

The Times Square Bomber: Home-Grown Hatred?

The New York Review of Books – Blog, 14/05/2010

By Ahmed Rashid

The Pakistani media is in a state of apoplexy about the would-be Times Square bomber, the Pakistani-born US citizen Faisal Shahzad. Predictably a great many commentators in the press and on the non-stop talk shows that run on over 25 TV news channels have discussed whether it was a CIA plot to embarrass Pakistan or provide an excuse for American troops to invade us: Was Shahzad an Indian or Israeli agent? And in any case, why should Washington hold Pakistan responsible, since he was an American citizen?

Not surprisingly, the Zardari government, the army, and Pakistani politicians have also muddied the waters. Although the government has said it will fully cooperate with US investigators seeking to find out which extremist groups trained Shahzad and where, Islamabad continues to fudge the paramount issue—the need for Pakistan to launch a comprehensive campaign against all extremist groups rather than the hit-and-miss anti-terrorism measures it is presently pursuing. That selective campaign leaves untouched the Afghan Taliban based in Pakistan—including Mullah Omar and other top leaders—who are not killing Pakistanis but are organizing attacks against US troops in Afghanistan; it also has ignored the Punjabi Taliban groups who have been attacking Indian nationals and government buildings in Kashmir, Kabul, and elsewhere, as well as killing numerous Pakistanis in suicide bombings in Lahore and other cities.

Both the Zardari government and the press have also made much of the conflicting statements by US officials, with Hilary Clinton threatening Pakistan with dire consequences if it does not deal with terror attacks, while General David Petraeus, the head of US Central Command, and other military officials suggesting that Shahzad may have been a lone wolf.

But what about the US press?

One would have thought that with the growing number of American Muslims who have been radicalized and planned or even launched an act of terrorism—the Fort Hood shooting spree of Army doctor Nadal Hasan last November is another example—there would be some effort to determine why Islamic radicalism is growing in the United States. But so far there has been very little. I have not yet read a single piece in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* that explores the broader milieu in which Shahzad became radicalized. Was he disturbed by particular aspects of American culture or foreign policy, that, combined with extremist ideas to which he was exposed, played havoc with his mind?

He may have trained in Pakistan and been inspired by this or that Pakistani radical preacher or leader. He is said by a “US government source” cited in *The Los Angeles Times* to have been “upset by repeated CIA drone attacks on militants in Pakistan.” Yet whatever ultimately put him on the path of wanting to blow up Times Square must have been related to what happened to him in the US where he spent most of his adult life. There have been lengthy journalistic pieces describing the basic facts of his life as a financial analyst, or as a good, quiet neighbor; there have been much-publicized raids on the homes of people who may have been connected with him in some way. But until now, the press has shown little interest in tackling the real causes for his radicalization in the US. Did he attend a mosque regularly, did he belong to an extremist or even just an ordinary Muslim network, who were his friends, what Web sites did he go to, what books were in his library, and what in particular made him so disillusioned with the good life in America?

Also little discussed has been his family background. He grew up within the military ruling elite in Pakistan (his father was an air vice marshal in the Pakistan Air Force), and enjoyed privileges that should have made him less vulnerable to disillusionment with America or the seductive charms of extremist propaganda: he was one of thousands of children of senior military officers who, courtesy of the Pentagon, have enjoyed scholarships in the US since the 1950s. The important question Americans should be asking is why members of Muslim communities in the United States, and white converts like “Jihad Jane,” are finding a cause in global jihadism ten years after September 11. Pakistanis do not understand what is going on now in America—but it seems

Americans understand even less.

Who or what radicalized Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan-American street vendor who pleaded guilty last year to plotting to blow up subway stations in New York? What inspired David Headley, an affluent Pakistani-American, to help the Pakistani group Lashkar-e-Tayab plan the 2008 Mumbai massacre? What motivated five young Muslim males to travel from Virginia to Pakistan late last year to seek jihadist training (they were arrested before they managed to do so)? Why did Bryant Neal Vinas, a convert to Islam, receive training in Pakistan in 2007 and plot to blow up New York's Penn Station? And why did the Hasan, the Army doctor, suddenly decide to kill 13 fellow members of the military and wound 32 others at Fort Hood, where he was stationed?

These and other would-be terrorists arrested in the past few months have very little in common other than that they are Muslim. They hail from vastly different social and economic situations—from taxi drivers and street vendors to financial analysts—they come from across the US and they vary in their commitment to Islamic radicalism and their degree of contact with extremist groups abroad. We can only presume that what unites them is a purposeful hatred of the United States and its foreign policy—one that may take root during a process of slow radicalization—together with a desire to be part of a larger anti-American movement.

In the years since September 11, many academics and journalists have suggested that, in contrast to Muslim populations in Europe, where there have been much-publicized problems with extremism, America's own Muslim population has been largely immune to radicalization. But ten years on we are seeing a change. Yet rather than trying to understand and explore this phenomenon, US journalists—and, it seems, the US government—are singularly obsessed with finding out which Pakistani group was responsible for training Shahzad or whether he had links to al' Qaeda. Meanwhile, every failed act of terrorism on US soil may encourage dozens more young American Muslims to try and succeed. And until there is a greater understanding of—and effort to address—the underlying issues that lead to this kind of radicalization, we will not come any closer to preventing such attacks in the future.