What terrorists are really angry about

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(CNN)—We will not know for some time exactly why three men who were arrested on Wednesday in the United States wanted to join ISIS in Syria.

But what we do know is that it has become common, even routine, to argue that there exists a process by which potential terrorists become "radicalized." The concept, which has become something of a buzzword, suggests that the central motivation for terrorist violence is ideological.

However, Islamist terrorists in the West have generally been set off not so much by anything theoretical but rather by intense outrage at American and Israeli actions in the Middle East and by a burning desire to seek revenge, to get back, to defend, and/or to make a violent statement expressing their hostility to what they see as a war on Islam.

This can be seen in the story of one of the shooters in the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris. If he was "radicalized" by anything, it was by news about the way prisoners were being treated by the United States at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. He spent years trying to get to Iraq to fight the Americans there, finally finding a target closer to home.

The same observation arises when one looks over a collection of case studies of terrorists or would-be terrorists who have sought to do damage in the United States. The overwhelming driving force in these cases has been simmering, and more commonly boiling, outrage at American foreign policy.

It was not that the plotters in these cases were motivated solely by a coherent ideology or had a burning urge to spread Islam and Sharia law or to establish caliphates. Rather, it was the desire to protect their religion against what they perceived to be a concentrated war upon it in the Middle East by the United States government and military.

At the same time, these cases -- from the shoe-bomber to the underwear bomber -- show that there is remarkably little hostility to American culture or society. For example, the infamous Times Square bomber, a Pakistani-American who tried to blow up a car in New York, specifically mentioned U.S. drone strikes that killed civilians in Pakistan. The Boston Marathon bombers, similarly, explicitly cited the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as motivating factors.

Almost none of the terrorists or would be terrorists had any problem with American society itself.

This is particularly impressive because many of them (though certainly not all) were misfits, suffered from personal identity crises, were friendless, came from broken homes, were often desperate for money, had difficulty holding jobs, were on drugs, were petty criminals, experienced various forms of discrimination, and were, to use a word that pops up in quite a few of the case studies and fits even more of them, "losers."

As terrorism specialist and former CIA officer Marc Sageman points out, "radicalization" principally happens because of perceived injustice against one's group -- a perspective the Washington Post's David Ignatius finds "worth a careful look," but calls "contrarian."

The standard "radicalization" misdirection process can be seen in a Seattle case in 2011 in which two men were picked up for planning to shoot a machine gun and lob grenades at a local military processing center. According to news reports, the perpetrators said that they were motivated by a desire to retaliate for crimes by U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and that they wanted to kill military personnel to prevent them from going to Islamic lands to kill Muslims. The official Department of Justice press release on the case, however, merely says that the men were "driven by a violent, extreme ideology."

Similarly a former FBI counterterrorism analyst was asked recently on PBS NewsHour about why people are drawn to violent extremism. He stressed that there are "ideological issues" as well as "local grievances" including "access to education and job opportunities" and whether one feels that one is fully accepted in society.

Outrage at American actions in the Middle East scarcely entered the discussion.

Speakers at the recent White House summit on countering violent extremism typically found some of the "root causes" of terrorism to lie in ideology, the ministrations of propagandists, the influence of the Internet, poverty, inadequate job opportunities and alienation from society. Those may well be contributing factors, but perhaps the most prominent motivating force is anger at U.S. foreign policy.

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