

OBAMA: Not Explaining The “Why of Terrorism”

By [Ray McGovern](#)

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President Obama signed a U.S.-Afghan strategic agreement on May 1, committing U.S. combat forces to withdraw by the end of 2014 while leaving behind U.S. counter-terrorism teams for another decade. But Obama and his aides still duck a full debate over the causes of terrorism, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

John Brennan, President Obama’s chief adviser on counterterrorism, has again put on public display two unfortunate facts: (1) that the White House has no clue as to how to counter terrorism; and (2) (in Brennan’s words) “the unfortunate fact that to save many innocent lives we are sometimes obliged to take lives.”

In a speech on April 30, Brennan did share one profound insight: “Countries typically don’t want foreign soldiers in their cities and towns.” His answer to that? “The precision of targeted [drone] strikes.” Does he really mean to suggest that local populations are more accepting of unmanned drones buzzing overhead and firing missiles on the push of a button by a “pilot” halfway around the world?

Beneath Brennan’s Orwellian rhetoric lies the reality that he remains unable (or unwilling) to deal with, the \$64 question former White House correspondent Helen Thomas asked him repeatedly on [Jan. 7, 2010](#), about why terrorists do the things they do.

Brennan: “Al-Qaeda is just determined to carry out attacks here against the homeland.”

Thomas: “But you haven’t explained why.”

Is it possible he still has no clue? To demonstrate how little progress Brennan has made in the way of understanding the challenge of “terrorism,” let’s look back at my commentary in early 2010 about Brennan’s vacuous non-answers to Helen Thomas. At the time, [I wrote](#):

Thank God for Helen Thomas, the only person to show any courage at the White House press briefing after President Barack Obama gave a flaccid account of the intelligence screw-up that almost downed an airliner on Christmas Day 2009.

After Obama briefly addressed L’Affaire Abdulmutallab and wrote “must do better” on the report cards of the national security schoolboys responsible for the near catastrophe, the President turned the stage over to counter-terrorism guru John Brennan and Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano.

It took 89-year old veteran correspondent Helen Thomas (now 91) to break through the vapid remarks about rechanneling “intelligence streams,” fixing “no-fly” lists, deploying “behavior detection officers,” and buying more body-

imaging scanners.

Thomas recognized the John & Janet filibuster for what it was, as her catatonic press colleagues took their customary dictation and asked their predictable questions. Instead, Thomas posed an adult query that spotlighted the futility of government plans to counter terrorism with more high-tech gizmos and more intrusions on the liberties and privacy of the traveling public.

She asked why Abdulmutallab did what he did. Thomas: "And what is the motivation? We never hear what you find out on why."

Brennan: "Al-Qaeda is an organization that is dedicated to murder and wanton slaughter of innocents. ... They attract individuals like Mr. Abdulmutallab and use them for these types of attacks. He was motivated by a sense of religious sort of drive. Unfortunately, al-Qaeda has perverted Islam, and has corrupted the concept of Islam, so that he's (sic) able to attract these individuals. But al-Qaeda has the agenda of destruction and death."

Thomas: "And you're saying it's because of religion?"

Brennan: "I'm saying it's because of an al-Qaeda organization that used the banner of religion in a very perverse and corrupt way."

Thomas: "Why?"

Brennan: "I think this is a — long issue, but al-Qaeda is just determined to carry out attacks here against the homeland."

Thomas: "But you haven't explained why."

Neither did President Obama, nor anyone else in the U.S. political/media hierarchy. All the American public gets is the boilerplate about how al-Qaeda evildoers are perverting a religion and exploiting impressionable young men.

There is almost no discussion about why so many people in the Muslim world object to U.S. policies so strongly that they are inclined to resist violently and even resort to suicide attacks.

Obama's Non-Answer

I had been hoping Obama would say something intelligent about what drove Abdulmutallab to do what he did, but the president uttered a few vacuous comments before sending in the clowns. This is what he said before he walked away from the podium:

It is clear that al-Qaeda increasingly seeks to recruit individuals without known terrorist affiliations ... to do their bidding. ... And that's why we must communicate clearly to Muslims around the world that al-Qaeda offers nothing except a bankrupt vision of misery and death ... while the United States stands with those who seek justice and progress. ... That's the vision that is far more powerful than the hatred of these violent extremists.

But why it is so hard for Muslims to "get" that message? Why can't they end their preoccupation with dodging U.S. missiles in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Gaza long enough to reflect on how we are only trying to save them from terrorists while simultaneously demonstrating our commitment to "justice and progress"?

Does a smart fellow like Obama expect us to believe that all we need to do is “communicate clearly to Muslims” that it is al-Qaeda, not the U.S. and its allies, that brings “misery and death”? Does any informed person not know that the unprovoked U.S.-led invasion of Iraq killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and displaced 4.5 million from their homes? How is that for “misery and death”?

Rather than a failure to communicate, U.S. officials are trying to rewrite recent history, which seems to be much easier to accomplish with the Washington press corps and large segments of the American population than with the Muslim world. But why isn’t there a frank discussion by America’s leaders and media about the real motivation of Muslim anger toward the United States? Why was Helen Thomas the only journalist to raise the touchy but central question of motive?

Peeking Behind the Screen

We witnessed a similar phenomenon when the 9/11 Commission Report tiptoed into a cautious discussion of possible motives behind the 9/11 attacks. To their credit, the drafters of that report apparently went as far as their masters would allow, in gingerly introducing a major elephant into the room: “America’s policy choices have consequences. Right or wrong, it is simply a fact that American policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and American actions in Iraq are dominant staples of popular commentary across the Arab and Muslim world.” (p. 376)

When asked later about the flabby way that last sentence ended, former Rep. Lee Hamilton, vice-chair of the 9/11 Commission, explained that there had been a donnybrook over whether that paragraph could be included at all.

The drafters also squeezed in the reason given by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed as to why he “masterminded” the attacks on 9/11: “By his own account, KSM’s animus toward the United States stemmed ... from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel.”

Would you believe that former Vice President Dick Cheney has also pointed to U.S. support for Israel as one of the “true sources of resentment”? This unique piece of honesty crept into his speech to the American Enterprise Institute on May 21, 2009.

Sure, he also trotted out the bromide that the terrorists hate “all the things that make us a force for good in the world.” But the Israel factor slipped into the speech, perhaps an inadvertent acknowledgement of the Israeli albatross adorning the neck of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Very few pundits and academicians are willing to allude to this reality, presumably out of fear for their future career prospects.

Former senior CIA officer Paul R. Pillar, now a professor at Georgetown University, is one of the few willing to refer, in his typically understated way, to “all the other things ... including policies and practices that affect the likelihood that people ... will be radicalized, and will try to act out the anger against us.” One has to fill in the blanks regarding what those “other things” are.

But no worries. Secretary Napolitano has a fix for this unmentionable conundrum. It’s called “counter-radicalization,” which she describes thus: “How do we identify someone before they become radicalized to the point where they’re ready to blow themselves up with others on a plane? And how do we communicate better American values and so forth ... around the

globe?”

Better communication. That’s the ticket.

Hypocrisy and Double Talk

But Napolitano doesn’t acknowledge the underlying problem, which is that many Muslims have watched Washington’s behavior closely for many years and view U.S. declarations about peace, justice, democracy, and human rights as infuriating examples of hypocrisy and double-talk. So, Washington’s sanitized discussion about motives for terrorism seems more intended for the U.S. domestic audience than the Muslim world.

After all, people in the Middle East already know how Palestinians have been mistreated for decades; how Washington has propped up Arab dictatorships; how Muslims have been locked away at Guantanamo without charges; how the U.S. military has killed civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere; how U.S. mercenaries have escaped punishment for slaughtering innocents.

The purpose of U.S. “public diplomacy” appears more designed to shield Americans from this unpleasant reality, offering instead feel-good palliatives about the beneficence of U.S. actions. Most American journalists and politicians go along with the charade out of fear that otherwise they would be accused of lacking patriotism or sympathizing with “the enemy.”

Commentators who are neither naïve nor afraid are simply shut out of the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM). Salon.com’s Glenn Greenwald, for example, [has complained loudly](#) about “how our blind, endless enabling of Israeli actions fuels terrorism directed at the U.S.,” and how it is taboo to point this out.

Greenwald recently called attention to a little-noticed Associated Press report on the possible motives of the 23-year-old Nigerian Abdulmutallab. The report quoted his Yemeni friends to the effect that he was “not overtly extremist.” But they noted that he was open about his sympathies toward the Palestinians and his anger over Israel’s actions in Gaza.

Former CIA specialist on al-Qaeda Michael Scheuer has been still more outspoken on what he sees as Israel’s tying down the American Gulliver in the Middle East. Speaking Monday on C-SPAN, he complained bitterly that any debate on the issue of American support for Israel and its effects is normally squelched. Scheuer added that the Israel Lobby had just succeeded in getting him removed from his job at the Jamestown Foundation think tank for saying that Obama was “doing what I call the Tel Aviv Two Step.”

More to the point, Scheuer asserted: “For anyone to say that our support for Israel doesn’t hurt us in the Muslim world ... is to just defy reality.”

Beyond loss of work, those who speak out can expect ugly accusations. The Israeli media network Arutz Sheva, which is considered the voice of the settler movement, weighed in strongly, citing Scheuer’s C-SPAN remarks and branding them “blatantly anti-Semitic.”

Media Squelching

As for media squelching, I continue to be amazed at how otherwise informed folks express

total surprise when I refer them to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's statement about his motivation for attacking the United States, as cited on page 147 of the 9/11 Commission Report: "By his own account, KSM's animus toward the United States stemmed not from his experience there as a student, but rather from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel."

And one can understand how even those following such things closely can get confused. Five years after the 9/11 Commission Report, on Aug. 30, 2009, readers of the neoconservative *Washington Post* were given a diametrically different view, based on what the *Post* called "an intelligence summary":

KSM's limited and negative experience in the United States — which included a brief jail stay because of unpaid bills — almost certainly helped propel him on his path to becoming a terrorist. ... He stated that his contact with Americans, while minimal, confirmed his view that the United States was a debauched and racist country.

Apparently, the *Post* found this revisionist version politically more convenient, in that it obscured Mohammed's other explanation implicating "U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel." It's much more comforting to view KSM as a disgruntled visitor who nursed his personal grievances into justification for mass murder.

An unusually candid view of the dangers accruing from the U.S. identification with Israel's policies appeared five years ago in an unclassified study published by the Pentagon-appointed U.S. Defense Science Board on Sept. 23, 2004. Contradicting President George W. Bush, the board stated:

Muslims do not "hate our freedom," but rather, they hate our policies. The overwhelming majority voice their objections to what they see as one-sided support in favor of Israel and against Palestinian rights, and the longstanding, even increasing support for what Muslims collectively see as tyrannies, most notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Pakistan, and the Gulf States.

Thus, when American public diplomacy talks about bringing democracy to Islamic societies, this is seen as no more than self-serving hypocrisy.

Abdulmutallab's Attack

Getting back to Abdulmutallab and his motive in trying to blow up the airliner, how was this individual without prior terrorist affiliations suddenly transformed into an international terrorist ready to die while killing innocents?

If, as John Brennan seems to suggest, al-Qaeda terrorists are hard-wired for terrorism at birth for the "wanton slaughter of innocents," how are they able to jump-start a privileged 23-year-old Nigerian, inculcate him with the acquired characteristics of a terrorist, and persuade him to do the bidding of al-Qaeda/Persian Gulf?

As indicated above, the young Nigerian seems to have had particular trouble with Israel's wanton slaughter of more than a thousand civilians in Gaza a year ago, a brutal campaign that was defended in Washington as justifiable self-defense.

Moreover, it appears that Abdulmutallab is not the only anti-American “terrorist” so motivated. When the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda announced that they were uniting into “al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula,” their combined rhetoric railed against the Israeli attack on Gaza.

And on Dec. 30, 2009, Humam Khalil Abu Mulal al-Balawi, a 32-year-old Jordanian physician from a family of Palestinian origin, killed seven American CIA operatives and one Jordanian intelligence officer near Khost, Afghanistan, when he detonated a suicide bomb. Though most U.S. media stories treated al-Balawi as a fanatical double-agent driven by irrational hatreds, other motivations could be gleaned by carefully reading articles about his personal history.

Al-Balawi’s mother told Agence France-Presse that her son had never been an “extremist.” Al-Balawi’s widow, Defne Bayrak, made a similar statement to *Newsweek*. In a *New York Times* article, al-Balawi’s brother was quoted as describing him as a “very good brother” and a “brilliant doctor.”

So what led al-Balawi to take his own life in order to kill U.S. and Jordanian intelligence operatives? Al-Balawi’s widow said her husband “started to change” after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. His brother said al-Balawi “changed” during last year’s three-week-long Israeli offensive in Gaza, which killed about 1,300 Palestinians.

When al-Balawi volunteered with a medical organization to treat injured Palestinians in Gaza, he was arrested by Jordanian authorities, his brother said. It was after that arrest that the Jordanian intelligence service apparently coerced or “recruited” al-Balawi to become a spy who would penetrate al-Qaeda’s hierarchy and provide actionable intelligence to the CIA.

“If you catch a cat and put it in a corner, she will jump on you,” the [brother said](#) in explaining why al-Balawi would turn to a suicide attack.

“My husband was anti-American; so am I,” his widow said, adding that her two little girls would grow up fatherless but that she had no regrets.

Answering Helen

Are we starting to get the picture of what the United States is up against in the Muslim world? Does Helen Thomas deserve an adult answer to her question about motive? Has President Obama been able to assimilate all this? Or is the U.S. political/media establishment incapable of confronting this reality and/or taking meaningful action to alleviate the underlying causes of the violence?

Is the reported reaction of a CIA official to al-Balawi’s attack the appropriate one: “Last week’s attack will be avenged. Some very bad people will eventually have a very bad day.” Revenge has not always turned out very well in the past.

Does anyone remember the brutal killing of four Blackwater contractors on March 31, 2004, when they took a wrong turn and ended up in the Iraqi city of Fallujah — and how U.S. forces virtually leveled that large city in retribution after George W. Bush won his second term the following November?

If you read only the Fawning Corporate Media, you would blissfully think that the killing of

the four Blackwater operatives was the work of fanatical animals who got — along with their neighbors — what they deserved. You wouldn't know that the killings represented the second turn in that specific cycle of violence.

On March 22, 2004, Israeli forces assassinated the then-spiritual leader of Hamas in Gaza, Sheikh Yassin — a withering old man, blind and confined to a wheelchair. That murder, plus sloppy navigation by the Blackwater men, set the stage for the next set of brutalities. The Blackwater operatives were killed by a group that described itself as the "Sheikh Yassin Revenge Brigade." Pamphlets and posters were all over the scene of the attack; one of the trucks that pulled around body parts of the mercenaries had a poster of Yassin in its window, as did store fronts all over Fallujah.

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