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Terrorism: Why They Want to Kill Us

The horrid attacks of 9/11 led to the cry: *Why do they hate us?* Most Americans seemed to believe that it was because we are such nice people. But the Times Square bomber reminds us that terrorism is mostly a response to U.S. government policies.

After 9/11 President George W. Bush reassured Americans: we were attacked because we are beautiful people, spreading freedom around the world. But often the actions of our government are seen by others as less than beautiful. To seek an explanation for terrorism is not to excuse monstrous attacks on civilians. But understanding what motivates people to kill could help reduce terrorism in the future.

Terrorism is not new. It was used against Russian Tsars, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and British colonial officials. Algerians employed terrorism against the French and later Algerian governments. Basque and Irish separatists freely relied on terrorism. Until Iraq, the most promiscuous suicide bombers were Tamils in Sri Lanka. In none of these cases did the killing occur in response to freedom, whether in America or elsewhere.

Robert Pape of the University of Chicago studied the most recent cases: "The central fact is that overwhelmingly suicide-terrorist attacks are not driven by religion as much as they are by a clear strategic objective: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from the territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. From Lebanon to Sri Lanka to Chechnya to Kashmir to the West Bank, every major suicide-terrorist campaign--over 95 percent of all the incidents--has had as its central objective to compel a democratic state to withdraw."

Consider Chechnya. Both suicide bombers in the recent Moscow subway attacks apparently were "Black Widows," whose militant husbands had been killed by Russian security forces. Even some conservatives, who typically decry discussion of "root causes" of terrorism, pointed to Russian brutality in Chechnya.

Pape, along with Lindsey O'Rourke and Jenna McDermit, also of the University of Chicago, studied 63 Chechen suicide terrorists and found that few had religious motives. Rather: "As we have discovered in our research on Lebanon, the West Bank, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, suicide terrorist campaigns are almost always a last resort against foreign military occupation. Chechnya is a powerful demonstration of this phenomenon at work."

As for America, the Defense Science Board Task Force reported in 2004: "Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather, they hate our policies." What might those be? Unseating democratically elected leaders, supporting dictatorships, backing Israel's Apartheid-like treatment of the Palestinians, and promiscuously waging war in Muslim lands. America is constantly "over there," as Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.) put it.

Nearly three decades ago President Ronald Reagan inserted U.S. forces into a multi-sided civil war in Lebanon to aid the minority Christian government which controlled little more than the capital of Beirut. Once Washington joined the conflict, the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks became natural targets.

In 1996 United Nations Ambassador Madeleine Albright was asked to justify sanctions against Iraq which, the questioner charged, had killed a half million children. Amb. Albright did not contest the claim. Instead, she responded chillingly: "we think the price is worth it." Muslims did not view as beautiful the assertion that Washington had the unilateral right to kill hundreds of thousands of Muslim children for its own purposes.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, one of the architects of the Iraq war, said of America's presence in Saudi Arabia: "It's been a huge recruiting device for al-Qaeda. In fact if you look at bin Laden, one of his principle grievances was the presence of so-called crusader forces on the holy land, Mecca and Medina."

In Iraq both invasion and occupation have fomented terrorism. Daniel Benjamin, now the State Department's counter-terrorism coordinator, observed while at the Brookings Institution that "the invasion of Iraq gave the jihadists an unmistakable boost. Terrorism is about advancing a narrative and persuading a targeted audience to believe it."

London's Chatham House reported that Iraq "gave a boost to the al-Qaeda network's propaganda, recruitment and fundraising, caused a major split in the coalition, provided an ideal targeting and training area for al-Qaeda-linked terrorists." Britain's Intelligence and Security Committee studied the July 2005 London attacks and concluded: "Iraq continues to act as a motivation and focus for terrorist activity."

Many Islamists say the same thing. For instance, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's deputy leader, spoke of "aggression against Iraq." Lebanese Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah stated that "the occupation of Iraq has increased acts of terrorism against the U.S. and everyone going along with it, including the Iraqis themselves."

U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan appear to be having a similar effect. Before being relieved as Afghanistan commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal admitted: "We've shot an amazing number of people [at checkpoints] and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force."

Faisal Shahzad, the naturalized American citizen who recently pled guilty after attempting to set off a car bomb in Times Square, was a troubled fellow, but there is no evidence that he disliked the liberties of the society which he chose to join. Instead, he grew to hate the policies carried out by the U.S. government.

During his court hearing Shahzad said: "until the hour the U.S. pulls its forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, and stops the drone strikes in Somalia and Yemen and in Pakistan, and stops the occupation of Muslim lands, and stops killing the Muslims, and stops reporting the Muslims to its government, we will be attacking U.S."

When the judge objected that people walking in Times Square had not attacked Muslims, Shahzad responded: "the people select the government; we consider them the same." As for children, he said: "the drone hits in Afghanistan and Iraq, they don't see children, they don't see anybody. They kill women, children. They kill everybody." Thus his resort to terrorism: "I am part of the answer to the U.S. terrorizing the Muslim nations and the Muslim people, and on behalf of that, I'm avenging the attacks."

Unfortunately, Shahzad is not alone. He spent 40 days with Pakistani Taliban/jihadist forces, most notably the Tehrik-e-Taliban, from which he received money and explosives training. Which means the group has turned its attention from Pakistan, which has been conducting military operations against its strongholds, to the U.S. Wrote Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution: "This means the United States is facing a larger pool of terrorists in Pakistan committed to attacking al-Qaeda's target set than ever before."

No doubt, some terrorists hope to reestablish the caliphate or knock Madonna off of television. But most anti-American terrorists appear to be motivated by something much more mundane: responding to U.S. government depredations in their own nations and other Muslim lands.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration appears to be as clueless as its predecessor. After Shahzad's arrest U.S. officials raced to Islamabad to urge Pakistan to do more to stop terrorism. But Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said simply: "This is a blowback. This is a reaction. And you could expect that."

The administration seems likely to increase its use of drones. However, Shahzad cited drone strikes. So did former CIA general counsel Jeffrey Smith, who in 2002 warned that they could "create more martyrs."

The moral issues are daunting enough even if the intelligence is faultless, and it rarely is. Americans should consider how they would react if a more powerful nation was slaughtering their relatives and friends--and even entire families--in an attempt to kill a few targeted individuals alleged to be terrorists.

There's also the problem of blowback. David Kilcullen, who advised Gen. David Petraeus on terrorism, and Andrew McDonald Exum, of the Center for a New American Security, recently argued: "on balance, the costs outweigh these benefits." By their count, drones have killed 700 civilians and just 14 terrorist leaders, a 50-to-1 ratio. Writing in the *New Yorker* Jane Mayer contended that the campaign to get one particular terrorist killed between 207 and 321 other people along the way. Even if the ratios are not so unbalanced, as claimed by U.S. officials, Kilcullen and Exum warned that "every one of these dead noncombatants

represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a military movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased."

Pakistanis believe the drones kill far more civilians than terrorists. Polls show enormous popular hostility towards America. Moreover, the U.S. has begun targeting Pakistani Taliban leaders. One U.S. official told the *New York Times*: "The Pakistani Taliban gets treated like al-Qaeda." However, that encourages the Pakistan Taliban to treat the U.S. like al-Qaeda treats the U.S. One intelligence officer said: "Those [drone] attacks have made it personal for the Pakistani Taliban--so it's no wonder they are beginning to think about how they can strike back at targets here." Jeffrey Addicott, a former legal adviser to U.S. Special Forces, said: "Some of the CIA operators are concerned that, because of its blowback effect, it is doing more harm than good."

The same appears to be the case in Afghanistan, where civilians are dying in air strikes, at checkpoints, and from drone attacks. Afghan Najibullah Zazi, arrested last fall for planning a suicide bombing in the New York subway, explained: "I would sacrifice myself to bring attention to what the United States military was doing to civilians in Afghanistan by sacrificing my soul for the sake of saving other souls."

Certainly civilian casualties have spurred more mundane guerrilla opposition to U.S. forces. *New York Times* reporter David Rohde was held captive for seven months by the Taliban. After he escaped he wrote that he "saw how some of the consequences of Washington's antiterrorism policies had galvanized the Taliban." For instance, "They said large numbers of civilians had been killed in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Palestinian territories in aerial bombings." To his complaint that he was a civilian, they said the U.S. "had held and tortured Muslims in secret detention centers for years," so why "should they treat me differently?"

The point is not that there is never a legitimate case for military intervention or use of drones. However, the high costs of these tactics must be recognized and weighed. To reduce terrorism, Washington should do less, not more, abroad.

September 11 demonstrated that America is not invulnerable. Washington no longer can expect to invade, bomb, and intervene in other nations without consequence. Policymakers should consider all the costs, including terrorism, before they casually thrust the U.S. into foreign controversies and conflicts. As Glenn Greenwald put it, "if we continue to bring violence to that part of the world, then that part of the world--and those who sympathize with it--will continue to want to bring violence to the U.S." That's why many people in other nations not only hate us, but are trying to kill us.