CHAPTER 13

Demystifying Terrorism

"CRAZY ISLAMIC TERRORISTS WHO HATE US BECAUSE WE'RE FREE?"

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THE MYTH

While the events of September 11 "changed everything," President Obama's announcement that Osama bin Laden had been killed has provoked the question of what—if anything—has changed because of his death. Adding to the feeling of a changed landscape are the popular demonstrations in multiple Arab countries in early 2011 (the "Arab Spring") that challenged or toppled dictators in favor of democratic elections. Understanding what is different and what has changed about terrorism and the Middle East is central in determining the extent of American military deployment abroad, government expenditures on war and security, the scope of government surveillance and the privacy of Americans, the status of civil liberties, and America's view of the approximately 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide.

Asking what has changed requires a return to the fundamental question of why terrorists do what they do. Because many people do not understand the political aspirations of terrorists, they assume that terrorists are crazy mass murderers, akin to serial killers. Less extreme is a position that terrorists—especially "suicide bombers"—are irrational or disturbed. Adding to the idea that terrorists have warped or illogical thinking is a second set of beliefs popularized by President George W. Bush in the days following Sept 11: they hate America, its freedoms, and democracy.

While each idea has a kernel of truth, appreciating the limits of these ideas involves several challenges. First, while much of the interest in serial killers relates to aspects of individual pathology, terrorism is *political* violence and thus requires knowledge of social and political issues. International terrorism requires some understanding of global politics and history, which are not popular topics in the United States (Even after September 11, few Americans increased their consumption of international news.) Second, getting inside the head of a terrorist requires taking their worldview seriously, including anti-American sentiments. In times of threat, the emphasis tends to be on solidarity, and many see understanding "the enemy" as somehow unpatriotic or blaming the victims (although "mind hunters" who get inside the head of serial killers never hear such accusations).

THE KERNEL OF TRUTH

In order for the myth to survive, there must be some kernels of truth to the idea that the United States faces "crazy" terrorists, who are anti-American and who hate democratic freedoms. Because people tend to give more weight to evidence that supports their beliefs, readers who believe Islamic terrorists are crazy freedom haters should pay close attention to the limits of such beliefs. The first kernel is that a "small cadre of scholars" argues that some suicide bombers are driven by suicidal tendencies rather than ideology (Kix 2010), although this finding applies to a minority of suicide bombers and not at all to terrorist leaders. Second, al-Qaeda and its affiliates are anti-American. They also hate and kill others, including Arabs, and are actively engaged in aggression against other democracies, so anti-Americanism is an incomplete explanation. Third, while only a small minority of Islamic fundamentalists are terrorists, they do tend to see American freedom as allowing for decadence and moral "filth" that pollutes the globe. (Al-Qaeda was more interested in establishing an Islamic caliphate or religious dictatorship than democracy.) But these ideas only call for direct attacks on the United States, rather than against European and Scandinavian countries as well, because it is seen as an occupying power in the Persian Gulf. (Al-Qaeda did attack London and Madrid, although their planning document—summarized by Pape—reasoned that "it would be more effective to attack America's European allies, who could be coerced to withdraw their forces, thus increasing the economic and other burdens that the United States would have to shoulder in order to continue the occupations" [2005, 55].)

The strongest case about terrorists having mental health issues is Merari's research finding that 40 percent of would-be Palestinian suicide bombers had "suicidal tendencies" (Merari, Diamant, Bibi, Broshi, & Zakin 2010, 95). Because suicide is explicitly forbidden in Islam—hence the use of the terms *martyrdom bombers* and *martyrdom operations*—the issue is difficult to study. Merari's research used psychological inventories and found the bombers to be people "in distress, feeling helplessness, loneliness, painfulness, and sadness, expressing pessimism and contemplation about situations without positive resolutions. They repeatedly portrayed family dynamics where the child fails to meet parents' expectations, tragic reciprocal disappointments entailed in either violent or self-destructive acts" (Merari et al. 2010, 96). Although some terrorist leaders and recruiters say that they reject mentally unstable candidates for suicide bombing missions, others look for "sad guys"—"people who were nonentities and had no status but who might get recognition by dying, those with low self-esteem…and bitterness at their marginality, and who are willing to try anything to feel like they have worth" (quoted in Lankford 2010, 338).

As noted, the concerns about mental health issues only apply to a minority of suicide bombers and none of the recruiters or leaders. Merari found that none

of the participants in the suicide bombers' group had psychopathic personality tendencies, and the group of terrorist organizers had a lower level of psychopathic tendencies than a control group (Merari et al. 2010, 96). Further, some of the mental health concerns are the result of living in war zones and desolate towns. In other cases, terrorists in Iraq would rape women and make sure that the victims were sent to a woman who would convince them that the only escape from public scorn was a martyrdom operation (Kix 2010). In short, mental distress that results in suicide bombing can be an adaptation to an extreme environment rather than the manifestation of mental illness rooted in brain chemistry or other mental defects.

The political issues of al-Qaeda and other Islamic fundamentalists certainly include anti-Americanism, which is evident from bin Laden's speeches and his fatwa (religious decree) about the "Zionist-Crusader Alliance." Although Europeans waged the Crusades that ravaged Muslim countries from about 1100 to 1300 (with some continuing for centuries after that), militants see the Crusades as a timeless battle between Islam and forces of Western imperialism, which the United States currently embodies. But the fatwa's title also suggests that opposition to Zionism (the movement for a Jewish state or homeland) is part of the motivation—and explaining the terrorism of bin Laden's followers also involves his reasons for a number of acts that have happened in Arab lands and have taken the lives of many fellow Muslims. Thus, to the extent that Islamic extremism is anti-American, the reasons include, and go beyond, American freedom in the abstract. Indeed, European and Scandinavian countries, many of which have more progressive values on gender and are less moralistic about sexuality than the United States, also advocate democratic freedoms.

Finally, Islamic militants seize on ambivalent reactions to America in the Muslim community, especially in terms of sexuality, abortion, women's rights, and homosexuality. Ironically, some of these issues are also concerns of the survivalist Right in the United States, a male-dominated movement that—while not monolithic in its beliefs—tends to endorse very traditional roles for women, bombs abortion clinics, and views homosexuality and interracial mixing as signs of moral decline that must be fervently resisted. Thus, to the extent that such beliefs fuel terrorism, the problem is as much domestic anti-government and anti-abortion terrorism as it is foreign anti-Americanism.

THE TRUTH OR THE FACTS

With terrorism that goes beyond suicide bombing, discussions involve labeling rather than explanation: terrorists have done evil, therefore they are evil (and because they are evil, they engage in evil deeds). People do not understand—or do not want to understand—so the terrorism is seen as senseless and irrational, and people thus assume that the terrorists are crazy. But in a wide-ranging literature review, Hudson (1999) finds no support for an explanation based on mental illness or abnormality in any of the studies of individual terrorists and groups. He concludes that terrorists are not psychologically different from non-terrorists. What distinguishes terrorists from non-terrorists is childhood development and radicalizing events, like war or insurrection, which combine with belief systems that are projected onto ever-changing regional and global conflicts.

The elaborate timing and planning that go into "successful" terrorism are inconsistent with mental disorders. Although some psychopaths are capable of elaborate planning to carry out serial murder, psychopaths exhibit narcissism and self-absorption; their motives for killing lie in fantasy, especially sexual fantasies. In contrast, terrorists are focused on a larger social or political cause and suppress much of their individual autonomy—in the extreme carrying out suicidal attacks—to further these ends. In addition, the majority of serial killers work by themselves, and a majority of team killers involve only two members with one clearly dominant (Hickey 1997). Terrorist cells that carry out the large-scale attacks people fear the most are larger and may involve coordination with several other cells. One of the hallmarks of al-Qaeda is multiple, simultaneous attacks that require elaborate planning. One senior CIA official commented that "two [attacks] at once is not twice as hard—two at once is a hundred times as hard" (Reeve 1999, 200). Al-Qaeda's September 11 operation involved four separate teams and could not have been completed by self-absorbed people pursuing individual fantasies.

Hudson (1999) notes that most terrorism experts are skeptical of explanations that rely on mental illness because it deflects attention from the political motives for violence that terrorists take seriously. This finding is consistent with research that demonstrates that "normal" people participate in executions, lynch mobs, military massacres, and genocide. For example, a key figure in the Nazi extermination of Jews was Adolph Eichmann, who was examined by six psychiatrists who proclaimed him "as 'normal'—'More normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him,' one of them is said to have exclaimed, while another had found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was 'not only normal but most desirable'" (Arendt 1964, 25–26). While Nazis are different from Islamic terrorists and American lynch mobs, what links these groups is that they all involve normal people acting together because of belief systems and what they see as a dangerous threat. The fight against that threat is for "the good," and they adopt rational strategies to achieve it.

Such beliefs are intensely held; terrorists are fanatics, or what Hoffer (1951) called "true believers." Not all true believers endorse violence, writes Hoffer, but "their innermost craving is for a new life—a rebirth—or, failing this, a chance to acquire new elements of pride, confidence, hope, a sense of purpose and worth by an identification with a holy cause" (1951, 21). True believers and fanatics see the world in very clear-cut, black-and-white terms, so they feel a high degree of moral certainty or righteousness about their position. When combined with a sense that something sacred is threatened, the violence can be seen and justified as self-defense.

In terms of the social and political issues involved with Islamic terrorism, Benjamin and Simon provide a helpful starting point. The authors were both directors of the National Security Council, and write about the "root causes" of terrorism:

The United States is resented for its cultural hegemony, global political influence, and overwhelming conventional military power. Its cultural reach threatens traditional values, including the organization of societies that privilege

males and religious authority. It offers temptation, blurs social, ethical, and behavioral boundaries, and presages moral disorder. America's political weight is seen as the hidden key to the durability of repressive regimes that fail to deliver prosperity while crushing dissent. Its support is cited to explain the power of Israel to oppress Muslims and degrade Islam. American military prowess is used to kill Muslims, as in Iraq, or is withheld to facilitate their extermination, as in Bosnia. The American cultural challenge to Islamic societies stands for a broader Western commitment to secularization, the relegation of religion to the private sphere, and a focus on the here and now instead of on either a hereafter for individuals, or a messianic era in which the righteous as a collective will partake. (2002, 407)

This lengthy quote is important because it concisely identifies a range of issues that need to be examined instead of individual pathology. It recognizes that anti-Americanism is a significant factor for reasons that include, and go beyond, American freedoms.

Further, Pape's analysis of the strategic logic of suicide bombing suggests that the central objective is "coercing a foreign state that has military forces in what the terrorists see as their homeland to take those forces out" (2005, 21). The bombings are done by psychologically normal people as part of a campaign to raise the costs of an occupation. In this context, there is widespread support for the goal, and the terrorists are simply "the most optimistic about the usefulness of violence for achieving" those goals (2005, 44). Al-Qaeda fits with this pattern, as bin Laden claimed that American forces are occupying ("defiling") sacred land in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula, and that American political control supports dictators, plunders the area's riches, and humiliates Muslims. (Remember that 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, where the United States has a strong presence because of oil interests and supports a harsh dictatorship.)

For al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the killing of Muslims is necessary when they put man's law above God's because part of the terrorist vision is the restoration of an Islamic caliphate, which is "an integral part of Islam's glory," a "divinely mandated leader whose forces lead a lightning conquest of much of the known world for the faith" (Benjamin and Simon 2002, 47). The idea goes back to medieval Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyya, who was concerned that the secularization of government meant the subordination of religion to the state: "To obey a leader who violated the percepts of Islam would be to reject the word of God and be guilty of apostasy oneself" (Benjamin and Simon 2002, 48). Ibn Taymiyya wanted to purify Islam, and a crucial aspect of this task was jihad, or holy war—and not the "inner" jihad, or individual struggle to become more devout. Jihad was against enemies, but not just the ones at the political borders: "By asserting that jihad against apostates within the realm of Islam is justified—by turning jihad inward and reforging it into a weapon for use against Muslims as well as infidels—he planted a seed of revolutionary violence in the heart of Islamic thought" (Benjamin and Simon 2002, 50).

In this belief, bin Laden was out of step with mainstream Arabs, and al-Qaeda did not have any role in the "Arab Spring," which generally used peaceful protest to

effect democratic reform rather than violence to bring about a religious dictatorship. These uprisings were also national events, which ran counter to bin Laden's strength—creating "cross-national military alliance[s] of national liberation organizations working together against what they see as a common imperial threat" (Pape 2005, 104). From this perspective, when the United States killed bin Laden, they killed an articulate and well-connected messenger, but the ideas, concerns, and discontents that he organized against have not vanished. Indeed, a review of "martyrdom" (suicide bombing) video wills and last statements included the following list of grievances: "the U.S. military wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the killing of Muslim civilians in drone and other types of U.S. military strikes, the occupation and siege of the Palestinian Territories, total U.S. political and military support for the Israeli state, American practices of torture, the humiliation of Muslims around the world, U.S. and European support for Arab and Muslim autocratic governments, war crimes committed by individual or small groups of U.S. military personnel" (Anzalone 2011).

INTERESTS SERVED BY THE MYTH

Believing that terrorists are crazy and hate freedom suggests that there is really nothing to be done to reduce the level of terrorism, so the response is to be "tough on terrorism." Similarly, if the cause of individual criminality lies in individual pathology—genes, psychosis, or poor morals—the solution is to be "tough on crime." With crime, getting tough meant more police and harsher sentences, while with terrorism it means enhanced security and surveillance, relentless military and drone (unmanned aircraft) operations, and "enhanced interrogation"/torture. With crime, the individual pathology explanation means that social conditions such as racism, economic inequality, and sexism are not really part of the problem and not the target of intervention. This leaves race, class, and gender privilege untouched. Similarly, explanations of terrorism that rely on mental illness or psychopathy hide social and political issues (Hudson 1999), such as disenfranchisement and the other root causes of terrorism discussed above.

Thus, the primary interest served by the myth is the general one of American hegemony in the world. American hegemony refers to American dominance and all the ways in which it is maintained, from the use of military force to unexamined beliefs about the superiority of U.S. values. Exposing the myth of crazy terrorists who hate us because we're free does not mean relinquishing America's place as a superpower or the responsibilities that go with it, but it does mean being more open to thinking about how the rest of the world sees us and how our presence influences others. It means asking about whether our commitment to spreading democratic freedom aligns with our support for Arab and Southeast Asian national leaders. It also means appreciating that the United States has a very high standard of living overall, especially in comparison to the populations of most Arab countries, that maintaining that high standard of living requires the consumption of significant amounts of oil from the Middle East, and that American oil interests are connected to feelings of occupation and anti-American sentiments that drive terrorism.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF BELIEF IN THE MYTH

Thinking first about policies not based on myths or vested interests helps us to better understand policy implications of belief in the myth. Pape, for example, argues that policy needs to "defeat the current pool of terrorists seeking to launch spectacular attacks against the United States and our allies, while simultaneously undermining the conditions that will otherwise produce the next, potentially larger generation of terrorists" (2005, 23). He explicitly notes that "the use of heavy offensive force to defeat today's terrorists is the most likely stimulus to the rise of more" (2005, 23).

The second pillar of rational policy is appreciating that part of bin Laden's strategy, which is now embedded in the logic of many terrorist groups, is the idea of low-cost attacks that provoke expensive (over)reactions. Terrorism adds a "security tax" through expenditures on security and productivity lost because of security measures—economic "death by a thousand cuts" or a "bleed until bankruptcy plan" (Gartenstein-Ross 2010). While some security spending is obviously necessary, some of it is also not cost-effective or is "security theater," which provides the illusion (props) of security without the substance. These concerns and the erosion of liberties leads security expert Bruce Scheier to suggest that policy needs to be based on the attitude that "when the occasional terrorist attack succeeds, as it inevitably will, we accept it, as we accept the murder rate and automobile-related death rate; and redouble our efforts to remain a free and open society" (2010). Note that while there is concern about violent crime and traffic safety, the cost-benefit trade-off and the willingness to give government power in the face of the problem strike more of a balance than do current policies that deal with terrorism.

A belief that terrorists are crazy and hate freedom leads to policies that support American hegemony, sometimes in ways that stimulate additional cohorts of terrorists. First, it paves the way for unprecedented presidential power over the lives of Americans and in the use of force internationally. The ability to detain people and declare them outside both U.S. criminal law and the protections of international law is a problematic way to defend democratic freedoms (Leighton 2004). When used against Muslims, this power adds to their feelings of persecution. Second, the myth leads to an overemphasis on security to deal with a relatively small number of terrorist organizations, rather than taking a more holistic approach to the root causes of terrorism. Security spending and procedures can become excessive, and at worst create a security industry—similar to a military-industrial or prison-industrial complex (Selman and Leighton 2010)—that lobbies for policies based primarily on corporate financial benefit rather than public safety.

Third, the myth that terrorists are mainly motivated by anti-Americanism ignores the violence they have done to other Muslims, and sets up Islam as the enemy, rather than seeing that tensions arise from how the United States positions itself in Arab struggles for national self-determination (Pape 2005). Indeed, in summarizing a global attitudes survey, the Pew Center (2003, 40) found "a pattern of support for democratic principles combined with the perception that their

nation is currently lacking in these areas is characteristic of many Muslim nations." The problem is not entirely about race or religion, and policies based on those perceptions can exacerbate the problem and miss the threat from domestic anti-government extremists.

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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why does the author say that readers who believe Islamic terrorists are "crazy freedom haters" should pay close attention to the limits of such beliefs?

2. What are the kernels of truth in the myths and the limits of those beliefs?

3. What does the author say are the facts about mental illness or mental abnormality of terrorists, the root causes of terrorism, the role of occupation, and the endorsement of democratic values?

DISCUSSION/CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What does American hegemony mean, and what are some examples (whether or not you see them directly related to terrorism)?

2. What does Pape argue should be the goal of policy, and what does he say is the effect of heavy offensive force? What reasons can you think of to agree and disagree with this position?
3. Scheier suggests that we need to accept casualties from terrorism as we accept the murder rate and automobile-related death rate. Do you agree, or are deaths from terrorism different—and how should they be balanced against our commitment to freedom?

WEBSITES

Juan Cole, Informed Comment blog. http://www.juancole.com/.
Bruce Schneier, Schneier on Security blog. http://www.schneier.com/.
Stop Violence: Resources for a Just Peace. http://stopviolence.com/.

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