It's the Occupation, Stupid

Extensive research into the causes of suicide terrorism proves Islam isn't to blame -- the root of the problem is foreign military occupations.

BY ROBERT A. PAPE | OCTOBER 18, 2010

Although no one wants to talk about it, 9/11 is still hurting America. That terrible day inflicted a wound of public fear that easily reopens with the smallest provocation, and it continues to bleed the United States of money, lives, and goodwill around the world. Indeed, America's response to its fear has, in turn, made Americans less safe and has inspired more threats and attacks.

In the decade since 9/11, the United States has conquered and occupied two large Muslim countries (Afghanistan and Iraq), compelled a huge Muslim army to root out a terrorist sanctuary (Pakistan), deployed thousands of Special Forces troops to numerous Muslim countries (Yemen,
Somalia, Sudan, etc.), imprisoned hundreds of Muslims without recourse, and waged a massive war of ideas involving Muslim clerics to denounce violence and new institutions to bring Western norms to Muslim countries. Yet Americans still seem strangely mystified as to why some Muslims might be angry about this situation.

In a narrow sense, America is safer today than on 9/11. There has not been another attack on the same scale. U.S. defenses regarding immigration controls, airport security, and the disruption of potentially devastating domestic plots have all improved.

But in a broader sense, America has become perilously unsafe. Each month, there are more suicide terrorists trying to kill Americans and their allies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Muslim countries than in all the years before 2001 combined. From 1980 to 2003, there were 343 suicide attacks around the world, and at most 10 percent were anti-American inspired. Since 2004, there have been more than 2,000, over 91 percent against U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries.

Yes, these attacks are overseas and mostly focused on military and diplomatic targets. So too, however, were the anti-American suicide attacks before 2001. It is important to remember that the 1995 and 1996 bombings of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen were the crucial dots that showed the threat was rising prior to 9/11. Today, such dots are occurring by the dozens every month. So why is nobody connecting them?

U.S. military policies have not stopped the rising wave of extremism in the Muslim world. The reason has not been lack of effort, or lack of bipartisan support for aggressive military policies, or lack of funding, or lack of genuine patriotism.

No. Something else is creating the mismatch between America's effort and the results.

For nearly a decade, Americans have been waging a long war against terrorism without much serious public debate about what is truly motivating terrorists to kill them. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, this was perfectly explicable -- the need to destroy al Qaeda's camps in Afghanistan was too urgent to await sober analyses of root causes.

But, the absence of public debate did not stop the great need to know or, perhaps better to say, to "understand" the events of that terrible day. In the years before 9/11, few Americans gave much thought to what drives terrorism -- a subject long relegated to the fringes of the media, government, and universities. And few were willing to wait for new studies, the collection of facts, and the dispassionate assessment of alternative causes. Terrorism produces fear and anger, and these emotions are not patient.

A simple narrative was readily available, and a powerful conventional wisdom began to exert its grip. Because the 9/11 hijackers were all Muslims, it was easy to presume that Islamic fundamentalism was the central motivating force driving the 19 hijackers to kill themselves in order to kill Americans. Within weeks after the 9/11 attacks, surveys of American attitudes show that this presumption was fast congealing into a hard reality in the public mind. Americans
immediately wondered, "Why do they hate us?" and almost as immediately came to the conclusion that it was because of "who we are, not what we do." As President George W. Bush said in his first address to Congress after the 9/11 attacks: "They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."

Thus was unleashed the "war on terror."

The narrative of Islamic fundamentalism did more than explain why America was attacked and encourage war against Iraq. It also pointed toward a simple, grand solution. If Islamic fundamentalism was driving the threat and if its roots grew from the culture of the Arab world, then America had a clear mission: To transform Arab societies -- with Western political institutions and social norms as the ultimate antidote to the virus of Islamic extremism.

This narrative had a powerful effect on support for the invasion of Iraq. Opinion polls show that for years before the invasion, more than 90 percent of the U.S. public believed that Saddam Hussein was harboring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). But this belief alone was not enough to push significant numbers to support war.

What really changed after 9/11 was the fear that anti-American Muslims desperately wanted to kill Americans and so any risk that such extremists would get weapons of mass destruction suddenly seemed too great. Although few Americans feared Islam before 9/11, by the spring of 2003, a near majority -- 49 percent -- strongly perceived that half or more of the world's 1.4 billion Muslims were deeply anti-American, and a similar fraction also believed that Islam itself promoted violence. No wonder there was little demand by congressional committees or the public at large for a detailed review of intelligence on Iraq's WMD prior to the invasion.

The goal of transforming Arab societies into true Western democracies had powerful effects on U.S. commitments to Afghanistan and Iraq. Constitutions had to be written; elections held; national armies built; entire economies restructured. Traditional barriers against women had to be torn down. Most important, all these changes also required domestic security, which meant maintaining approximately 150,000 U.S. and coalition ground troops in Iraq for many years and increasing the number of U.S. and Western troops in Afghanistan each year from 2003 on.

Put differently, adopting the goal of transforming Muslim countries is what created the long-term military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Yes, the United States would almost surely have sought to create a stable order after toppling the regimes in these countries in any case. However, in both, America's plans quickly went far beyond merely changing leaders or ruling parties; only by creating Western-style democracies in the Muslim world could Americans defeat terrorism once and for all.

There's just one problem: We now know that this narrative is not true.

New research provides strong evidence that suicide terrorism such as that of 9/11 is particularly sensitive to foreign military occupation, and not Islamic fundamentalism or any ideology
independent of this crucial circumstance. Although this pattern began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, a wealth of new data presents a powerful picture.

More than 95 percent of all suicide attacks are in response to foreign occupation, according to extensive research that we conducted at the University of Chicago's Project on Security and Terrorism, where we examined every one of the over 2,200 suicide attacks across the world from 1980 to the present day. As the United States has occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, which have a combined population of about 60 million, total suicide attacks worldwide have risen dramatically -- from about 300 from 1980 to 2003, to 1,800 from 2004 to 2009. Further, over 90 percent of suicide attacks worldwide are now anti-American. The vast majority of suicide terrorists hail from the local region threatened by foreign troops, which is why 90 percent of suicide attackers in Afghanistan are Afghans.

Israelis have their own narrative about terrorism, which holds that Arab fanatics seek to destroy the Jewish state because of what it is, not what it does. But since Israel withdrew its army from Lebanon in May 2000, there has not been a single Lebanese suicide attack. Similarly, since Israel withdrew from Gaza and large parts of the West Bank, Palestinian suicide attacks are down over 90 percent.

Some have disputed the causal link between foreign occupation and suicide terrorism, pointing out that some occupations by foreign powers have not resulted in suicide bombings -- for example, critics often cite post-World War II Japan and Germany. Our research provides sufficient evidence to address these criticisms by outlining the two factors that determine the likelihood of suicide terrorism being employed against an occupying force.

The first factor is social distance between the occupier and occupied. The wider the social distance, the more the occupied community may fear losing its way of life. Although other differences may matter, research shows that resistance to occupations is especially likely to escalate to suicide terrorism when there is a difference between the predominant religion of the occupier and the predominant religion of the occupied.

Religious difference matters not because some religions are predisposed to suicide attacks. Indeed, there are religious differences even in purely secular suicide attack campaigns, such as the LTTE (Hindu) against the Sinhalese (Buddhists).

Rather, religious difference matters because it enables terrorist leaders to claim that the occupier is motivated by a religious agenda that can scare both secular and religious members of a local community -- this is why Osama bin Laden never misses an opportunity to describe U.S. occupiers as "crusaders" motivated by a Christian agenda to convert Muslims, steal their resources, and change the local population's way of life.

The second factor is prior rebellion. Suicide terrorism is typically a strategy of last resort, often used by weak actors when other, non-suicidal methods of resistance to occupation fail. This is why we see suicide attack campaigns so often evolve from ordinary terrorist or guerrilla campaigns, as in the cases of Israel and Palestine, the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey, or the LTTE in Sri Lanka.
One of the most important findings from our research is that empowering local groups can reduce suicide terrorism. In Iraq, the surge’s success was not the result of increased U.S. military control of Anbar province, but the empowerment of Sunni tribes, commonly called the Anbar Awakening, which enabled Iraqis to provide for their own security. On the other hand, taking power away from local groups can escalate suicide terrorism. In Afghanistan, U.S. and Western forces began to exert more control over the country’s Pashtun regions starting in early 2006, and suicide attacks dramatically escalated from this point on.

The research suggests that U.S. interests would be better served through a policy of offshore balancing. Some scholars have taken issue with this approach, arguing that keeping boots on the ground in South Asia is essential for U.S. national security. Proponents of this strategy fail to realize how U.S. ground forces often inadvertently produce more anti-American terrorists than they kill. In 2000, before the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, there were 20 suicide attacks around the world, and only one (against the USS Cole) was directed against Americans. In the last 12 months, by comparison, 300 suicide attacks have occurred, and over 270 were anti-American. We simply must face the reality that, no matter how well-intentioned, the current war on terror is not serving U.S. interests.

The United States has been great in large part because it respects understanding and discussion of important ideas and concepts, and because it is free to change course. Intelligent decisions require putting all the facts before us and considering new approaches. The first step is recognizing that occupations in the Muslim world don't make Americans any safer -- in fact, they are at the heart of the problem.

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