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# US just doesn't get it about motivation for suicide attacks



Barack Obama: has made six speeches about the Christmas Day attack and ordered two policy reviews; but where is the concern about offering Muslims an alternative?

Christmas Day bombing of Northwest Airlines flight 253. Amid the flurry of recriminations and speeches, it was reported that a state department official "misspelled" the name of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian who attempted to bring down the aircraft with explosives sewn into his underwear, thus preventing data concerning him and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula from being correlated.

The story fed the narrative of bureaucratic ineptitude, and received wide coverage. No one pointed out that there is no correct spelling of Arabic names transliterated into English. Umar is the same as Omar, and both spellings are correct, just as Mohamed can be written several ways.

This footnote to the failed suicide bombing was symptomatic of a wider breakdown in understanding, as if the collective American psyche was pre-programmed by rigid mental software not to comprehend.

Any cop will tell you that the first thing one searches for when investigating a crime is a motive. The fact that two well-educated young men – Abdulmutallab the Nigerian and Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, a Jordanian – were ready to turn themselves into human bombs in the hope of killing Americans, just five days apart, ought to make us ask why. Abdulmutallab (23) is from a rich family and studied engineering at University College London. Balawi (32) was a medical doctor with a Turkish wife and two young daughters. On December 30th, he dealt the worst blow to the CIA in 27 years by killing seven agents at its base in Khost, Afghanistan.

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OPINION: Barack Obama says US intelligence fails to 'connect the dots' to prevent terror attacks. America itself fails to connect the dots that help explain motive, writes LARA MARLOWE

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In a posthumously broadcast video, Balawi said his "martyrdom" was to avenge the assassination by an unmanned US drone last August of Baitullah Mehsud, a Pakistani extremist leader.

It would be easy to dismiss Balawi's suicide bombing as merely another round in the cycle of revenge between the US and al-Qaeda. But clues to Abdulmutallab and Balawi's motives are there if you search for them. There was a photograph of the solemn, baby-faced Abdulmutallab, wearing a red polar fleece at what appeared to be a London demonstration against the Israeli bombing of Gaza. One of Balawi's brothers told the *New York Times* that Balawi was changed by the Israeli assault on Gaza, which killed 1,300 Palestinians.

Balawi's family, like that of Maj Nidal Malik Hasan, the US army psychiatrist who killed 13 US service members at Fort Hood in November, were Palestinians from what is now Israel. In 2008, the *Washington Post* reported, Balawi wrote on an internet site that he wished to "be a bomb" so he could punish Israel for its treatment of Palestinians.

You would think these events might spark a debate about the anger of Palestinians and Muslims towards Israel and the US. But to the extent that this anger is mentioned, it is portrayed as blind, fanatical hatred, with no reference to Israel's continued occupation of Arab land, the suffering of Palestinians still under siege in Gaza or the 1,300 Palestinians killed by Israel one year ago.

*The New York Times* published a one-and-a-quarter-page spread on "The Terrorist Mind" in which the words Israel and Palestinian appeared not once. It is as if a curtain, a de facto taboo, falls over these topics in the US. No wonder Americans "don't get it". President Barack Obama made six statements and speeches about the Christmas Day attack and ordered two policy reviews. House and Senate committees are gearing up for a string of hearings on the security lapses. I recall no comparable US interest in the Israeli onslaught on Gaza.

*Time* magazine reporters in Amman quoted senior Jordanian intelligence sources saying they believed Balawi turned on the CIA because so many civilian deaths resulted from the airstrikes in Afghanistan for which he provided intelligence as a double agent.

The US has suffered 4,358 fatalities in Iraq and 943 in Afghanistan. In the same period, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis are believed to have been killed and thousands of Afghans. US officials say most die at the hands of their own countrymen. That doesn't change the perception that the US is ultimately responsible because it started both wars.

During a TV debate on profiling, MSNBC presenter Chris Matthews said: "If Americans were going around killing Muslims, they'd be searched at airports too." But Americans are killing Muslims, in far greater numbers than Muslims are killing Americans.

A US federal judge's recent dismissal of charges against four Blackwater mercenaries who shot dead 17 Iraqi civilians in a Baghdad traffic circle in 2007 was quickly forgotten by the US public. You can be sure it wasn't forgotten by Arabs.

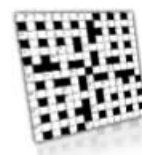
MSNBC is supposed to be a politically liberal network. So I was surprised to hear one of its breakfast commentators suggest that prisoners at Guantánamo "live better there than they did in their own countries". A classified Pentagon report this month concluded that one in five prisoners released from Guantánamo then joined an extremist group. If you'd been water-boarded, subjected to sleep deprivation, loud music, extreme temperatures, threatening dogs and scantily clad women interrogators using sex to humiliate you – and seen your holy book flushed down the toilet – you'd probably join an extremist group too.

At a recent briefing Obama's chief counterterrorism expert John Brennan was asked about the motivation of suicide bombers. Al-Qaeda, Brennan said, "is dedicated to murder and wanton slaughter of innocents . . . has the agenda of destruction and death . . . is just determined to carry out attacks here against the homeland".

"But you haven't explained why," the journalist protested. Brennan ignored her, and went on to the next question.

The US "failed to connect the dots", Obama and other officials repeated ad nauseam in the wake of the Abdulmutallab case. The dearth of co-ordination between 18 US intelligence agencies, the fact there is still no single database and more than half a million names on an ineffectual "terrorist watchlist" have been analysed to death in the past two weeks.

Yet nothing has been said about the equally dangerous failure to provide Muslims appalled by US policies with an alternative to suicide bombing. Obama hinted at this in a speech on January 7th. "We must communicate clearly to Muslims around the world that al-Qaeda offers nothing except a bankrupt vision of misery and death," he said,



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"while the United States stands with those who seek justice and progress."

One thing would convince Muslims that the US seeks justice: the creation of a viable, independent state for the Palestinians. After more than half a century of skewed US Middle East policy, peace between Israelis and Palestinians would not stop attacks on the US overnight. But the injustice done to Palestinians remains a festering wound and, even more than Guantánamo, the best recruitment tool for al-Qaeda.

Obama knows this, but seems powerless to do anything about it.

Lara Marlowe is Washington Correspondent



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