

Louise Richardson Sound Byte.mp3

Harvard Professor Discusses the Terrorist Mindset

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So I want to step back for a moment and argue that if you take a longer perspective, if you take a broader perspective, you'll find that many of the truths that we read about terrorism today are not truths at all. And I want to briefly challenge four of them:

The first is, I want to challenge the notion that terrorism is new. Terrorism is not new. It's been around at least as far back as the first century after Christ. But even the terrorism we've seen in recent years, terrorists with a mixture of religious and political motives is not new either. Again the Sicarii and the Zealots who operated against the Romans shortly after Christ had the same mixture of religious and political motives. And actually, if you look historically, prior to the French Revolution, all terrorist groups had this mixture of religious and political motives. It's really only with the secularization of society generally that you had a secularization of terrorist groups. Until the 1970s, when you have the re-emergence of terrorist groups with this mixture of religious and political motives that came about as a result largely of the Iranian Revolution, the humiliation felt by the Israeli victory in the '67 war and by a reformist interpretation of Islam as represented by people like Sa'id and so on. So terrorism, even religious terrorism is not new.

Secondly, I believe that terrorism is not the sole or even the primary preserve of Islam, an impression that would be very easy to get from reading much of the popular media. There have been Christian terrorists, like the IRA in Ireland or the ETA in Spain. There have been Jewish terrorists, like the ancient Sicarii or more recently the Stern gang. There have been Hindu terrorists like the ancient Thuggee or contemporary groups operating today. There have been atheist terrorists like the social revolutionary groups that bedeviled Europe in the 1970s, including the Red Army Fraction here, or the 19th century anarchists. And there have been secular terrorists like the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or the BKK in Turkey. As well as Islamic terrorists.

Thirdly I want to challenge the view that terrorists are irrational. Psychologists who've interviewed terrorists and former terrorists and imprisoned terrorists are virtually unanimous on this point. Insofar as we understand the term "normalcy", terrorists are as normal as the rest of us. I would even argue that suicide terrorists are not irrational, and I hope we'll have time to go into this in a moment. Certainly from an organization point of view suicide terrorism is deeply rational in terms of expending a minimum of your own resources for maximum effect. And certainly when you talk

to the godfathers of the terrorist groups, when they talk about suicide operations, they talk in these cost-benefit calculating terms, even though the volunteers themselves rarely do.

And fourthly, I want to challenge the notion that terrorists are amoral. This is not to suggest that I think that their behavior is morally acceptable, I don't, but the notion of them as depraved and immoral I think is mistaken. I have never met a terrorist who didn't believe passionately in the morality of his cause and the immorality of his adversary. All these things that Bin Laden and his followers go to such pains to issue are in fact an effort to justify their actions. You may remember the video we saw of Sadique Khan. Sadique Khan was the 30-year-old teacher who led the London underground bombers. And he issued a video tape or a video tape was issued posthumously, in which he sought to justify his action in classic, just war terms. And it isn't only in their public announcements that they attempt to justify their actions. They also justify them in private communications, too. There is a Wallstreet Journal reporter who is covering the war in Afghanistan, and his car was in a car accident and his computer was destroyed. So we went into the marketplace to buy a computer, and he ended up getting two computers, a laptop and a desktop, and it turned out that these computers had been abandoned in an apartment that had been occupied by members of al-Qaeda. And on the hard drive of one of these computers he found a document written by Ramsey bin al-Shead, a senior member of al-Qaeda, who has since been held in our custody, American custody, in which he sought to justify the September 11th attacks for the membership of al-Qaeda. So nothing that was ever intended to be publicized. So in this he wrote about the importance of keeping the conflict reciprocal. He argued that they were justified in killing four million of us, but not more than four million, and that they had to be careful not to displace more than ten million of us, because as long as the conflict was reciprocal, it was justified. Now, I fully appreciate that the fact that they feel justified in killing four million of us is hardly encouraging, and in fact this document was written prior to the Iraq war and shortly after the Afghan war began, so I don't doubt this number would be considerable higher today, but it does speak to the fact that they operate within self-imposed constraints.