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Drone Strikes and the Boston Marathon Bombing

By Robert Wright

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Protesters loyal to the Shi'ite al-Houthi rebel group burn an effigy of a U.S. aircraft during a demonstration to protest against what they say is U.S. interference in Yemen, including drone strikes, in the Old Sanaa city April 12, 2013.

In 2011, after President Obama used a drone to kill Anwar al-Awlaki, the American citizen who was recruiting jihadists from his perch in Yemen, many hailed the assassination as a powerful blow against terrorism.

"The death of al-Awlaki is the last nail in the coffin of the al Qaeda brand," wrote Lisa Merriam (a "brand consultant") in a piece for *Forbes*. "Yes, bombs are what we think of when we think of al Qaeda, but powerful bombs require a powerful brand. The al Qaeda brand has been the key to raising awareness, raising an army of recruits, raising money, and raising terror. Now that the brand is dead, all of those goals are out of reach."

Tell that to the people of Boston. The more we learn about the Boston Marathon bombing--and the accused bombers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev--the more reason there is to doubt the wisdom of Obama's drone-heavy approach to fighting terrorism. Not only did his hundreds of drone strikes fail to prevent the bombing; they've probably made this kind of terrorism--home-grown terrorism, committed by longtime residents of America--more likely. Many have noted that a recipe for the type of bomb used in Boston was published three years ago in *Inspire*, the online magazine aimed at getting American Muslims to commit terrorism. *Inspire* is associated with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and al-Awlaki is thought to have been involved in the magazine's creation.

So the Boston bombing is, for starters, a reminder that killing al-Awlaki didn't magically expunge that bomb recipe from the internet. And the fact that another issue of *Inspire* came out last month is a reminder that killing al-Awlaki didn't kill his magazine or his message or the al Qaeda brand.

In fact, if you look at the contents of that most recent issue, you'll find evidence that this and other targeted killings have strengthened the al Qaeda brand, or at least the jihadist brand more generically, by making it more appealing to vulnerable American Muslims (not *most* American Muslims, of course, or even many of them, but the very few unstable, disaffected ones who are susceptible to the lure of radical Islam).

The point of this issue of *Inspire*--and all issues of *Inspire*--is twofold: to suggest effective forms of violence and convince these vulnerable Muslims that violence is warranted. That second goal rests on a simple narrative that gained momentum via the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts: America is at war with Islam. President Obama may think he's draining that narrative of its power by extracting troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. But his strategic substitute for ground troops--a hugely expanded program of drone strikes in various Muslim countries--is also substituting for those troops in the jihadist narrative.

This latest issue of *Inspire* says America uses drones in a "cowardly" way:

In Yemen, they roam over Muslim houses, terrorizing children, women and the weak. Moreover they bombard 'suspected' targets in villages, towns and cities. Why? Because far from Yemen, in the Whitehouse [*sic*], Obama took a decision. He decided to start a new chapter, a chapter more savage and barbaric than the previous chapters of the crusade on Yemeni Muslims. A chapter which relies on the strategy of the unmanned drones, 'the strategy of signature strikes'.

This strategy allows officials in the CIA and the PTSD army to carry out attacks on any human, vehicle or building in Yemen if 'suspected' to be a threat to the security of the US without the need to identify the real identity of the target, whether Al-Qaeda or not. This includes women

and children. Just because an American 'feels' this person poses danger. Whenever they have this 'feeling' they order for a 'Hell Fire missile' to be launched.

These missiles are usually carried by the unmanned drones to kill this or that target cold-bloodedly. Of course! Obama is declaring a crusade! These missiles have no eyes and their launchers are more blind. They kill civilians more than mujahideen.

Obviously, there's some exaggeration here; that's the way propaganda works. But propaganda is most powerful when it's at least within shouting distance of the truth--and, unfortunately, that's the case here. Obama's drone strikes have killed, if not more civilians than mujahideen, lots of civilians, including women and scores of children. Every time such killing happens, the jihadist narrative, the narrative that seems to have seized the minds of the Tsarnaev brothers, gains a measure of strength.

So did one or both Tsarnaev brothers actually read *Inspire*? Pro Publica has suggested that Tamerlan did. But whether or not he did, the drone-strike trope has become a standard theme in jihadist propaganda channels, and there's strong evidence that Tamerlan was tuned in to those channels. And he seems to have been buying the larger America-is-at-war-with-Islam meme. A man who knew Tamerlan says he "was upset with America because America was in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries."

No doubt there were lots of ingredients in Tamerlan's radicalization, possibly including Russia's brutal treatment of fellow Chechens. He may have even gotten inspiration or guidance during a 2012 trip to Russia. But his radicalization seems to have preceded that trip, and, in any event, in the end he needed a rationale for killing Americans, not Russians. That's where drone strikes can come in handy, and the latest issue of *Inspire* spells out the logic explicitly: Because America is "ruled by the people," its "rulers (people) should pay for their country's action till they change their system and foreign policies." So "war on America including civilians" is legitimate, says *Inspire*, so long as Americans are killing Muslim civilians with drone strikes. "The equation should be balanced. Like they kill, they will be killed."

We'll never know for sure whether recurring news about civilians killed in drone strikes helped push Tamerlan over the edge or helped him rationalize atrocity. But I assume jihadist recruiters know their business, and know what kinds of things *can* incite people like the Tsarnaev brothers. And they seem to consider Obama's drone strike policy a gift from God. If that "gift" isn't what gave us the Boston bombing, it will probably, if continued long enough, give us some other horrific bombing down the road.

When Lisa Merriam celebrated the assassination of al Awlaki in *Forbes*, she was under a misapprehension that seems to have motivated that assassination and has helped sustain Obama's drone strike program: that the enemy should be thought of as a kind of overseas army, and if we kill all its soldiers, we'll have won.

In truth, the enemy isn't just jihadists, but jihadist memes. And if every time you kill a jihadist you create several more by spreading the memes, you're not winning. That's especially true if

some of the jihadists you create are already in America--assets more valuable to America's enemy than 100 jihadist foot soldiers in Yemen.

Another premise of Obama's drone strike policy is that "high value" targets are hard if not impossible to replace. After all, who could possibly fill the shoes of the famously charismatic al-Awlaki? Now we have our answer. Though Obama ensured that al-Awlaki isn't around to preach to people like Tamaran Tsarnaev, Tsarnaev seems to have found someone equally charismatic to follow: Feiz Mohammad, an Australian YouTube preacher who, as Noam Scheiber of the New Republic notes, has "the chiseled look of a former athlete" and "impeccable dramatic timing".

Obviously, to note how American policies contribute to terrorism isn't to diminish the moral culpability of the terrorists or to embrace jihadist rationales. And it's not to suggest that terrorists should get veto power over American policies. If *Inspire* inveighed against, say, freedom of religion in America, no compromise of that principle would be in order even if terrorism was the price paid for defending it. But with drone strikes, *the whole point of the policy* is supposed to be to prevent terrorism. If the policy is in fact contributing to terrorism, that's a pretty strong argument against it.