in 5 reported a desire for vengeance, stating that if they had the chance, they would punish those they held responsible with their own hands.

People who felt the strongest desire for vengeance were those whose loved ones had endured captivity, torture, rape or violent death. That was followed by those who had personally become refugees or endured forced displacement, captivity and torture, or exposure to gunfire or shelling. These findings clearly show that war violence has powerful effects that could explain, at least in part, the motivation for further acts of violence.

This fits with experimental work showing that both humans and animals respond with anger and aggression to threats to their physical and psychological well-being and that retaliatory aggression attenuates the feelings of helplessness that arise from trauma. For an intuitive understanding of those feelings, simply imagine your home suddenly being raided by invading forces and your loved ones being humiliated, imprisoned, tortured, raped or killed.

Many other acts create feelings of outrage and helplessness, and the accompanying desire for vengeful action. Among them are economic policies that contribute to poverty in the name of national interests, high-technology weapons being dropped from the sky in the name of national security, invasions in the name of democracy, and humiliation, imprisonment, torture and killing in the name of the war on terror.

## **“Weapons dropped from the sky in the name of national security create a desire for vengeful action”**

In a globalised world where images of war and human rights abuses are instantly transmitted to people's living rooms, the vicarious effects of trauma also need attention. Evidence suggests that even witnessing such events second-hand leads to similar cognitive and emotional responses.

The effects of trauma don't just lead to tit-for-tat violence. They can radicalise ordinary civilians and can even lead to their engagement in suicide terrorism. It is important to understand that such action does not originate from religious beliefs per se; religion merely facilitates such acts by providing a meaning for self-sacrifice, such as martyrdom.

Understanding is further undermined by psychological strategies which not only aggravate vengeful feelings in the victims but also lead to curtailment of civil liberties and human rights in democratic societies in the name of national security. For example, characterising adversaries as fanatics, religious extremists or terrorists hell-bent on destroying western values maximises public fear and prevents an understanding of the psychology behind acts of terror, thereby bolstering public support for war. Euphemisms such as “collateral damage” and “aggressive interrogation techniques” serve to hide the horrors of war and human rights abuses from the public eye.

Halting mass violence, including terrorism, requires a political will to address the problem at its roots. That requires western nations to revise their foreign policies in ways that do not generate and sustain cycles of violence. Unfortunately, such political will appears unlikely at this stage of human history.

A solution might be reachable to some extent by raising public awareness of these issues and bringing pressure to bear upon governments. People also need to see how their consent

to wars is manufactured through disinformation.

This is both a moral issue and one that concerns the safety of millions. Escalating cycles of mass violence might well lead to nuclear terrorism at some stage. It is often said that the first casualty of war is the truth. The antidote to this virulent problem is a better understanding of the truth of what wars and other forms of mass violence are really about.

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