

Demystifying Terrorism: ‘Crazy Islamic Terrorists Who Hate Us Because We’re Free?’

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The Myth

“September 11 changed everything” is an observation that is heard frequently along with discussions of a “post 9/11 world.” Yet before the terrorist attacks, criminology had only a “grudging acceptance of terrorism” (Rosenfeld 2002:1) and the situation has changed surprising little. Certainly, many criminology students will find employment and increased opportunities in security and related fields, but the discipline has made little movement to build on its understanding of violent crime and hate crimes to better understand the mass murders of terrorists. Indeed, serial killers are still a trendy topic, with much interest in psychological profiling and “mind hunting.” Getting inside the head of Bundy, Gacy, or Dahmer is more popular than understanding Osama bin Laden (who has killed far more people than those serial killers combined).

While there are some patterns to understanding serial killers, much of what people find fascinating is aspects of individual pathology. In contrast, 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.

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Anti-American terrorism is more difficult still to study. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the emphasis was on creating solidarity rather than understanding—and seeing the world through the eyes of—the enemy.”

Further, those who do try to understand anti-American terrorism and to see the world as the terrorists do run the risk of seeming unpatriotic and of appearing to blame the victims, even though those who do the same with serial killers never hear such accusations. Indeed, one university that simply wanted to require all incoming freshmen to read a book about Islam found itself sued in federal court and berated by a range of conservative groups and Christian evangelists. One news analyst compared the assignment to teaching “*Mein Kampf*” in 1941, and questioned the purpose of making freshmen study “our enemy’s religion”. However, one freshman, demonstrating a much better grasp of the issues, commented: “After the terrorist attacks, I was so angry that I really didn't care to learn anything about Muslims. But I know now that refusing to learn is what causes more anger and confusion” (Johnson 2002:A2).

The author of the book about Islam also noted the importance of understanding, because the United States is likely to have continuing conflicts with Islamic nations and militants. Ignorance is no longer an option. Indeed, without understanding and a willingness to explore uncomfortable issues like anti-Americanism, myths and distortions are likely to flourish. Given the complexity of terrorism and strong mixed feelings about the war on terrorism, there are many myths and problematic simplifications that this chapter could address. The focus, however, will be on several fundamental myths. The first goes to the basic character of terrorists—the belief that they are insane psychopaths bent on evil. The second and third are about the terrorists’ politics and worldview—the belief that they hate us because we’re free and that they are only

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motivated by anti-Americanism. Revealing the kernel of truth in these statements facilitate an understanding of terrorism and enables criminology to be more relevant to the issues facing America in the twenty-first Century global village.

The Kernel of Truth

Many discussions of the character of terrorists engage in labeling rather than explanation: terrorists have done evil, therefore they are evil (and vice versa). People do not understand—do not want to understand—so the terrorism is seen as senseless and irrational, and people thus assume the terrorists are crazy. Likewise, the mass violence of terrorism seems similar to mass murder, so people assume terrorists must be similar to psychopaths and serial killers. While these characterizations are circular and flawed, the important truth is that terrorists are fanatics or what Hoffer (1951) called “true believer.” 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” (21). True believers and fanatics see the world in very clear cut 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 stage is set for action that can include violence.

Terrorists working on their own are considered more likely to have personality disturbances than those working as a team. Occasionally two psychopaths will work together; and frequently one will be clearly dominant. So there is some basis for believing terrorist cells could be explained by personality disorders. But, as discussed below, psychopaths are too egocentric to work together in groups for a larger political or social cause. More generally, personality plays a role in shaping terrorists, especially in terms of how it interacts with events in life that will serve as catalysts for terrorism. The role of mental illness and diagnosable

personality disorders is ultimately a small contribution to explaining terrorism and a focus on these subjects diverts attention from social issues that are the basis for terrorism's political violence.

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, militants see the Crusades as a timeless battle between Islam and forces of western imperialism, which the United States currently seems to embody. But the fatwa's title also suggests that anti-Semitism, or at least anti-Zionism, is part of the motivation. Furthermore, explaining the terrorism of bin Laden's followers also involves understanding his reasons for a number of acts that have happened in Arab lands and taken the lives of many fellow Muslims.

To the extent that Islamic extremism is anti-American, the reasons include—and go beyond—American freedom in the abstract. 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". People in countries around the world endorse American democratic values, although they also believe that the social, political and economic freedoms in the United States lead to behaviors that are decadent and materialistic. 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.

The Truth or the Facts

When attempting to make sense of the character of terrorists, the proper context is research showing 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 found that Eichmann’s 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 them is that they all involve normal people acting together to combat what they see as a dangerous threat. The fight that threat is viewed by them as an important and eternal version of “The Good”.

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. The elaborate timing and planning that go into “successful” terrorism are inconsistent with mental disorders. Hudson quotes conclude 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 on to ever changing regional and global conflicts (Hamm and Leighton 2002).

Some of the arguments above do not apply to psychopaths, who are capable of elaborate planning to carry out serial murder. But the majority of serial killers work by themselves, and a majority of team killers only involved two members (Hickey 1997). Even in such teams,

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 carry out suicidal attacks—to further these ends. Further, 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.

In terms of the social and political issues involved with Islamic terrorism, Benjamin and Simon (2002) provide a helpful starting point. The authors were both directors of the National Security Council, and they write about the “root causes” of terrorism. They argue:

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. The root causes examined in this quote can help explain terrorist attacks perhaps directed at Western targets but which also kill large numbers of Arabs and fellow Muslims, such as the 2003 bombings in Saudi Arabia and Bali. Ultimately, the question “why do they hate us?” is “too self-centered and exclusionary a reflex. Those who hate in this way hate much more than us” (Hoagland 2003:B7).

As Benjamin and Simon (2002) note in the quote above, part of the motivation for terrorism is a desire to bring to life a new messianic era involving an Islamic superpower ruled by Islamic law. Muslims who put man’s law above God’s are as despised as America and Israel. The militants hope to restore 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).

This goal may be new information to many, but this part of bin Laden’s quest has roots that go back to medieval Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyya. His writings included issues that we now discuss in terms of the separation of church and state, which for Ibn Taymiyya centered on the secularization of government and the consequent subordination of religion to the state. He felt that rulers needed to enforce sharia, Islamic teachings that have been codified into law, and exhibit personal piety: “To obey a leader who violated the precepts 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—holy war—just

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).

This current of reasoning from Ibn Taymiyya is handed down through the Crusades, European conquest, and colonialism—that all of which found humiliating—to bin Laden. Al-Qaeda and its supporters view less-militant interpretations of Islam as coming from the paid lackeys of apostate leaders bought off by the United States. Indeed, such governments tend to be more Western, more secular, and thus not only place human judgment over the divine, but also lead Muslims away from the true faith. For bin Laden, the overthrow of such governments is an important step to securing rule by those such as the Taliban, who govern in accordance with Islamic law. The ultimate goal is to create an Islamic superpower and resurrect the glory days where Islam was a powerful force, united under a divinely appointed ruler. To this end, bin Laden is willing to engage in violence against a wide range of people who stand in the way of this vision, and has indicated that acquiring a nuclear weapon is a religious duty (Benjamin and Simon 2002:140, 160).

Interests Served by the Myth

Hudson (1999) notes that many terrorism experts are skeptical of explanations that rely on mental illness or psychopathy because these explanations hide social and political issues the terrorists take very seriously. This point is crucial for understanding September 11 because bin Laden is a “terrorist hero” similar to the Western outlaws and urban gangsters Kooistra (1989)

writes about. Indeed, after September 11, The Pew Center's global attitudes survey asked people around the world which leader they "had confidence in to do the right thing in world affairs." Osama bin Laden received substantially higher ratings than President Bush or British Prime Minister Blair in six countries whose combined population is almost 500 million people (Pew Center 2003). This survey is consistent with earlier information that "scores of Pakistanis have named their newborn sons Osama," highlighting that the terrorists may be on the fringe "but those who applaud are the disenfranchised Muslims everywhere" (Reeve 1999:203). Believing that the September 11 suicide terrorists were crazy or had questionable pathologies might be comforting but disguises an important issue about how widespread support for bin Laden is.

Kooistra's (1989:52) suggests that hero status occurs when people find "some symbolic meaning in his criminality"—or his political violence, in the case of bin Laden. With criminals, support for the symbolic meaning happens when substantial segments of the public feel "outside the law" because the law is no longer seen as an instrument of justice but as a tool of oppression wielded by favored interests" (1989:11). In terms of terrorism, the message sent by the political violence finds support when large segments of the population feel disenfranchised within the social, political and economic order of the world.

The analysis of disenfranchisement points back to the above excerpt of the root causes of terrorism by Benjamin and Simon (2003): Muslims feel oppressed because of America's military might, foreign policy, and the invasive spread of American culture and values. While discussions of these issues do occur, they do not follow from beliefs about crazy terrorists, so one of the interests served by the myth is a general one of American hegemony in the world. American hegemony refers to American dominance and all the ways it is maintained, from the use of military force to unexamined beliefs about the superiority of United States values. Exposing the

myth of crazy terrorists who hate us because we're free does not mean relinquishing power, but rather being more open to thinking about how the rest of the world sees us and how our presence influences others.

The rhetoric of crazy, freedom-hating terrorists also serves the interests of the president in his attempt to rally support for whatever actions he believes should be taken, even when those actions and strategies are problematic. The division of *us* (rational freedom-lovers) versus *them* (crazy freedom-haters), when combined with rhetoric emphasizing the stark choice of “with us” or “against us,” minimizes legitimate debate in favor of unquestioning support. While national unity and secrecy can be important at times, people should be free to raise questions or oppose plans they consider to be flawed, without accusations of being unpatriotic or giving comfort to terrorists. Partisan interest, not democracy, is more likely to be hurt by full information and robust debate.

Further, whether a president is using terrorism for partisan purposes is a question that should be asked regardless of which party holds the office. The best interests of politicians (especially around election time) may or may not be the same as the country's long-term best interest; patriotic titles on legislation may or may not be an accurate reflection of the bill's content.

Policy Implications of Belief in the Myth

A belief that terrorists are crazy or irrational may lead to an overemphasis on security to deal with the relatively small number of terrorist organizations, rather than taking a more holistic approach to the root causes of terrorism. The belief that terrorists are driven by anti-Americanism and hatred of freedom reinforces the idea that terrorism is an accumulation of the

irrational or “slick” beliefs of a few, rather than the militant wing of a substantive political agenda that may receive widespread support, including financial aid. 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 highlighting potential alliances with Arab leaders.

Further, the belief that terrorists are simply evil implies that the threat requires unprecedented presidential power, even going beyond the scope of powers prescribed by the Constitution during a time of declared war. The ability to detain people and declare them outside of both the U.S. criminal law and the protections of international law is a problematic way to defend democratic freedoms (Leighton 2004), and, when used against Muslims, adds to their feelings of persecution. Declaring that well-established international law does not apply, adds to perceptions that the United States thinks it is above the laws it frequently insists other countries obey. Ignoring international law at this juncture also undercuts policies favoring the development of international law to deal with a growing number of disputes caused by a shrinking and increasingly interconnected global village.

This chapter has argued for a more complex understanding of terrorism that includes an uncomfortable examination of the social issues raised by al-Qaeda’s political violence (Hamm and Leighton 2002). Indeed, criminology does not only focus on security to prevent crime, but attempts to examine the causes of crime and believes that certain social conditions are important factors. Dealing with school violence only through metal detectors and surveillance cameras is limited, unimaginative, and can benefit from serious inquiry into the mindset of students who show up at school ready to massacre their classmates. While many would like to believe simply that such students are crazy, the emerging picture suggests it has more to do with dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, and that these students reflect aspects of the society that shaped

them. While terrorism is not exactly like school violence, the analogy helps illustrate the problems with the current myths surrounding terrorism.

Unfortunately, following the suggestions in this chapter will not end terrorism and it is unrealistic to expect any policy to bring an end to terrorism—or crime. Crime prevention policies are not expected to end crime but instead are judged by the amount of victimization and suffering they can reduce in relation to the resources they require. Terrorism prevention policies are still in development, but should be judged by the same standard rather than discounted because they will end terrorism. Reducing the frequency, severity and support for terrorism are important goals, and ones that should not be left only to political scientists, psychologists and security personnel. Criminology has an important role to play in helping confront the problem of international terrorism and should take up the uncomfortable challenges of pursuing a deeper understanding

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