

SUPPORTING LEADERS UNDER THREAT AND THEIR PROTECTION

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Introduction

Most politicians will die of natural causes, but some have died as a result of assassinations. E.J. Gumbel describes, in his book *Four Years of Political Murder*, that between 1918 and 1922, 376 political assassinations were carried out in Germany of which the assassination of the foreign minister Walter Rathenau is the most remembered. Four American presidents have been killed, and many more failed assassinations have been reported. In the Netherlands, such events are extremely rare. In 2002, the popular politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered by an animal activist. Two years later, the Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh was killed on his bicycle by an Islamic fundamentalist. Van Gogh had produced the movie *Submission* about the suppression of Islamic women together with the Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

To prevent new attacks and to enhance the safety of politicians, the Dutch government initiated the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCSC) in 2005. In this agency, threat intelligence was brought together with security and protection forces of the Dutch police with the aim of putting protective measures into place when the threat or risk reached such proportions that the politicians or other public figures were no longer able to take adequate protective measures themselves. Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders, both members of the Dutch Parliament at that time, already received death threats and needed protection. But other politicians also increasingly received threatening messages. Protection in this post-9/11 era has become an increasing activity with cameras, protected entrances and corridors, secure badge systems, armoured cars, surveillance teams, and constant intelligence sampling and analysis to prevent attacks on politicians.

In the same year, the psychological consequences of threat and protection became apparent to the NCSC, which then invited Professor Gersons to become their consultant (Gersons & Olf, 2005). Protection was not only a specialised skill of trained police officers, but involved the cooperation of those who needed protection. This cooperation, together with the support of the families of the protected politicians, could not be taken for granted. After the first experiences with providing advice and counselling politicians and their families under threat and

protection, we began and published a systematic study on the psychological consequences of threat and protection (Nijdam, Olf, de Vries, Martens & Gersons, 2008; Nijdam, Olf & Gersons, 2010).

Death threats and protection

Death threats towards politicians are, apart from personal reasons, motivated to spread anxiety in the population and to influence the decision making of the politicians. Sometimes keeping the threat active is enough to draw attention towards the goals of the persons behind the threat. But killing the politician is showing power and audacity and making other politicians seriously frightened. Attacks on politicians can also help to silence a political opponent. Attacks from mentally disturbed persons on politicians, often without any warning, are the most dangerous

(James, Mullen, Meloy, Pathé, Farnham, Preston & Darnley, 2007).

The threats in the Netherlands from 2005 on were mainly related to some form of (Islamic) fundamentalism

(Stern, 2003).

To help politicians cope with threats, we first pay attention to the specifics of the threat. Often, the threat has become known through the Internet or an anonymous letter. Its aim is to intimidate the politician and to let him or her know that they are not safe any more. Sometimes the intelligence agency has discovered less explicit threats by listening to telephone calls or by tracking suspicious persons. The politician mostly does not know the potential attackers and their plans. The intelligence agency and the NCSC avoid sharing specific information with the politician for security reasons. The result is a very frightened politician, suddenly notified by the NCSC about a death threat. The lack of detailed information makes it extremely difficult for the politician to prevent the attack, to be well prepared, or even to imagine what could happen.

Some politicians are aware that their views are controversial towards, for instance, Islamic people. In such cases, a death threat is not completely unexpected. But even politicians who do not have such opinions can receive threats as representatives of the government. Threats have also come from individuals who hate certain politicians.

When the NCSC has identified a threat, they are legally obliged to provide protection. Depending on the risk analysis, the protective measures taken can be diverse. In extreme cases, the politician is not allowed to return to work or home and is sent directly to a safe house with protectors. Sometimes it is even necessary to send them elsewhere in the world. In such cases, the use of a phone or the Internet is prohibited because it can provide information to potential attackers. The decision to protect is often an immediate and urgent one which overwhelms the politician. Family, friends, colleagues and assistants gradually become aware

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of it. Less intense protection consists of being transported by protectors in armoured cars. The protectors wear bullet-proof jackets, and they have weapons on them. The protection is organised in different concentric circles around the politician. Some protectors (in shifts) in direct proximity of the politician will constantly accompany him or her. A wider circle of protection is composed of protectors who are on the lookout for signs of a planned attack. The home of the politician will be transformed with bullet-proof glass, cameras and other security measures and, constant police surveillance can be required.

All these safety measures are taken to protect the safety of the politician and of his or her family if needed. In 2005, however, the protectors were largely unaware that instead of providing reassurance, these measures actually increased fear in the politician and those around him or her.

Psychological reactions towards threats and protection

The threat of being murdered will immediately set off the stress response for survival (Olf, Langeland & Gersons, 2005). This response is mediated by the amygdala in the brain, which functions as an alarm centre. With sensory information such as seeing a sharp knife or a pistol directed at the person, the amygdala will inhibit the slower, reflective thinking in the frontal brain and start to prepare the body for immediate action by increasing the heart rate and oxygenation of muscles. This helps the individual to flee towards safety or to fight back. Freezing is also a possible reaction; the person then is not able to move or to control muscular movements appropriately. These are strong physical and psychological reactions. One feels tense, sometimes sweating or shivering, loses appetite, and is unable to relax.

From our experience, we have categorised the protection period into three different phases with their associated stress reactions. In these phases, the person's appraisal of the threat determines which stress reactions will occur (Olf et al., 2005). This sense of threat can vary over time and explains why protected persons, partners and family members differ in their stress reactions during the period of threat and protection.

The *beginning* phase starts when the politician is informed about a death threat and protection is introduced. Most politicians have no experience of protection and threat at such a level. The first reaction is to become bewildered, frightened and overwhelmed at the prospect of losing control of one's life and becoming dependent on others for safety. A common reaction is denial of the threat, resulting in noncompliance with the protection. Those who bring the unwelcome news are sometimes verbally attacked. Some politicians try to use their powerful position to overrule the actions of the protection agency. But some become so frightened that they cling to the protectors by constantly asking: 'Where are we going? Are they close? What do you know? How do you know we are safe now?', and other dependent behaviour. Others remain 'cool' and do not betray much emotion but later on become more emotional and may start to abuse alcohol. Protection may also be unwelcome because it is seen as a sudden intrusion not only into work

but also into private life. Secrets and private relationships or habits may become known to the protectors. Reactions of family members, including the spouse and children, are often just as important in this phase. Sometimes the spouse is more worried than the politician, and each can start blaming the other for their reactions to the threat. The spouse may even ask the politician to leave this or her job. Especially when children have become a target of the terrorists, we have seen politicians who have stepped down.

In this phase, we normally see more intense emotions—fear, anger, sometimes crying, but also feelings of guilt towards family and coworkers. They may suffer from sleeping problems, exhibit increased startle reactions as well as somewhat paranoid reactions, become easily irritated and lose concentration. These problems along with anger about the loss of control and the threat will influence the political opinions of the politician and influence decision making. The protectors and their supervisors may find these reactions difficult to understand and to handle.

Then follows the *consolidation* phase. After some weeks, protection becomes part of 'normal' life. Politicians 'enjoy' being freely transported and assisted in different ways by the protectors. It can even become politically profitable to show how much protection they need, for they now have good reason to blame the terrorists. This can also be stimulated by a less conscious process. Protection, in some ways, disconnects people from normal interactions, which would normally help the person to get certain points of view into perspective. Being threatened with death, however, increases the need to be more strongly convinced of one's existing convictions. People who do not share or accept certain viewpoints of one side or the other without criticism can be pressured to leave the group and may be blamed as a 'traitor' or as a disbeliever. Provocative behaviour on the part of the politician will provoke the 'enemy' and prevent termination of protection. It also can become difficult for the protectors not to become overly influenced by the ideas of the politician, since their lives are also under threat by virtue of being in the proximity of the protected person. 'Terror management theory' has shown that reminders of one's mortality in various contexts strengthen the person's cultural values and worldview (Greenberg, Pyszczynski & Solomon, 1986).

In addition, depending on their natural attachment style, some people will be inclined to form an attachment to their protectors and surrender control to them, whereas others tend to be antagonistic to the protectors and keep them at a distance (based on Hart, Shaver & Goldenberg, 2005).

However, a very different response can be exhibited by politicians under threat. They may start to evaluate their views and actions or even change how they perceive themselves and the world. This phenomenon – 'post-traumatic growth' (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) – has first been found in cancer patients who expected to die soon. When life cannot be taken for granted, it becomes a vulnerable treasure. One starts to evaluate one's life and connections. Moreover, family and friends often become much more important than work, social position and money.

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For those around the politician, the unexpected changes in interacting with the politician can be confusing. The topics of work and private life during protection often become an arguing point for partners who have nothing to do with the origin of the threat. They can become angry and complain about the 'stupid' choices made by the politician. Politicians often spend very little time at home with their family, which can cause family members to blame the politician's political ambitions for having led to this devastating situation. Protectors who are trained as specialised police officers or with a military background become unwilling observers of these quarrels. They try to distance themselves from these affairs. It becomes even more complicated if the politician or the partner becomes attached to their protectors and may even try to initiate romantic relationships with them. This also happens with hostages who are dependent on their hijackers (Symonds, 1980). Especially in a safe house, the protection situation bears some similarities to the experiences of hostages in terms of isolation, deprivation, psychological pressure and role inequality, and similar attachments can arise in the consolidation phase of protection.

The relationships of the protected person with family, friends and work will be influenced and compromised by the protection. Living under protection means loss of freedom in many respects. Going out for a stroll, to a bar or restaurant, to see movie, or friends and family will lose all its spontaneity.

The last phase is *withdrawal* from protection. One might expect someone to be happy about the renewed freedom when the message comes that there is no more danger, for instance, when a terrorist is killed or imprisoned. But more often the feeling of being safe sinks in much later than the message of new freedom. Protection agencies have recognised this phenomenon and have developed a routine to downgrade the protection step by step.

As human beings we perform many necessary behaviours automatically, such as driving a car, cooking, and going to bed. In a similar vein, when one is accustomed to protection, it takes time to adapt to its withdrawal and to return to normal circumstances. The habit of hyper-vigilance, learned under protection, will not be easily shaken off. The first reaction to withdrawal of protection is to start scanning your environment for danger again. The withdrawal of the protective shell will give rise to a feeling of renewed vulnerability. The politician wants proof of the new safety or does not believe the protection agency. Moreover, the secondary gain of free transportation and feeling important may motivate some to protest against the ending of protection.

Supporting by direct advice

As we have seen, politicians will react in various ways towards threat and protection. During *the beginning phase*, it helps if the politicians are reassured that their psychological reactions in the beginning are 'normal reactions when facing an abnormal situation'. This is an often-used choice of words in the direct aftermath of disasters and helps people to cope with their overwhelming experiences. When

we start to advise politicians under protection, normalising their reactions is our first goal. This is sometimes called 'psycho-education'. In this setting, it means explaining the psychological reactions as a result of the unfamiliar death threat and protection. When a politician, and often also the partner, recognises that their psychological reactions are normal in the context of the abnormal circumstances, some feeling of control is regained.

We also explain that feeling fear is an important signal which is related to danger. When we feel fear, we immediately want to identify and assess the danger. Politicians under protection, however, cannot identify and assess the danger, and this uncertainty results in a state of anxiety. We explain that the feeling of fear initiates the stress response system; one becomes hyper-vigilant; the heart rate increases; emotions such as crying or irritability can appear, with aggressive outbursts; or emotions can be stifled. It becomes increasingly difficult to concentrate on matters not related to the threat and, most prominently, sleeping well often becomes impossible because one is on constant alert. Only when one is exhausted is sleep possible, and then only for a limited period.

The hyper-alertness makes keeping a normal work schedule difficult. Perhaps the terrorist wants to disrupt the politician's normal life and coerce him or her into accepting the terrorist's opinions. This is the case with instrumental threats, when the perpetrator wants to achieve a concrete result by force. Realising this often makes the politician extremely angry. Discussing and explaining these relations and reactions in an advisory session has been much appreciated by politicians and their family.

The psycho-education also includes warnings about the near future. It is worthwhile to warn protected persons against increasing their use of alcohol as a way of trying to feel less tense and to increase the chance of sleeping longer. Alcohol also impairs attention and concentration and can even increase the fear and emotions. Exhaustion can also lead to a depressed state.

We advise the politician to take note of his or her reactions and also those of family members and even assistants who become fearful because of the new situation. Then we start to discuss how he or she can best adapt to this new situation. Apart from keeping a daily routine with less work than usual, we explain and stimulate healthy distractions. Listening to or making music, exercising, sports and meeting with friends are examples of suggested activities. The protection results in a much smaller circle of movement than one is used to having. Because one cannot go out freely for a walk, physical activity at home or in a gym is a must.

Often it takes time and more sessions to help the politician and his family to adapt in steps to the protected state. In the beginning, they often have difficulty in trusting their protectors. The protected person lacks knowledge about the specifics of the threat and is therefore unable to distinguish between dangerous and less dangerous situations. One needs to learn to trust the protectors, and an optimal individual match is important. Some protectors are quite open, while others do not like to talk much. Their task is not primarily to socialise with the politician and his family, but to be on high alert and to maintain a professional distance. Politicians have repeatedly requested the agency to send only protectors who are already well

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known to them. However, the protectors work in shifts and, as a rule, routine is dangerous when one needs to be alert. Here, we see that the profession of protection may conflict with the needs of the protected person and the family.

The advisory meetings, as requested by the NCSC, are held by psychiatrists and psychologists who are specialised in interventions after traumatic events and in treating clients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They can distinguish between normal and abnormal stress reactions. The role of an advisor, however, is different from that of a doctor or a therapist. When the NCSC asks the advisor to plan a meeting with a protected politician, it is seldom a request for medical treatment or psychotherapy. Therefore, we make it explicitly clear to the client that the aim of the meeting is to advise, not to diagnose mental problems. The involvement of the advisor is legitimate because of his knowledge and experience of normal and abnormal stress reactions, especially under threat and protection. The advisors are still governed by their duties as mental health professionals to abide by professional standards of confidentiality.

However, for a frightened politician, it is difficult to distinguish between these different roles, between a 'doctor', an advisor or a therapist. Regrettably, often the first reaction of a politician towards the offer of the NCSC to talk with a psychologist or psychiatrist about how to cope with the situation is a rejection. 'I am not crazy' or 'I do not need a shrink' are common reactions.

To overcome these negative reactions the NCSC has produced and distributed flyers with information about common reactions and about the advisory meetings. Also, politicians who have become familiar with threat and protection have offered to meet with the new protected persons and to tell them about the value of advisory meetings.

The advice will be different in the later phases. During *the consolidation phase*, there is usually less need for politicians and their families to meet with the advisors. Only new threats and disturbing new information, or complications in the interactions between the family and protectors, are reasons for new advisory sessions. Living in a safe house can become complicated when neighbours become fearful that they too may be caught up in an attack. When the threat persists for months, or even years, it can become a divisive issue for the politician and his or her partner and family. Both politicians and partners have to adapt to an abnormal life of protection and to cope with this unusual and often unacceptable situation.

It is sometimes difficult not to become suspicious towards unknown people, especially when the threat is coming from countries outside Europe. Here, confrontation with foreign-looking people can cause startle reactions. This phenomenon is called fear generalisation. When someone has been threatened, for instance by a coloured person, all coloured persons are then appraised as possible attackers. One loses the capacity to distinguish between real danger and triggers of past events.

During *the withdrawal phase*, the protection agency often likes to have an advisory meeting with the politician. Many psychological reactions about uncertainty and safety return and necessitate explanations and new ways of coping.

Complications

Advisors, as stated before, want to stick to their role and try to avoid making unnecessary diagnoses and offering treatment. However, as experienced mental health professionals, it is difficult not to see when suspicion – a normal response when one is protected – turns into a full-fledged paranoid state. Likewise, alcohol abuse and major depression are occasionally encountered in such situations. When an advisor is confronted with such symptoms, one has to discuss these observations explicitly with the politician if possible. In such cases, it is advisable to refer the protected person for treatment to someone outside the advisory team.

It has been helpful for us, as advisors, to understand the task of the protectors and the sometimes difficult interactions this can cause with the politician and his family. However, feeling dependent on the protector, or becoming friends with them, can become an unpleasant issue. Sometimes, politicians develop an intense attachment towards their protectors. Some politicians treat the protectors like servants; for instance, they may be expected to go shopping for the politician's family. This conflicts with their protective role and can cause anger among the protectors. We have also seen regressive reactions of politicians which complicated the protection.

In day-to-day life, people do not expect to be exposed to an accident, an attack or a life-threatening disease. However, when such incidents do happen, in the beginning it does not seem real. In the field of psycho-trauma, this is called the 'illusion of safety'. It is difficult to believe and to act as if a disaster could happen any day or that someone might die. Especially in the beginning phase, politicians sometimes do not want to comply with the protection. They sometimes, for instance, try to escape from the attention of the protectors. This behaviour can be understood as testing the reality of the threat.

Protection becomes a routine for politicians, such as ministers and presidents, who are in leading positions. Here it is not a specific threat but constant unknown possible dangers that bring about the need for protection; for instance, it is always possible that mentally disturbed persons or 'lone wolves' will attack without warning. Without explicit threats, it is more difficult for the politician to comply with the protection and to accept the associated intrusion into their private life. Indeed, protection in itself sometimes stimulates fear in the protected person. Again, advisory meetings are advised in such situations.

Wider implications

To increase the general awareness of MPs, ministers and leaders of the political parties in the Netherlands about threats and protection and the need for psychological support, they have been informed at meetings with the NCSC together with an advisor. One can see this as an 'early warning system' to increase the feeling of responsibility and involvement of the leaders. This approach is also increasing their interest in other kinds of threat, which are much more frequent

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than might be expected. Hate mail is quite common, and politicians often receive threatening letters at home or are verbally attacked in public. This is often seen as insignificant, or 'part of the job'. The meetings help them to take threats more seriously and to inform the NCSC about those incidents.

The encounter with a personal death threat is a challenge for politicians. However, they are also confronted with the responsibility to respond to major tragedies and threats towards populations such as those that arise at times of war, or civil strife and natural or man-made disasters. As we saw on p. 91, politicians can be expected to experience the same or similar emotions to others faced with such problems. Both immediately and sometimes later on, they may become fearful, saddened, angry or depressed. They may attempt to cope by concealing or repressing some feelings while expressing others, they may make use of alcohol or other drugs for this purpose and this sometimes leads to abuse.

Their assistants or colleagues often turn a blind eye to these reactions and responses. They do not know how to handle them or how to help. Psychological advice as described earlier can be helpful in many such situations and can help politicians to feel less lonely at the top and better able to make wise decisions. At critical moments when the politician feels overwhelmed by emotions, it can be helpful to let the first wave of acute stress reactions die down before making high-impact decisions. For these reasons, it is important for an advisor to be an experienced mental health professional who is absolutely independent of the politician and who has nothing personal to gain.

Conclusion

Knowledge of stress reactions, trauma and PTSD has been applied outside the treatment room of the mental health professional. Expert knowledge of people's responses after disasters has been found to be useful.

In the Netherlands, in 2005, a special agency – the NCSC – was set up to protect politicians whose lives had been threatened. Soon after their first experiences of protecting politicians, this agency encountered psychological reactions in response to threat and protection which complicated their primary task of enhancing the safety of the protected persons. The help of specialised mental health professionals in the area of trauma and PTSD was requested to help the politicians cope with the situation in the best possible way. Further direct advice and consultation were found to be necessary but not easy to put into practice, mainly because of a certain stigma surrounding the issues. By using different approaches and tools, a more comprehensive programme has been developed. Advising politicians in the contexts of other stressful situations and encounters in their work has been found to be helpful and has important implications for future development.