

Understanding Terrorism And What We Can Do About It: A Continuing Conversation with Lord John Alderdice, (Former) Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and International Commissioner for the International Monitoring Commission[†]

Chair: Nadia Ramzy PhD

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Dr Ramzy began her introduction of psychoanalytic psychiatrist and former Head of the Assembly of the Northern Irish Parliament, Lord John Alderdice, by saying that he had been actively engaged in the political arena laboring for peace since 1978. She noted that Dr Alderdice had led the Alliance Party's delegation to the multi-party peace talks chaired by US former Senator, George Mitchell, and had helped to negotiate one of the most successful peace processes of the twentieth century culminating in the Belfast agreement of 1998. Signed on Good Friday of that year, the terms of the agreement urged the (former) combatants to abandon armed struggle and to deal with the underlying social conflict in Northern Ireland via the political process – “with words rather than weapons” as Dr Ramzy put it.

In January 2004, Lord Alderdice was appointed by the British and Irish governments to the newly created International Monitoring Commission, whose goal is to promote a stable and peaceful government in Northern Ireland by reporting to the British and Irish governments about the activities of paramilitary organizations and on the progress of normalizing security arrangements in Northern Ireland.

During the same month, he was also invited to speak at the 2004 winter meetings of the American Psychoanalytic Association about terrorism. Dr Ramzy then reminded the audience that, during his presentation, Lord Alderdice had said that an act of terrorism entailed not only breaking through social and moral conventions to shock people, but it also threatened their standard of living. According to Alderdice, Ramzy continued, the ultimate purpose of terrorism was to undermine the capacity of the powerful, and to menace their core prin-

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ciples. Frequently, this devolves to the terrorized doing the terrorizing and continues, in the aftermath of 9/11, in the guise of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the war on terrorism in general, and the continuing tragedy of attack and counter-attack between the Palestinian and Israeli peoples.

Dr Ramzy concluded her introduction to the symposium by saying that Lord Alderdice had demonstrated the utility of psychoanalytic ideas in understanding and dealing with terrorism. His work made it clear that economic and/or political approaches to terrorism are not sufficient. Ultimately, his approach supported the claim that a psychoanalytic understanding of large-group processes was an important and valuable tool for negotiating the road to peace. Summarizing her ideas about the potential role of psychoanalysis in the struggle for peace, Dr Ramzy ended her remarks by reminding the audience of Hannah Segal's way of thinking about the psychoanalytic contribution to understanding social and political conflict. Paraphrasing Segal, Ramzy said, "The real battle is between insanity based on mutual projections and sanity based on truth."

Lord John Alderdice prefaced his presentation to "Understanding Terrorism: The Inner World and the Wider World" by saying that his views were based on his psychotherapeutic work with terrorists and upon his political practice in Northern Ireland. Noting that his political work would necessarily be revised as the Northern Ireland situation changed, he regarded his psychoanalytically informed political activity as "a work in process and hopefully in progress" and he wanted the audience to think about whether his observations and interventions in the Northern Ireland situation could be applied elsewhere.

Dr Alderdice started his analysis of the psychological and social contours of terrorism by discussing his treatment of a man who suffered from acute anxiety episodes. His patient, a one-time member of an extremely violent paramilitary loyalist group that had murdered Catholics during the period of Northern Irish "Troubles,"* had suddenly become panicked about his impulse to violently attack his wife when angry at her. With the patient's mentation about his past terrorist activity in mind, the psychoanalytic exploration of his anxious complaint led to symptom abatement once the link was established between his rage-motivated anxiety about killing the woman he loved and his chronically troubled feelings of abandonment, hatred and shame about having grown up humiliated in a sectarian Protestant neighborhood, the bastard son of a Catholic man who had deserted him and his Protestant mother. Although it was unusual for a terrorist to seek psychotherapy directly, the work with this patient was made easier by the time-lapse between his paramilitary activity and his current situation.

*The "Troubles" is a term that refers to the bloody civil war in Northern Ireland that began in 1968. By the time the 1998 Belfast Treaty was finally approved, more than 3600 people had been killed during the conflict, and over 30 000 had been injured.

Dr Alderdice then turned to the general question of the social and psychological characterization of the terrorist. He began by indicating that although maladaptive resolution of psychic conflict might be correlated with terrorism, it was not its invariable companion, and mentioned that neither unreasonable hatred, neurotic fear, nor a history of humiliation were sufficient motivational conditions to join a terrorist organization or to stimulate terrorist action. He noted that some terrorists belonged to a tradition of violent struggle that had captured their admiration of, and prompted their identification with, those they regarded as heroes of a noble political cause whose goals could only be achieved by violent means. In cases where family or friends were killed, joining a paramilitary organization served to satisfy revenge and protective motives. On the other hand, he pointed to a group of so-called "Cease fire" soldiers, "johnny-come-lately's" who opportunistically joined terrorist groups to satisfy economic motives through organized practices of "extortion, racketeering, [and the sale of] drugs." Benefiting from organized crime not only put these terrorists at odds with those whose primary interest was promoting a political agenda through violence but underscored motivational, personality, and socio-economic variations among terrorists. He summarized these differences by saying that whilst there was neither a unique terrorist personality type nor background associated with terrorism, systematic variations in terrorist tactics could be understood as developmental stages in the terrorist campaign. To substantiate this idea, he identified changes in the implementation of political goals of the combatants in Northern Ireland during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The riots, bombings of buildings and large numbers of fatal shootings during the 1970s gave way to hunger strikes, targeted assassinations, and car bombings, and the use of electoral means to gain control of the communities in the 1980s. Tactics changed again during the 1990s by expanding the concept of a legitimate target to include, among other things, bombing the British mainland and, once the Belfast Agreement was negotiated, shifting the object of violent attacks from security forces to members of their own communities to assert their political control.

In the case of the Northern Irish conflict, these tactical changes reflected a developmental process that saw periods of breakdown interspersed with movement toward peaceful resolution. During the peace negotiations themselves, an alternation in terrorist attitudes and behavior became apparent: as advances toward peace were achieved, they "met resistance . . . with obvious secondary gain." Alderdice recognized certain "simple resonances" between breakdowns in the social process of peace negotiations and malfunctions observed by psychiatrists in the mental health of individuals. The question that captured his interest here was whether these apparent similarities could be understood psychologically, and if so, with which of several possible models. While recognizing that social inequality was a source of misery, Alderdice maintained that terrorism was more likely to emerge from societies rising up from poverty as he argued against the claim he believed characterized "political theories of the left," namely, that poverty accounted for terrorism. To dispatch class analyses which identify

economic deprivation as the source of terrorism, Alderdice reminded the audience that Osama bin Laden, hardly a pauper, had profound experiences of humiliation and disrespect similar to those of Alderdice's (earlier described) Northern Irish patient. Such experiences, he continued, play a prominent behind-the-scenes role in the development and actualization of terrorist inclinations. Terrorism generally does not assume a prominent role as a political strategy, especially in post-colonial societies, until the economic conditions begin to improve. It is precisely then, he contends, that "things became vulnerable to breakdown" and terrorism became a viable political option.

Lord Alderdice views the terrorism theories and contravention strategies stemming from the political right, from those who claim ethical neutrality in foreign policy, and from self-regarding anti-doctrinaire utilitarians who construe their policies to be in the "best interests" of those they represent, as pre-psychoanalytic forms of false consciousness. He recognizes the despotic inanity of treating serious social conflict in a "simple behavioral fashion" dispensing economic and political rewards for desired behavior and punishing the undesirable with negative sanctions or war, and regards the "US approach to the Middle East" as well as the Israeli government's "attacks on Palestinians" as examples of this misguided approach to social and cultural conflict remediation. He argued that people who live under social conditions that regularly produce intense negative affects they cannot alleviate through positive, affirmative social action do not always recognize, let alone act realistically, in terms of their "best interests." Following Freud, he distinguished between grief and depression, and warned that a diagnosis of either presupposes knowledge of the social-cultural conditions in which they occur. Believing that a psychoanalytic understanding of individual development, intrapsychic conflict, and mental illness could be usefully applied to social processes characterized by high degrees of intra- and inter-communal conflict, profound violence, and hatred, Alderdice outlined six psychoanalytic principles that orient individual treatment to see how they might aid our understanding of the social and cultural phenomenon of terrorism. The principles, which Alderdice used to organize much of the remainder of his presentation, included: understanding the subject's particular meaning-making activity; knowing how the past affects the present; recognizing the impact of regression on the emergence of primitive states; discerning the importance of temporal factors in the development of mental illness; appreciating the role of unrequited humiliation and shame in subsequent violence; and perceiving the operation and significance of resistances to health.

How then, Alderdice wondered, do these principles serve as a framework for improving our interpretation of terrorism? He answered by saying that grasping the mental state of those having been subjected to terrorizing tactics and appreciating their narrative constructions about what was happening, and why, illustrated the principle of becoming aware of how the terrorizing violence was experienced. Terrorism's purpose, he seemed to be saying, may or may not be

confusing to the surviving victim traumatized by its effects but the terrorist usually has a clear understanding of the perceived necessity of this particular form of violence. In other words, the subjective states of both must be understood psychoanalytically to develop a reasonable intervention strategy.

The psychoanalytic principle that underscores the importance of knowing how the past infiltrates the present is background knowledge for the psychoanalytic clinician treating an individual patient; however, to apply this foundational idea to terrorism required Alderdice to make an additional assumption in which knowledge of the psychology of the individual is the basis for inferring similar processes about the psychology of the group. In this way, Alderdice conceptualized terrorist violence as an advanced stage of a lengthy social deterioration process whose meaning for its perpetrators only becomes accessible through knowledge of their collective past. For members of a terrorist network, terrorism is a justifiable means of social violence whose end is to right a social and cultural wrong. It addresses a communal injury regardless of when the perceived violation occurred. Lord Alderdice put the matter well, saying, "If the past in personal terms casts a cloud over decades of individual life, in communal terms the time frame may be centuries."

He then gave illustrations of two more psychoanalytic principles that he found useful in conceptualizing what drives people to terrorism. First, he talked about how members of societies caught up in protracted social conflict frequently experienced powerful feelings that could overwhelm reason, thus exemplifying how the regression of higher mental functions gives way to primitive mental states. Adding that it was difficult for well-meaning British politicians to see that the suicidal destruction of others was not conduct easily put to one side but something driven by commanding mental states which obviated constructive thought and action, Alderdice concluded that powerful affects dominate terrorist behavior. He then elaborated his contention that disrespect and humiliation, and the wish to avenge these injustices, were the "most significant" contributors to subsequent terrorist violence. He added that an entire community punished and tormented in this way could be driven to violence as harsh as that which it had experienced it.

Alderdice began the last segment of his presentation by stating that the central organizing concept of US and British foreign and military policy since September of 2001, the "War on Terrorism" was "hard to understand" and was probably "counterproductive" since terrorism was neither a "structure, an organization [n]or even a belief system." Rather, he continued, terrorism is a tactic, a set of actions implementing a strategic goal. The tactic, the premeditated use of violence, implements the strategy of creating a "climate of fear." Terrorists maintain a clear distinction between the intended targets, those held to be responsible for the communal agony, and the immediate victims of their violence. Terrorism is a provocative act in which the terrorist, unlike the ordinary criminal, claims responsibility for the violence instead of avoiding it. The

terrorist is satisfied if the goal of retaliating against the real target is achieved. As long as the terrorist campaign is successful, the terrorist's victory is not diminished by his or her personal sacrifice. In fact, given its own perceived weakness relative to that of the intended target, the terrorist organization sometimes seeks to aggravate, even to provoke harsher retaliation to gain the moral high ground. After distinguishing between state terror, in which a government tortures, disappears, and murders its own citizens to maintain its power and terrorism, the use of violence to engender "radical change in the polity," Alderdice noted an important similarity in the beliefs of terrorists and those who combat them. Both, he observed, think that getting rid of the evil-other is good and that dying for the cause reinforces their own convictions about the other's wickedness. In this regard, Alderdice was reminded of the difficulty, often seen in psychotic patients, of effectively intervening when primitive modes of primary process thought dominate. Whether or not the manifest ideation is theological or political, dismissing the terrorists as madmen misses the possibility of understanding them and of effectively intervening.

The issue of how to use psychoanalytic insight to help restore methods of rational conflict resolution and contain further social violence took up the remainder of Lord Alderdice's paper. He reminded the audience that coping during an outbreak of terrorism can take different forms, ranging from measures that distort but preserve some degree of social functioning to a "profound dissolution of society into chaotic violence." In the latter case, rational discourse is all but impossible and the best that can be hoped for is to contain further self- and retaliatory damage. After analogizing the healing process of clinical psychoanalytic intervention, in which violent thought is contained through its exploration, to that of social interventions with a similar aim, Lord Alderdice emphasized the importance of creating an intervention strategy that maintained continuity of care, boundary setting, inclusion of all parties, and communication when seeking "help [for] a community in chronic turmoil." In the same vein, he cautioned against believing that appeals to communal rationality or coming up with the "right plan" would facilitate adaptive conflict resolution.

Finally, Lord Alderdice reminded the audience of the challenges of facilitating and implementing social change. Referring to his extensive experience in observing and working to find psychoanalytically informed solutions for the chronic violence in Northern Ireland, he noted that after 11 years of peace negotiations, conducted during his tenure as head of a political party and six more as the Speaker of the Northern Irish Assembly, the manifestations of violence changed, but the violence itself did not end. This sobering idea underscored the importance of recognizing and working within the realistic social, political, cultural, economic, and psychological limits of all parties involved in finding viable alternatives to terrorist violence. Realistic intervention goals clearly require a long term perspective characterized by "patience, understanding, and respect and . . . tough, resolute . . . creative adherence to the process . . . at the heart of all our work on or off the couch."

Discussion of Dr Alderdice's presentation

Nadia Ramzy began the discussion of John Alderdice's warmly and enthusiastically received presentation. Then the audience joined the question and answer session. In reporting about the exchange with the audience, I have only included essential ideas communicated by the various speakers. Unless otherwise indicated, the form of the report is formatted as an interview and intended to reflect the flow of the exchange between the participants.

Nadia Ramzy: Dr Alderdice talked about the core dynamic of humiliation in terrorism; 9/11 was indeed experienced as America's profound narcissistic injury. Humiliation was the manifest affect, underlying which was a form of annihilation anxiety that fuels the expressed humiliation-rage. The Bush administration's skillful manipulation of the annihilation anxiety has put us, as a nation, in a very troubled position in which we are tempted to blame others for our own government's actions, especially when we feel afraid and unsafe, and possibly guilty about what our government is doing in other parts of the world. I think this a potent moment to develop the theme of the demonization of the other and the racism it implies. I want to know how you think we should conduct ourselves to keep society steady during the next period. It has been profoundly disturbing to me that, during the course of these meetings, I have heard several people say, "We are in a position similar to that of the German Jews in the late 1930s" – palpably expressing the fear of annihilation.

John Alderdice: Analytic training and background don't protect us from having and expressing strong feelings. It is difficult not to act on strong feelings and it is important to be able to express them. But when the thought capacity of one's community is adversely affected by such powerful feelings, expressing them may incite actions that worsen the situation. Recall the effect of the jingoism of the British press during the Falkland's war. Or, think about what it was like in Northern Ireland when rational discussion about terrorist motivation could provoke more violence in the aftermath of a bombing. Nevertheless, we may be able to help people think about the way they think. The capacity to help comes from this.

What is affecting how the USA responded to 9/11? When you have an electoral result it is important to understand what the outcome says about the "body" of the country. When the UK elected Thatcher, it suggested that the country was reacting against having to give up empire. She was Britannia riding the imperial waves. A large percentage of the US population who became citizens was fleeing from persecution elsewhere. The USA was a place of asylum. Maybe the optimism contained therein betrays the knowledge that the world is a rough place. The United States' optimism may defend against the recognition that pessimism reigns in the world. You might also ask why the USA did terrible things to the Indians. I'm going to meet with Native Americans when I leave,

to talk to them about what happened during the period of the “Trail of Tears.”* When the US is the Calvary that goes everywhere to solve others’ problems, it does so to avoid dealing with its own problems.

Woman: Cambridge, MA: How do you deal with feelings of despair and hopelessness that allow you to persevere and that affect our work with challenging patients.

John Alderdice: By trying to understand what is going on and to realize that you learn most from those who don’t get well quickly. You have to try to struggle to recognize the difficulties. Second, for personal and professional reasons, I started traveling outside Ireland. I discovered that by getting outside the Northern Ireland situation, I could get perspective and I could think about what was happening in other countries. Talking with others really helped.

Woman: Washington, DC: I think the psychology you discussed fits more than 99% of people. I don’t agree with Nadia about what we are seeing now. I think that we are witnessing a form of US exploitation. We have a government that is mercenary not humiliated. Some believe that the results of the election aren’t accurate so we have to be careful. The double game, in which the US Government seems to be a peace-maker while remaining a war-monger, must be understood.

John Alderdice: Susan said: “You talk about people at the mercy of humiliation and wonder about the exploitive motive. Isn’t that what we are seeing?” Yes, Susan. I think that is right. There is a malign component that must be dealt with. There are benefits that accrue through manipulation. But binary thought is dangerous. The Bush administration represents more than itself. There is also another problem: being a guy with a gun who can kill is exciting.

Additional interventions: Two related questions were then posed by audience members. The first sought Dr Alderdice’s opinion about how psychoanalytic organizations should deal with the Bush administration’s ideological attack. A second person asked for advice about how to help the American public to overcome the Bush administration’s 9/11 propaganda. Then a third person said that we should probably get away from the British model of being the loyal opposition. He thought that we must be “gadflies who remind the Bush gang that they are wrong and that they make mistakes.”

*The “Trail of Tears” refers to the US Government’s decision to have the army force the migration of Cherokee Indians in the winter of 1838–1839. Over 3000 Cherokee men, women, and children perished during the relocation. According to the official North Georgia website, the Cherokee phrase “*nunna dail tsuny*” literally means “the trail where they cried.”

John Alderdice: I think the first question was about how people from an analytic perspective address the Bush 9/11 propaganda, and the second was also about how to combat propaganda and a comment about being the loyal opposition. Loyal opposition means being loyal to the principles of democracy, not to the government's actions. One can be loyal to the crown and opposed to the government. It is the responsibility of the opposition party to question the government. You had no formal opposition during the aftermath of 9/11, and it would have appeared disloyal to question the Bush government during that period. My reply to the question about what psychoanalytic organizations should do is this: nothing. There should be different views and all should be represented.

Man: Los Angeles, CA: I wonder whether underlying humiliation is simply annihilation anxiety. Terrorists believe they will go on to live in a special place in heaven. I think a more basic mechanism is at work.

George Awad, Toronto: I am excited by your speech. I'll answer the question about what works against despair. We formed a group of Palestinian and Jewish therapists – this keeps our hopes alive. Susan Lazar used the word “imperialism” a moment ago: that word is interesting and not used in ordinary conversation. There are two fundamentalisms in the world today, the USA is one and al-Qaeda another. Secular Arabs are opposed to fundamentalism. Talking doesn't always help.

Man: San Francisco, CA: Most of the people in this room have worked with disturbed patients and respect primitive mental processes. But when the larger group is at the center of the discussion, there are complications, questions about how the larger collective affects the individual. Don't we need to take into consideration group processes and dynamics that are profoundly important in this regard?

John Alderdice: Well, I can't pull all that together in the time we have left. Let me try to answer the last question first. There are group dynamics about which I've said little. Each dynamic contributes but you must recognize other components and I haven't talked about them. Small groups can keep us going. It isn't for everyone to get involved but we have responsibilities as citizens to become engaged. The question about fundamentalism is interesting. How do we understand it and how do we understand the role of historical humiliations? Nadia has said something about this. I'm not sure. There are primitive components to us all and what we do with that is important. There are malignant and benign regressions. What about humiliation? Arrogance needs to be challenged. Having a sense of humility is different than humiliation. We have to create contexts where people respect one another, or at least behave respectfully. On the international front, the issue of money and jobs arises. I think we need more than money and jobs, yet money and jobs can also be humiliating. We must find ways of behaving respectfully.

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