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Times Square bomber: another of the dangerous disillusioned

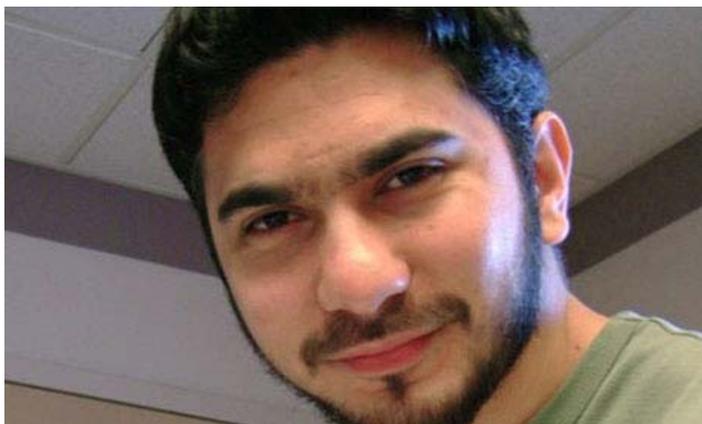
As with the 7/7 attacks, the real motives behind the attempted New York bombing were personal rather than ideological



Scott Atran

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Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani-American suspected of planting the failed Times Square bomb. Photograph: Orkut.com/Reuters

Sixty years ago, Eric Hoffer wrote in *The True Believer* that the higher one aims, and the harder one falls, the greater the likelihood one will join a violent mass movement. Faisal Shahzad, the would-be Times Square bomber, fits the mould in a modern way. Research shows that terrorists generally don't do it because they are vengeful or uncaring, poor or uneducated, schooled as children in radical religion or brainwashed, criminally minded or suicidal, or sex-starved for virgins in heaven.

The son of a former Pakistani air force general, Shahzad entered higher education in the US and became a naturalised citizen. Until then, life had been easy for the MBA who wore designer sunglasses. But by summer 2009 he had lost his home, left his job, and seemed estranged from his wife. He found solace in a militant religious rebirth, went to Pakistan to "find himself" again, and found jihad.

The main threat in the west today is not from any well-trained organisation, but from an al-Qaida-inspired viral social movement that abuses religion in the name of defending Muslims, and is particularly contagious among young adults in transition: immigrants, students, those in search of friends, mates or jobs. They go looking for al-Qaida or its associates and, when lucky, find someone to take them to a makeshift training facility where they are usually told to forget about fighting Americans in Afghanistan and "go home and do something". This was as true for the 7/7 bombers and Operation Crevice plotters as for those who conspired to blast the New York subway.

In Pakistan, America is now perceived as a greater evil than India, as popular anti-US fervour has risen in proportion to American aid and involvement, egged on in the media by an elite pained by the country's deepening client status. Highly militarised (Pakistan spent 240 times more on security than on health and education even before 9/11),

edging towards a failed state, the nation offers little to its youthful population. Add to this the fact that America has bombed al-Qaida's remnants into togetherness with Pakistan's historically most bellicose and indomitable tribal factions, and it's no wonder it takes less and less for jihadism to ignite any part of this inflammable mix.

And so it ignited Shahzad, who told his father he wanted to fight the Evil Empire in Afghanistan (his father was against it), then sought out more militant friends, one of whom apparently introduced him to Qari Hussain Mehsud, the Pakistani Taliban's top trainer. After a primer in bomb-making in North Waziristan, Shahzad was probably told to go back to America to avenge America's assault "against Islam" (as he put it) and upon his own ambitions (as indicated in his job applications).

Although many jump to conclude that Shahzad was "brainwashed" or "indoctrinated" by Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, it is he who sought out the popular internet preacher because he was already self-radicalised to the point of wanting reassurance and further guidance.

The familiar process of self-selection into extremism is today stimulated by a media-driven political awakening in which jihad is represented portrayed as the only way to resolve global injustice. When this perceived injustice resonates with frustrated personal aspirations, then a way out is given meaning through moral outrage supporting violent action. Al-Qaida and associates do not so much recruit as attract and enlist disaffected souls already embarked on a path to violent extremism.

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