

Locating the Roots of Terrorism in Strategic Approaches to Global Insecurity

Michael D. Kennedy
Vice Provost for International Affairs, International Institute
University of Michigan

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I'd like to offer a word on the title as a way to begin. It is very common to talk about the "roots" of terrorism, but this conference is unusual because these roots are not so typically addressed with rigorous social science. I am very glad, therefore, to be part of this. However, it's also worthwhile to think about why we use this metaphor in a rigorous social science conference.

It is appealing to use this imagery because we realize that, as with a dandelion, if one only chops off what is apparent to the eye, one will only have the dandelion grow back by the next time you cut that lawn next. This is indeed a powerful image, but it is not at all apparent that this metaphor is useful when we don't make common our sense about what roots mean, and why they are not apparent to the eye. And this variation in vision is not a disciplinary difference most of all, but a reflection of the political and strategic approaches we take in that definition of roots. If we are going to develop a scholarly approach that takes this diversity of roots' interpretations not as a political obstacle, but as an intellectual asset, we must be clear about how we view these roots and how they are located in various strategic approaches themselves.

Let me start, however, with some apology. I have no real place in a conference of experts about terrorism, for I am no such expert. I have not studied the traits that make people violent. I have not studied peoples assigned a violent role in this story. I have not studied policies that are designed to address violence. I have studied the relationship between intellectual and social change, and especially those cultural formations that structure the relationship between knowledge and power. My last book, for example, was about how the transition from plan to market set up a series of problematics that focused research, but simultaneously distracted scholars from critical problems that were at the heart of the social transformations accompanying communism's collapse and postcommunism's alternatives.¹

Perhaps for that very reason I do have a place here when you are trying to figure out how to study something so apparently concrete as the roots of terrorism. And that may be why Cambridge University invited me to their conference, involving faculty, private sector experts, and other professionals, with an occasional foreign consultant or NGO official, to think "outside the box" about root causes for human insecurity.

My summary of that conference, originally prepared for another publication,² follows this introductory comment.³ That summary should be useful, especially if we are to consider how we might cumulate research across very different traditions of academic inquiry, and across very different presumptions about the character of global affairs. And

that requires that we begin our discussion of root causes with such intellectual plurality in mind.

WHAT ARE ROOT CAUSES OF HUMAN INSECURITY?

I suggested that we think of root causes in several ways. Invoking Alex Haley's Roots, we considered causes embedded in the past, as long enduring, like genealogies. We also thought of root causes as embedded in systems, whether they are economic, social, cultural, kinship or other enduring patterns of human behavior. Finally, we should also think about root causes in terms that seminar participant Anton Obholzer helped us imagine, as those causes that might be difficult to recognize, acknowledge, or articulate. In this sense, root causes are beneath the surface, hard to see, and hard to describe.

Our organizers didn't tell us what kinds of human insecurity to address. Terrorism was the obvious concern of many, but we also had sessions devoted to other manifestations of insecurity, including how a networked polity of informal economic flows is substituting for conventional forms of development aid. For its resonance with root causes, our focus groups settled relatively easily into terrorism as the main problem. But this provisional consensus only enabled much greater disagreement on how to address its causes.

Of course participants generally recognized that it was important to understand better those value sets and cultural models that motivate terrorists to destroy themselves and others. At the next level, we discussed the values of the communities in which terrorists are embedded – what leads these communities to allow or support terrorists? But it was not clear how we should think of these communities. Are these communities formed around inequalities they perceive to be unjust? What makes inequalities appear particularly unjust? Do the media exaggerate the problem, or just make the inequalities more apparent? While evocative, this discussion was also manageable, especially compared to our discussion around religion.

One participant identified religion *per se* as the root cause of terrorism. Of course, he quickly corrected himself; religion itself is not a problem. Someone helped him out and offered that dogmatism or inflexibility found in religions, especially when they are traveling across the world imposing their ideas on others, is the real problem. But which religions are so problematic? Certainly he didn't consider the Dalai Lama part of the terrorist wave. Nor did he consider Christian missionaries who traveled the world over the last five centuries to be part of the problem. The problem may not be religion, but rather our difficulty in discussing religion, and its diverse expressions, in secular company.

Britain may, in some ways, be more able to carry out this conversation than we are. That, at least, is one impression we might take from Ellen Laipson's report that the authors of "Global Trends 2015" shied away from making predictions about rising religiosity and its political implications because they feared such judgments would be

controversial and would be misunderstood.⁴ The British were not so cautious. Their Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre strategic trend project noted religion as a key element, identifying not only fundamentalist reaction to Western (particularly U.S.) power and culture but also ever increasing tensions between Islam and the West as likely developments of the future.⁵

Of course this forthright approach is careful too, and it exposes many anxieties buried beneath the surface. One participant demonstrated just that disposition when he expressed frustration at my innocent questions about which religions were the problem. He finally said that “they won’t be satisfied until there is an Islamic Republic of Great Britain.” This was not politically correct, but it was helpful, for it reflected a broader inexperience in dealing with the challenge of Islam in Britain. But inequality and religion are not the only problems that deserve wider analysis and discussion, for a new, less confident, imperialism looms large, at least from some British viewpoints.

One observer found the USA’s hegemony more fragile than older imperialisms. British imperialism knew the world’s future, and Britain was to be at the core. They may have been wrong, but they were, at least, confident. He doesn’t find that confidence in the U.S. today. He thought this new world led by the U.S. is based on a profound doubt, worried that the secular, capitalist and liberal order organized around American values could itself be at risk. I hadn’t considered this uncertainty seriously before, but when one group of respondents argued that imposing democracy was making the world unstable, and another group argued that the *failure* to impose democracy was at the root of terrorism’s existence, I saw the problem. It may not be uncertainty about America, but it is certainly an uncertainty about America’s model for and relationship to the rest of the world that some believe to be a root cause for human insecurity, if not terrorism. And the American problem goes beyond its example.

The conference participants were certainly divided about how to interpret America’s power in the world. While some celebrated the closeness of American and British intelligence, and others expressed a wish that more Americans could be present at the conference, others openly doubted the commonality of U.S. and UK interest. Isn’t it the UK’s interest to constrain American unilateralism? What about the apparently contradictory interests of the U.S. and the U.K. on genetically modified foods, on the international criminal court, and even on the European Union’s place in the larger world order? Here, among the academic and policy intellectuals of America’s closest ally we find a great ambivalence, characterized by a “Yes, but...” attitude toward the alliance.

Ultimately, however, this uncertainty redounds to the British homeland itself, and not only with anxiety over immigrants’ place in the British way. Some openly worried that foreign policy had become too democratic. Indeed, some troubles, one person suggested, rested in the requirement that leaders be *absolutely* certain that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction; they couldn’t be just reasonably sure, and the public could not simply trust them. Some were prepared to conclude expecting infallibility and certainty of one’s political leaders is a recipe for political failure, and a symptom of democracy’s overextension.

The root causes of terrorism and human insecurity can therefore run very deep – not only from the motivations of terrorists and their communities’ support for their path, but into much broader and systematic features of the world in which we live. Are these root causes additionally found in religion’s awkward place in a secular globalization, or might they be rooted in the global information infrastructure’s broadcast of the wealth of some communities in the face of others’ poverty? Perhaps the problem rests in American imperialism itself, or in America’s lack of confidence, or in the uncertainty about whether democracy is good for everyone, or even good for making foreign policy. As the list indicates, we don’t have good answers for what the root causes really are, and we don’t have adequate methods for even addressing the question. Many would prefer, therefore, to focus only on the terrorists themselves, but given the anxieties and uncertainties facing the world and the consequences of violence in shaping global trajectories, it hardly seems wise to focus only on what is apparent and relatively simple.

GLOBAL ACADEMIC CULTURAL FORMATIONS STUDYING TERRORISM

The previous summary reflects one major conference, although there are others now in the planning stages in Britain and in this country modeled on this British example. Each conference may suggest a different route to understanding terrorism’s root causes, but I would propose that before we go off and consider our particular special interests within this larger problematic, that we answer a couple key questions first.

First, while terrorism is clearly a major problem, is it the right problem on which to focus if you are developing any nation’s foreign policy?

For domestic political reasons, America must have terrorism as its principal foreign policy focus, but it may not be the biggest problem. As more than one international relations expert has pointed out, nuclear proliferation and real war between India and Pakistan, or North Korea and other states, may be far more of a threat to American national security than terrorism is.

Nevertheless, given the significance of this problem in American politics, and in the politics of certain other nations, notably in Israel, India, Spain and Great Britain, it is significant regardless of its relative threat to national security. Nevertheless, just as the 9/11 bi-partisan commission interrogates why the Bush administration failed to attend sufficiently to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda before 9/11/01, we must also ask what we miss when terrorism becomes the principal lens through which foreign policy is conducted.

Second, as we focus on terrorism, fully aware of why it deserves the focus that it does, we must also consider how the framing of that problem shapes its engagement, especially when we search for its roots. Interestingly, we often hesitate to dig too deep, for our focus on the causes of terrorism typically stops at the motivations of terrorists.

This is not to say, of course, that we should not focus on motivations, even if they are not root causes. These are proximate causes, and of terrific interest to all security

agencies concerned for terrorism. The front lines of Britain's homeland security were clearly focused on this issue, as are most research agencies associated with security. This is clearly an important issue to address, but it should not be confused with being a "root cause" in any of the senses with which I began this paper.

However, if one is to understand motivations, one must also understand them in context, and that means in communities whether organized in place or in networks. Here, however, you face a challenging problem: through what lens does one interpret the community in which terrorists are embedded? Do you interpret them as the victims of terrorism view terrorists, as pathological and beyond explanation? Or do you interpret these communities in ways that lend dignity to the communities themselves? It is politically impossible to assign dignity to terrorists, but how does one recognize dignity in the communities that shelter them? As one scholar put it from the British conference, most military strategists cannot afford to interpret their enemy with the lenses that are most comfortable; they must use the cultural lens with which their opponent mobilizes their forces. Shouldn't the terrorists' communities be understood in these terms too, even if they are the communities that legitimize terrorists?

While we should interpret these communities in network terms, we also must consider how they articulate with the dominant perspectives shaping the explanation of these networks, around inequality and around religion. There is, of course, a small cottage industry saying that this is not about inequality – look at Osama's wealth is the most frequent refrain.⁶ There is another cottage industry that says this is not about religion, but about a religion hijacked. But neither of these convenient explanations gets to the question of why terrorists in the name of Islam capture the appreciation of so many people beyond the terrorists' immediate communities.

For this reason, I don't believe one can focus on the motivations of terrorists to understand root causes of terrorism – one must move instead ask what makes terrorists legitimate to so many otherwise very decent people, in varying degrees of affinity, from personal to imagined communities. That is a key question, and denying the fact of terrorism's legitimacy in these ever widening circles only reinforces the problem we face in recognizing terrorism's root causes.

I therefore appreciate very much what Madeleine Albright suggested in the conference's opening: that the assault on dignity, on the one hand, and the lack of hope for the future, on the other, moves people to the desperation that is associated with terrorism. I also think she is quite right, and here she resonates with Mark Juergensmeyer's work.⁷ Some religious worldviews can give many the confidence that they may sacrifice all for a cause that is greater than anything in this world. If this world offers no hope and dignity, religiously motivated terrorism becomes even more compelling for the hope and dignity it affords based on that viewpoint's construction of a world beyond.

It is, of course, absolutely wrong to assume that such terrorism is embedded in the doctrine of any religion, but it is important to see how religion can become implicated in

terrorism. But that also is a subject that is terribly difficult to write about, or to discuss as the British conference itself suggested. This is due, in large part, to the ignorance that typically goes into those who purport to explain how someone else's religion is implicated in the violence that offends. Perhaps, then, we should shift focus when we discuss religion.

Instead of focusing only on a question about whether any particular religion is itself implicated in terrorism's spread, might we ask how any particular religion might become implicated in the production of dignity and hope in this world? For instance, shouldn't we consider how we might explain the presence in Iraq of the coalition of the willing in the terms that assign dignity and morality in everyday life, and not only in the terms most comfortable for those who occupy?⁸ Might this, itself, be part of the problem, a root cause so to speak?

If dignity's assault and hopelessness are key to explaining the communities from which terrorists come and are given shelter, then the answer to terrorism's root causes cannot be found alone, or even primarily, in the communities of the terrorists themselves. They can be held partially responsible, as Tom Friedman does when he assaults Arab leaders for their poor leadership of their peoples. However, by seeing this only as a matter of will, and not as part of a dynamic system that moves leaders and others to the choices they make for short term gains if long term costs, we practice a very poor social science.

That poor social science may be, however, politically necessary. There is not much political space in a war on terrorism to wonder whether the war in Iraq or the violence used to confront violence itself creates more terrorists. But that is precisely the question that must be asked. And here, then, we must ask the question then about how the policies of states are formulated not necessarily to deal with terrorism as such, but to deal with the anxieties of people about being potentially victims of terrorism, or to carry out other agendas that are poorly, if at all, connected with the war on terrorism.

For this reason, I especially appreciate Scott Atran's assessment of current policy.⁹ I especially look forward to the debate about it, for if it is assaulted on ideological grounds, then I will only see another root cause for terrorism's spread at work. If, instead, it leads to innovative out of the box thinking, then there may be some good reason for hope, not only for the world, but for the productive connection between a free academy and the multilateral search for global security.¹⁰

¹ (2002) Cultural Formations of Postcommunism: Emancipation, Transition, Nation and War (University of Minnesota Press, "Contradictions" Series, Craig Calhoun, editor).

² (2003) "Institutional Capacities and Global Transformations" The Journal of the International Institute 10:4:8-9. <http://www.umich.edu/%7Eiinet/journal/vol11no1/kennedy.htm>

³ For publications ensuing from that Cambridge conference, see <http://www.intstudies.cam.ac.uk/research/security.html>, <http://www.infowar-monitor.net/> and <http://www.cambridge-security.net/index2.html>

⁴ For additional information, see “Global Trends 2015” <http://www.africa2000.com/indx/trends2015.html>

⁵ For additional information, see “Strategic Trends”, Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre, Ministry of Defence <http://www.mod.uk/jdcc/trends.htm>

⁶ For an important critique of that line of reasoning, however, and a reassertion of inequality’s importance, see Emilio Cardenas’s contributions to this conference: <http://rcgd.isr.umich.edu/roots/Cardenas%20presentation.pdf>

⁷ See for example his volume, Terror in the Mind of God. University of California Press, 2000.

⁸ For elaboration on this, see Michael D. Kennedy, (2003) “Culture, War, and Humility around a University of the World” The Journal of the International Institute 10:3: 12-13. <http://www.umich.edu/%7Eiinet/journal/vol10no3/kennedy.htm>

⁹ Scott Atran, “America’s Mission Impossible: Strategy on the Altar of Ideology” <http://rcgd.isr.umich.edu/roots/Atran%20Paper.pdf>

¹⁰ For the dangers of ideological mobilization in response to the complexity, see my forthcoming essay in the next issue of the Journal of the International Institute entitled “Ideological Diversity and Intellectual Responsibility in International and Area Studies”. <http://www.umich.edu/%7Eiinet/journal/current.html>