



## **Experts: What's going on with Islamic terrorism and why it's so hard to stop**

Stephen Loiaconi

March 11, 2016

WASHINGTON— At the Republican presidential debate Thursday, front-runner Donald Trump defended comments he made in a recent CNN interview that "Islam hates us."

"There's something going on that maybe you don't know about, maybe a lot of other people don't know about, but there's tremendous hatred," Trump said, refusing to further clarify his statement.

In the interview with Anderson Cooper Wednesday, Trump acknowledged that the threat of terrorism came from radical Islam but he claimed that was hard to distinguish from mainstream Islam. Trump has made many comments critical of the religion during the campaign, including a controversial call to ban all Muslims from entering the country "until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on."

Nearly 15 years after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, experts have a fairly clear grasp on what is going on, but the challenges of preventing terrorism and combating radicalization remain.

In the early days of Washington's war on terrorism, politicians often sought a single specific motivation for radical Islamic terrorism, such as hatred against U.S. foreign policy or freedom.

Some experts say it is rarely that simple.

"It's never that easy," said Seamus Hughes, deputy director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. "Humans are complex and they decide to join terrorist groups for various reasons."

"Whenever there's a terrorist attack, people want to know first, who did it, and secondly why, and there's almost this sense that for whatever reason terrorist attacks can be explained with a single motive," said Max Abrahms, a political science professor at Northeastern University.

"We tend to underestimate the personal motives of participating in terrorism and we tend to overestimate the political motives," he explained.

There is undoubtedly a political element to it, though.

"Terrorists by their very definition express a political aim," Abrahms said. "If they weren't presumed to be motivated in part by a political aim, then they wouldn't be regarded as terrorists."

He believes it is a mistake to presume that a specific attacker is personally driven by the stated goals of their organization.

"If you were actually to go back in time and see why the terrorist joined up with the group, it probably had very little to do with ideology," he said.

In his research, Abrahms has found gaps between the motives of terror organizations' leaders and their rank-and-file members.

"The leadership tends to be more politically minded than the lower level members, and the lower level members are often motivated by more personal goals."

In the case of ISIS, he said the leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is an Islamic Studies scholar who is driven by his particular interpretation of the religion, but new recruits often have very little education on the faith. He noted cases where suspects had ordered copies of "Islam for Dummies."

Abrahms also pointed to recently-leaked documents that show recruits were able to volunteer for martyrdom operations, suggesting some have low self-esteem and want to die.

However, John Mueller, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said he has studied cases of attempted Islamic terrorism against U.S. targets since 9/11 and has found a consistent anger at U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Many suspects have said they were defending Islam from what they perceived as an onslaught on their way of life by the U.S. They often described their own actions as revenge against U.S. policy.

"The exception to that might be with the thrill over ISIS," Mueller added, although that effect is now fading.

Abrahms argued there are significant differences between the approaches of Baghdadi and Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden laid out a "consistent set of political grievances" related to U.S.

policies in the Middle East. He would adjust tactics when it appeared al Qaeda's actions were becoming counter-productive.

"In Baghdadi's case, I don't think that he is as strategic," Abrahms said. The stated goal of ISIS may be establishing a caliphate, but he believes the group is more opportunistic than that, spreading its influence to other countries where there are power vacuums and political turmoil. ISIS-linked attackers in places like Paris, San Bernardino, and Cambodia appear to have chosen convenient targets rather than symbolic ones.

Hughes also sees a pattern of opportunism in ISIS plots.

"It's a hodge-podge of motivations and it varies each day," he said, and religion often does play a role. "They clearly have an apocalyptic view of the world."

Mueller pointed to criticisms of U.S. policy and actions in propaganda from both ISIS and al Qaeda over the years.

Understanding terrorist motives can play a role in preventing attacks.

"It helps you in a very narrow way in terms of disengagement," Hughes said. Understanding what drives a particular recruit can help tailor a specific deradicalization effort to them.

One of the keys to counterterrorism operations, according to Abrahms, is to "divest terrorism of its utility." In order to convince terrorists that their tactics do not work, the government needs to understand what they want and how to keep them from getting it.

There is no consistent comprehensive profile of an ISIS supporter. Suspects in U.S. ISIS-related criminal cases have varied widely in age, gender, and motive. There are common psychological threads, like feelings of isolation and disaffection that make many people susceptible to radicalization, but clear patterns are hard to discern.

"The early people that were arrested were much more driven by the Assad atrocities and wanting to do something about it," Hughes said. Many later suspects were attracted to the idea of the caliphate.

Belief in Islam certainly is a consistent characteristic of ISIS followers, but the level of devotion and the role their faith plays in their radicalization differs for every recruit.

Following the Boston Marathon bombing, Georgetown University Professor Bruce Hoffman wrote in the Daily Beast that religion is only one aspect of the justification that drives homegrown radicals.

"The terrorist virtually always sees himself as a reluctant warrior: cast perpetually on the defensive and forced to take up arms to protect himself and his community," Hoffman said.

"They see themselves as driven by desperation--and lacking any viable alternative--to violence

against a repressive state, a predatory rival ethnic or nationalist group, or an unresponsive international order."

Hoffman observed that the individualized nature of terrorist motivations makes it particularly difficult to develop defenses against them.

While U.S. military involvement in the Middle East and foreign policy positions can galvanize supporters behind groups like al Qaeda and ISIS, some are skeptical that even a complete U.S. withdrawal from the region would actually eliminate the threat.

"Islamic State really took off in the absence of U.S. opposition to the group," Abrahms said. ISIS seized large parts of Iraq and Syria before the U.S. joined the counter-offensive.

"Clearly U.S. intervention is not a requirement for Islamic State to take root," he said. However, he believes the presence of U.S. troops in the country can help terror groups recruit.

According to Hughes, the fact that ISIS has a functioning state with a government and territory is one element attracting foreign fighters. Much ISIS propaganda focuses on social services and building a utopian society.

"It's drawing people to be for something, not necessarily against it," he said.

Mueller does believe reversing the policies that have outraged Islamic terrorist groups would reduce the risk, but he emphasized that the risk over the last 14 years is exceedingly small, much smaller than the public's fear of attacks would suggest.

"It's not particularly clear why you would want to do an awful lot to reduce that incredibly low amount of destruction," he said, although he added it would obviously be better if there was no threat of attacks at all.

His research has shown that the public's fear that they or someone in their family would be a victim of terrorism has remained relatively consistent since the end of 2001, even as years passed with very few attacks occurring.

Mueller is still trying to figure out exactly why the fear has been so persistent, but he suspects it is in part because news reports of potential terror plots being disrupted are so common.

"Unless you can get rid of this fear of terrorists, it seems to be there's going to be the same massive counterterrorism effort demanded by the people."

He compared it to the fear of communist infiltrators that persisted in the U.S. for decades during the Cold War without anything really happening to justify the concern. Unlike communism, he does not see how Islamic terrorism can be completely eliminated.

"You can't stop all terrorism any more than you can stop all murder," Mueller said.

Law enforcement and homeland security experts say it is impossible to prevent every terrorist attack. The U.S. has too many soft targets to secure every location at all times, and previous ISIS attacks have demonstrated that the group will strike anywhere it can find a target.

"I think we're going to have to deal with it for some time," Hughes said. Even if a group like ISIS or al Qaeda is defeated, other organizations with similar radical Islamic ideologies will rise up in their place.

"Terrorism is not against any particular enemy," Abrahms said. "It's a tactic. I think it's unforeseeable that terrorism will ever end."