

Reflecting on terrorism

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"The horrific terrorist attack in Boston has captured the attention of the western world over the past week. Initially, the media and wider speculation concentrated on who carried out the attacks and why? Was it a lone wolf/lone actor? Did a Timothy McVeigh-type on the American far right, motivated by domestic issues, carry it out? Or had foreigners, perhaps connected to al-Qaeda or one of its affiliates, been responsible? The centre of that maelstrom of speculation moved squarely onto to the motivation question when on Friday the names of the alleged bombers entered the public sphere. Did Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev engage in terrorism because they were inspired by or affiliated with al-Qaeda? Were they operating on behalf of a known or previously unknown Chechen terrorist group? Or were they "homegrown," radicalized in the United States perhaps out of a sense of exclusion, and prepared to wreak mayhem on their fellow citizens at the world's most famous marathon?

The discussion so far has had an unfortunate either/or dynamic. Either it was something to do with what occurred in the Caucasus or the answer was to be found at home. What similar cases in the U.S. and the U.K. suggest, including [a recent example in Birmingham \(http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/feb/21/birmingham-terrorists-al-qaeda-suicide-bombers\)](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/feb/21/birmingham-terrorists-al-qaeda-suicide-bombers), is that motivation is much more complex and not reducible to a sound bite. There may well be overlapping motivations that involve both the global and local, or "glocal," which in combination led to the dynamics that fuelled the violence. I once used the term "homegrown" during an interview with a British counter-terrorism official for a project related to the 7 July 2005 bombers. He challenged the homegrown premise, pointing out that an individual radicalized to the point of engaging in violence in the UK may be doing so for reasons that have nothing to do with the environment that they live in. Many people have long experienced multiple lives (local, national, and international) and the combination of mass immigration and the rise of Internet has only fostered such complex identities. Trying to reduce the Boston case down to a single explanation ultimately obscures more than it reveals.

Now the debate is moving on to who in authority is to blame with attention being increasingly directed at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), including in the British media over the weekend. After all, hadn't the FBI been warned about the older brother by the Russian government? At such an early stage and with all of the evidence not available, such a rampant rush to judgement by the media, politicians, or self-appointed Twitter mobs is pointless. But even in the longer run there may be no easily accessible answer as to whether the attack could have been prevented. Understanding the process of radicalization, including why some individuals with radicalized views remain peaceful while others turn to violence, is, despite the claims of some, far from an exact science. Britain's Security Service, MI5, has admitted that **there is no such thing as a typical terrorist or a single explanation as to how someone ends up involved in violence** (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism1>). Add to this the reality that in democratic societies police forces and security agencies simply don't have the resources to continually monitor all those with extreme views. And in the United States free speech protection under the First Amendment allows the types of views that would be prosecuted in the UK under counter-terrorism laws.

Ultimately, there will be discussion about the significance of the attack at the Boston Marathon in relation to terrorism trends. It does fit a developing norm over the last ten years whereby the threat of terrorism to western countries comes primarily not from a professional plot on the scale of 9-11 but from a small number of individuals, fortunately often with amateurish skills, looking to attack their fellow citizens. It is "low intensity" terrorism of a doable variety. Although still deadly, it lacks the capacity to kill on the scale of the 9-11 attacks. On the other hand, the involvement of a small number of people, or even just one, can make it more difficult to discover and penetrate than a larger plot containing many actors.

Finally, Boston shows that the impact of terrorism is felt not just through the loss of life or injuries, after all more people were killed and injured in an industrial accident in Texas the same week, but in the psychological impact. That is the power of terrorism and it carries the seeds of a societal overreaction (already evident in calls by some US politicians for **"increased surveillance" of "Muslims"** (http://www.salon.com/2013/04/20/peter_king_calls_for_increased_surveillance_of_muslims_after_boston/) or for **a curtailment of the surviving suspect's legal rights** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/22/us/gop-lawmakers-push-to-hold-boston-suspect-as-enemy-combatant.html?pagewanted=all&r=2&>)) which can make the impact of an attack that much worse.

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