

# Why Do the Terrorists Hate Us?

## ***A veteran foreign service officer ventures some answers***

by Lindsey Grant

[Editor's Note: Lindsey Grant was asked by a cousin how he would explain the terrible acts of September 11. We appreciate the opportunity to publish the exchange.]

*Lindsey: I wanted to hear from you...your thoughts on this tragedy in our world. I am struggling for comprehension on why we are so hated by many factions in the Middle East (and beyond). I know it is not as Bush says "evil against good." Such duplicity totally side steps our role in this and when I say "our," I mostly mean the federal government though I am more than willing to look at myself. And I am.*

*I am not feeling "patriotic" though I love my country, my community, my family, friends, and life. I am feeling more the reality of the Global Family...We have to find a way to live peaceably together. As Gandhi says, an eye for an eye and the whole world is blind.*

*Technology is too powerful and we are too interconnected to keep bombing the hell out of each other. There must be other strategies that would work if we could come to grips with the pain so much of the world feels and use the money in a different way instead of inflicting more pain. I honestly don't know if I would kill the small group of men who master-minded this*

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*Lindsey Grant is a writer on population and the environment and a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Environment and Population Affairs. His most recent book is Too Many People which is available from The Social Contract Press at 1.800.352.4843 or [www.thesocialcontract.com](http://www.thesocialcontract.com).*

*if they were rounded up. Suffering for the rest of their lives on this earth could be more of a punishing hell, especially since they glorify a sacrificial death so much.*

Susan:

Let me begin at the most immediate level and work outward. I think the intensity of the American reaction arose in part because the attack was so huge and in part because in this country few people (except those who have to live in the slums) have been used to living with the proximity of violent death. The senseless attacks on schoolyards, the Oklahoma City bombing, were profoundly disturbing. They seemed to signal some deep dysfunction in our own society. This attack was about our role in the world, a shocking reminder that, although our leaders talk regularly of American leadership, there are people out there who really hate us. I guess this is a real surprise. When Americans travel, they usually come back with memories of friendly strangers. (Of course, the ones they see are frequently profiting from their presence.)

Having spent some years working in embassies abroad, having experienced some violence and having lost several friends and fellow Foreign Service officers to assassination, I have probably been more conscious of the constant proximity of violence than if I had spent those years in the United States. (I know my wife won't forget her introduction to Cyprus. We had just hosted our first formal dinner. It went well, and we settled in for a nice sleep, when somebody set off a bomb underneath a Mercedes a block away. That action wasn't aimed at us, but later of course others were.) Much of the world's population lives with that constant awareness. Welcome to their world. We in the U.S. have not experienced much of that sort of direct political violence.

Having said that, I was glad to see the outpouring of patriotism that the attacks stirred up. I

don't mean jingoism, but we have to be able to act as a nation rather than as a collection of competing interest groups if we are to deal with present realities and those to come.

You stated the ideal of worldwide brotherly love. That is an ideal. It is not a good description of the way people (and many other animals) behave when they perceive a threat to their interests. We are a contentious species. Even your message ended on a note that can hardly be called one of forgiveness and love. Remember that those terrorists deliberately killed themselves in the hope of killing others. That kind of hatred requires an intense loyalty to a partisan cause. The dream of course is that somehow, eventually, humankind can develop an equitable system that makes such partisanship obsolete. But that is a long time away — and I think it is getting farther away.

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The principal American reaction has been one of anger at perceived injustice. The minority reaction has been *mea culpa*, a criticism of ourselves for having generated such anger. I think we are entitled to be angry, but we should also recognize how our adversaries perceive us. The United States will almost certainly be the target of the disaffected (who frequently are Muslim fundamentalists), because of our role in the world and because, as a nation with an investment in stability, we tend to support the status quo. There are elements in our past policies that lead them to identify us as a target. I am no Middle East expert, but I can see several such policies:

1. The major and continuing U.S. support of Israel, without which its treatment of the Palestinians and even perhaps its existence would be impossible.
2. The U.S. intervention in Iran against Mossadeq and in behalf of the Shah. Mossadeq seemed to threaten us, because he leaned toward the USSR and posed a threat to our access to oil. In the Cold War we saw

these as justification for our behavior. He was, however, the people's choice. For others who did not share our strategic concerns, our intervention was a betrayal of the people and of our own democratic principles.

3. Our hostility to Nasser, a major popular figure in the Arab world, because of Cold War considerations.
4. The international ban on Iraqi oil exports which has caused much suffering among the Iraqi people. We were recognized as leaders of that ban (and our recent efforts to find a humanitarian way to modify it are probably not generally recognized). From our standpoint, we were justified in taking tough action against a leader who tried to develop atomic, chemical, and germ weapons and who invaded a neighbor and tried to take over more of the world's oil reserves. Our opponents are less concerned than we are about such things as free access to oil.
5. Our cynicism in supporting the most illiberal elements in Afghanistan — who later became the Taliban — against the USSR-supported government. (This, obviously, doesn't worry bin Laden, but it must worry the people we want on our side.)

If I had been present at the Creation (in that lovely Spanish phrase), I would have urged different policies in some of these respects, but not in all of them. Until we get the good sense to diversify away from petroleum, we are going to have a major stake in assuring access to it. That is real-politik, but it is real. Moreover, remember that not all Arabs are mad at us. There are plenty of them who welcome our role, including those who hope for peace and quiet and an opportunity to live their lives. After all, the Saudis paid us \$30 billion in support of Desert Storm. Moreover, our opponents may offer a less humane alternative than the present situation in many Arab and Middle Eastern countries.

We do not necessarily back away from our policies because some terrorists have proven how much they hate us. That area of the world has been known for decades for its potential instability. It takes finesse to recognize which of our interests are real, and which ones are imagined — to support the more genuinely democratic forces such as President Khatami in Iran and not to run either with tottering despots or religious fanatics. What I am suggesting here is that things are not usually as simple as they seem.

As to what we do now: As you can imagine, I am

no fan of the President, but I think that he has staked out the right course. (In that, I think Secretary Powell's hand is clearly discernible, and I'm glad that he, not Wolfowitz, is calling the tune.) To start indiscriminate bombing would be to promote more fanaticism and strengthen just the forces that oppose us. We need to protect ourselves against further attack. I think more attacks are likely because the organization is still there and because others will tend to imitate what seem to be successful tactics. (Incidentally, I suspect that the next attacks will not be against aircraft because of tighter security and heightened awareness but against other mass targets — Japanese terrorists attacked the Tokyo subway — or vital communications whose removal would paralyze the economy.)

We will need a lot better intelligence before we can move against these terrorists and others. We need to reassure our friends and allies that we will not be precipitate, so as to get their intelligence assistance and their political support. What we do then depends on what we have learned. In this business, it may not be possible to apply the rules of procedure we demand at home. If we can identify and locate self-professed terrorists, there are different ways of getting them. It may take years. Be patient. Americans tend to want action *now*. We mustn't rush the government's hand. The Air Force bombed Qaddafi's palace in Libya when we were pretty certain he was in it. We just missed him, but his behavior softened astonishingly after that attack.

### Where Do Terrorists Come From?

So much for an outsider's impression of the proximate causes of the September 11 attacks and what we should be doing about them. Let me go now to the driving forces that generate terrorists. This is an area that seems to be universally ignored in the present debate.

When they are not threatened, most people tend to be friendly. Tensions grow and hostilities mount when they are competing for scarce goods and resources. The Middle East is mostly desert, with few natural resources except petroleum and gas. By and large, the populations in 1950 were living at subsistence level, within those constraints. The oil boom and the population boom changed all that. Since then, Saudi Arabia has gone from three to 22 million people, the United Arab Emirates from 70,000 to 2.6 million (most of them foreigners). Jordan,

without oil resources, has five million inhabitants now; it had fewer than 500,000 then. Most of the countries in the region have trebled, even Afghanistan, which is in shambles. Israel, at the middle of the powder keg, has gone from 1.3 to six million.

The Jews are sequestering water supplies for their own use at the expense of the Palestinians, but the Palestinian West Bank is the source of the aquifers on which Israel depends. The million-plus Arabs squeezed into the Gaza Strip are doubling every 18 years. With aquifers turning saline, with few jobs and almost no resources, young Arabs there are probably at a stage of anger we can hardly imagine. The supply of water has not increased, so per capita supplies are down accordingly. The oil-rich can desalinate seawater for domestic and commercial use, at a very high price — but not for irrigation, which is still too expensive. Others do not have that luxury.

As competition for water intensifies, so do the international tensions. Water is a major issue in

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Israel's relations with Syria and Jordan. Elsewhere, the Turks have been putting dams on the Tigris and the Euphrates, threatening Iraq's irrigation systems. It is a one-product region, and petroleum profits are very unevenly distributed between and within countries. The Saudis (and Gulf states) in effect made a bargain with their people, providing everything for them in return for their acquiescence in the Saudi family's taking the oil profits. That unspoken deal is coming unraveled as the growth of population and the greed of the family make it harder to keep their side of the bargain. It is hard enough to be poor. It is intolerable to be poor and see immense wealth around and above you. And it is most intolerable of all if you do not have a job, or anything to do but listen to the bin Ladens of the world.

The Arab world is the slowest of all regions, except for Africa, in coming to see the need for family planning. That means that the poverty, the inequities, and the shortage of water are going to

become even more galling. Most nations in the Third World would welcome more help from us in bringing human fertility under control, but generally not in the Middle East. They are locked into their antagonisms, and family planning is a victim of competitive breeding.

It is, in short, a scene pregnant with possibilities for extremist demagogues. T. E. Lawrence long ago remarked on the Arabs' propensity for following a man with a message. Let us hope they do not follow the wrong one. I assume that even an anti-Western (anti-American) fanatic would want to sell oil to us, because his followers would need food and necessities.

The more immediate danger for the Western world and Japan is that turmoil would interrupt the oil supplies on which we depend. During Desert Storm the Iraqi Army managed to torch the oil wells in its path even when it was in full retreat. And our dependence increases year by year. Japan, with almost no indigenous energy sources, is the most immediately vulnerable, but all of us would face a time of turmoil.

Terrorism is the weapon of the weak. The example having been provided, we must assume that there are enough deeply embittered people in the Middle East to seize upon it, even though in the long term it is unlikely to do them any good. From this description, you would hardly take me for an optimist. I am one, for the long term, largely as a matter of faith. In the immediate future, however, it seems to me unlikely that we will escape unscathed from the forces that have been set in motion, partly by population growth, in the past 50 years.

And not just in the Middle East, though that is a particularly vulnerable area. I suspect that we in the United States will, at best, have to learn to live within a much less easy-going system than we have had, and that constraints on our individual freedom will become more commonplace as we seek to counter terrorism. There may be one useful by-product from that sacrifice: If we have to learn to identify terrorists, we will need to identify other people, too, and that would provide a needed tool in our efforts to enforce the laws and bring illegal immigration (and population growth) under control.

You probably hoped for a more upbeat

answer. I am sorry. Let me try to end with one positive thought. We should be learning that interdependence can be a danger when we rely on unstable regions for basic needs. We have the option of anticipating the inevitable phase-down of the petroleum era and shifting systematically to other sources. The transition will involve fundamental readjustments. Railroads, for instance, can run on electricity, but airplanes cannot. The shift of energy sources will involve dangers, insofar as we go nuclear. It will require heavy clean-up costs, if we rely on coal. It does offer a chance to move toward more benign technologies such as wind and photovoltaics. Wind energy is competitive for peaking power, right now, if we consider the environmental costs of fossil fuels. Europe is beginning to make the move. So should we.

And, of course, we wouldn't need so much energy if we weren't so damn big.

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