

Theater of Terror

Do these stories of piety and mayhem have anything in common? This is a critical question, and considering the frequency of acts of religious terrorism around the globe, either answer is significant. If the answer is no, these cases may suggest a worldwide loosening of social control that makes inexplicable acts of violence possible. If it is yes, and if we can find convincing explanations for these patterns, we may shed some light on why violence and religion have reemerged so dramatically at this moment in history, and why they have been found so frequently in combination. The question, then, is whether there are common themes in the stories of Anders Breivik, Michael Bray, Timothy McVeigh, Ian Paisley, Meir Ettinger, Yoel Lerner, Baruch Goldstein, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Osama bin Laden, Mahmud Abouhalima, Abdul Aziz Rantisi, Maya Kodnani, Simranjit Singh Mann, Ashin Wirathu, Takeshi Nakamura, and many other religious activists around the world.

As we begin to look for answers, the very nature of their violence may provide our first clue. In many cases the incidents of violence in which they have been implicated have been acts not only of destruction but also of bloodshed executed in a deliberately intense and vivid way. It is as if these acts were designed to maximize the savage nature of bloodshed and meant purposely to elicit anger.

The catastrophic attack on the Paris nightclub and cafés; the bombings in Oslo and the massacre of a Norwegian youth camp; setting fire to Palestinian houses, burning children alive; attacks on American

embassies in Africa, the Oklahoma City federal building, mosques in Myanmar and nightclubs in Bali; the burning of abortion clinics and the shooting of a clinic doctor in the face; the assassination of Israeli, Sri Lankan, and Indian political leaders; angry mobs pulling Muslim housewives from their homes in Ahmedabad and setting them on fire; the slaying of a busload of Hindu pilgrims in the Himalayan foothills by a band of radical Sikh youths; the agonizing effects of the nerve gas attack in a Tokyo subway; and the bloody confusion of suicide bombings on the otherwise peaceful streets of Baghdad and Kabul, and of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: all of these are not just incidents of violence, they are acts of deliberately exaggerated violence.

The spectacular aerial assaults on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, are dramatic illustrations of this theatrical display of violence. Thousands perished in the assault. But even one death can convey in its savagery the force of terrorism. Consider, for example, the gruesome image projected around the world on the internet in 2015 of a captured Jordanian pilot placed in a cage by his ISIS captors. As the world watched in horror, a trail of combustible fluid is ignited with a torch. The flames quickly spread into the cage, engulfing the hapless pilot who writhes in anguish as his body is consumed.¹ This video was the most extreme of a series of well-produced videos by ISIS that captured images of the movements' atrocities, including many incidents of beheadings that have created massive revulsion throughout the world. The footage of the immolation of the pilot created a national outcry in Jordan and a renewal of that country's commitment to defeating the movement. Clearly the leaders of ISIS knew what they were doing. They were aware that these images would be met with horror and anger; indeed they seemed actively engaged in promoting the dissemination of these pictures on the internet. Why would they want such extreme sadistic images to be seen?

ISIS itself has given an answer. "The more gruesome the better," an ISIS propaganda magazine stated in 2016; or as an Irish activist in Belfast put it some years ago, the object was to terrorize using "the most macabre means."² In an interview with a British journalist, Unionist activist Kenny McClinton admitted that in his struggle against Irish republicans, like ISIS he advocated beheading his enemies and impaling their heads on the railing of a park.³ His group, the Shankill Butchers, were accused of more than thirty gory murders, all committed for the purpose of political intimidation: to show the power of the Protestant community and to scare Catholics into withdrawing their support for the IRA. They attacked

an innocent Catholic working man, for instance, chosen at random as he walked to his post as a security guard in a border area between Catholic and Protestant communities, and slowly, viciously killed him. The Catholic was stripped naked, tied, and ritually carved as a sculptor would carve a block of wood.⁴ Still alive after having received 147 wounds over his body, the hapless victim was suspended from a beam by a slowly tightening noose, where he eventually died of strangulation. His mutilated corpse was then put on display for Catholics and Protestants alike to see.

Even when terrorist actions have involved less direct methods of killing—such as car bombs and suicide attacks—many were carried out in such a manner as to be both vivid and horrifying. Targets were often chosen because they were familiar and secure—shopping malls, nightclubs, and centers of mass transit. The timing of the events often ensured that the maximum number of people would be gathered at the target sites—the truck rampage on a Christmas market in Berlin in December, 2016, that killed a dozen innocent shoppers is a horrifying example. In the case of bombing attacks, the explosive devices used were often aimed at wounding people rather than damaging buildings. Nails were embedded in the bombs of Hamas suicide bombers, for instance, to increase their maiming capability. The Aum Shinrikyo scientists considered adding a floral scent to the deadly sarin gas they were to unleash to encourage more people to inhale it.⁵

When a bomb planted in a busy commercial area of Beirut by ISIS militants exploded and rescue workers and concerned neighbors swarmed into the scene to help save the victims, another bomb went off, timed to kill and maim the rescuers as well. It was a tactic often employed in car bombs in Baghdad and Kabul. In the town of Omagh in Northern Ireland, authorities were warned of a bombing in advance, but they were told that the attack was to take place in a different area from where the bombs were in fact planted. As a result, unsuspecting citizens were herded into an area directly adjacent to the bomb site, and a larger number were killed and wounded than would have been if they had remained where they were. Although spokespersons for the “Real IRA,” which took responsibility for the bombing, claimed that they had not intended so many civilians to be killed, authorities were not so sure. Many agreed with the assessment of the secretary of Northern Ireland, that the Real IRA’s statement was a “pathetic attempt to apologize for and excuse mass murder.”⁶ They remained convinced that the object of the false information was to kill as many of the townspeople as possible, and to do so in a deliberately horrific manner.

Many terrorist incidents have been aimed at killing massive numbers of victims. "Kill, kill, kill!" was the battle cry of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in what he called a "war against Christians."⁷ When Boko Haram militants went on rampages in villages in northern Nigeria in 2009 and again in 2015 they were said to have slaughtered over seven hundred in each incident. Car bombings in Iraq have often been set off in marketplaces, or near lines of applicants to enlist in the Iraq army, sometimes timed for multiple explosions to be ignited at once. In 2007 hundreds were killed in simultaneous blasts in towns inhabited by members of the ancient Yazidi religion in northern Iraq; hundreds of Shi'a Muslims were killed in Sadr City on the outskirts of Baghdad by car bombs and mortar fire in 2006, a number that was exceeded in 2016. In other cases, if committed differently, terrorist attacks would have harmed many more than were actually killed. If the sarin gas unleashed in the Tokyo subways on March 20, 1995, had been 70 to 80 percent pure, rather than diluted to only 30 percent of its full strength—solely to protect the safety of the Aum members transporting it—thousands would have perished. An incident a few weeks later at the Shibuya station in Tokyo would have killed twenty thousand if the device had not malfunctioned and been discovered by alert station attendants.⁸ If the explosives in the 1993 World Trade Center attack had been as strong as the perpetrators expected, as I noted earlier, the entire pair of buildings would have collapsed, taking at least two hundred thousand lives rather than the three thousand who perished when the towers eventually collapsed in 2001. Prior to the September 11 attacks, the largest number of casualties in a single terrorist incident were the 329 passengers killed in the explosion of an Air India jumbo jet off the coast of Ireland on June 23, 1985. It is only by sheer good fortune that even more people have not lost their lives in events designed to be spectacular in their viciousness and awesome in their destructive power.

Such instances of exaggerated violence are constructed events: they are mind-numbing, mesmerizing theater. At center stage are the acts themselves—stunning, abnormal, and outrageous murders carried out in a way that graphically displays the awful power of violence—set within grand scenarios of conflict and proclamation. Killing or maiming of any sort is violent, of course, but these acts surpass the wounds inflicted during warfare or death delivered through capital punishment, in large part because they have a secondary impact. By their demonstrative nature, they elicit feelings of revulsion and anger in those who witness them.

PERFORMANCE VIOLENCE

How do we make sense of such theatrical forms of violence? One way of answering this is to view dramatic violence as part of a strategic plan. This viewpoint assumes that terrorism is always part of a political strategy—and, in fact, some social scientists have defined terrorism in just this way: “the use of covert violence by a group for political ends.”⁹ In some cases this definition is indeed appropriate, for an act of violence can fulfill political ends and have a direct impact on public policy.

The Paris attacks by ISIS in 2015, for instance, may have been designed for specific purposes, such as bolstering the morale of ISIS supporters in Europe and around the world. They might also have been efforts to goad France and the United States into conducting a ground war in Syria and Iraq—the kind of battle that ISIS thought it could win, unlike the air assaults for which they had little defense. And indeed, the day after the Paris attacks French President Francois Hollande proclaimed that “France is at war” with ISIS, but he stopped short of a commitment to sending in troops to fight against them.¹⁰ Despite a clamor for the United States to become more involved following the Paris incident, U.S. President Barack Obama also renewed his pledge of not authorizing “boots on the ground” in the region.

Other efforts by perpetrators of terrorist acts to influence public policy may have been more effective. The Israeli elections following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin may be a case in point. Immediately after Rabin’s death, his successor, Shimon Peres, held a 20 percent lead in the polls over his rival, Benjamin Netanyahu, showing that the efforts of the Jewish terrorist, the assassin Yigal Amir, had the countereffect of making the Israeli populace more sympathetic to the pacifist position. But this lead soon vanished following a different terrorist assault carried out by Muslim activists, a series of Hamas suicide attacks on Jerusalem buses, shortly before the election that was held to determine Rabin’s successor. Netanyahu narrowly edged out Peres in the May elections. Many observers concluded that Netanyahu—no friend of Islamic radicals—had the terrorists of Hamas to thank for his victory.

When the Hamas operative who planned the attacks was later caught and imprisoned, he was asked whether he had intended to affect the outcome of the elections. “No,” he responded, explaining that the internal affairs of Israelis did not matter much to him. This operative was a fairly low-level figure, however, and one might conjecture that his superiors had a more specific goal in mind. But when I put the same question

to the political leader of Hamas, Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, his answer was almost precisely the same: these attacks were not aimed at Israeli internal politics, since Hamas did not differentiate between Peres and Netanyahu. In the Hamas view, the two Israeli leaders were equally opposed to Islam.¹¹ "Maybe God wanted it," the Hamas operative said of Netanyahu's election victory. Even if the Hamas leaders were being disingenuous, the fact remains that most of their suicide bombings have served no direct political purpose.

Other examples of religious terrorism have also shown little strategic value. Anders Breivik's assault on the Norwegian youth camp and Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building did not result in uprisings against the governments that Breivik and McVeigh thought were too permissive of liberal multiculturalism. Similarly, the release of nerve gas in the Tokyo subways and the attacks on the World Trade Center did not provide any immediate political benefits to those who caused them. Although the financial costs of the September 11, 2001, attacks were staggering, there is no evidence that Osama bin Laden and other members of the Al-Qaeda network launched the attacks solely to cripple the U.S. economy. Mahmud Abouhalima, convicted for his part in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, told me that assaults on public buildings did have a different kind of strategic value in that they helped to "identify the government as enemy." In general, however, the "political and economic ends" for which these acts were committed were distant indeed.¹²

A political scientist, Martha Crenshaw, has shown that the notion of "strategic" thinking can be construed in a broad sense to cover not just immediate political achievements but also the internal logic that propels a group into perpetrating terrorist acts. As Abouhalima said, many of those who committed them felt they were justified by the broad, long-range benefits to be gained.¹³ My investigations indicate that Crenshaw is right—acts of terrorism are usually the products of an internal logic and not of random or crazy thinking—but I hesitate to use the term *strategy* for all rationales for terrorist actions. *Strategy* implies a degree of calculation and an expectation of accomplishing a clear objective that does not jibe with such dramatic displays of power as the Norwegian youth camp killings or the destruction of the World Trade Center towers. These creations of terror are done not to achieve a strategic goal but to make a symbolic statement.

By calling acts of religious terrorism "symbolic," I mean that they are intended to illustrate or refer to something beyond their immediate tar-

get a grander conquest, for instance, or a struggle more awesome than meets the eye. As Abouhalima said, the bombing of a public building may dramatically indicate to the populace that the government or the economic forces behind the building were seen as enemies, to show the world that they were targeted as satanic foes. The point of the attack, then, was to produce a graphic and easily understandable object lesson. Such explosive scenarios are not *tactics* directed toward an immediate, earthly, or strategic goal, but *dramatic events* intended to impress for their symbolic significance. As such, they can be analyzed as one would any other symbol, ritual, or sacred drama.

I can imagine a line with "strategic" on the one side and "symbolic" on the other, with various acts of terrorism located in between. The hostage taking in the Japanese embassy by the Tupac Amaru in Peru—clearly an attempt to leverage power in order to win the release of members of the movement held prisoner by the Peruvian government—might be placed closer to the political, strategic side. The Ahmedabad massacre and the Tokyo nerve gas assault might be closer to the symbolic, religious side. Each was the product of logical thought, and each had an internal rationale. In cases such as the Hindu massacre of Muslims in Ahmedabad that were more symbolic than strategic the logic was focused, not on an immediate political acquisition, but at a larger, less tangible goal.

The very adjectives used to describe acts of religious terrorism—*symbolic*, *dramatic*, *theatrical*—suggest that we look at them not as tactics but as *performance violence*. The spectacular assaults of September 11, 2001, were not only tragic acts of violence; they were also mesmerizing theater. In speaking of terrorism as "performance," however, I am not suggesting that such acts are undertaken lightly or capriciously. Rather, like religious ritual or street theater, they are dramas designed to have an impact on the several audiences that they affect. Those who witness the violence—even at a distance, via the news media—are therefore a part of what occurs. Moreover, like other forms of public ritual, the symbolic significance of such events is multifaceted; they mean different things to different observers.

This suggests that it is possible to analyze comparatively the performance of acts of religious terrorism. There is already a growing literature of studies based on the notion that civic acts and cultural performances are closely related.¹⁴ The public protests against Muslims by Buddhist monks in Myanmar, and the controversial parades undertaken each year by the Protestant Orangemen in Catholic neighborhoods of Northern Ireland, for instance, have been described not only as cultural

events but also as political statements.¹⁵ So it is not unreasonable to view public violence as performances as well.

In addition to referring to drama, the term *performance* also implies the notion of “performative”—as in the concept of “performative acts.” This is an idea developed by language philosophers regarding certain kinds of speech that are able to perform social functions: their very utterance has a transformative impact.¹⁶ Like vows recited during marriage rites, certain words not only represent reality but also shape it: they contain a certain power of their own. The same is true of some nonverbal symbolic actions, such as the gunshot that begins a race, the raising of a white flag to show defeat, or acts of terrorism.

Terrorist acts, then, can be both *performance events*, in that they make a symbolic statement, and *performative acts*, insofar as they try to change things. When Abdelhamid Abaaoud led his group of ISIS killers into street cafés and a Paris nightclub; when Yigal Amir aimed his pistol at Israel’s prime minister, and when Sikh activists targeted Punjab’s chief minister with a car bomb in front of the state’s office buildings, the activists were aware that they were creating enormous spectacles. They probably also hoped that their actions would make a difference—if not in a direct, strategic sense, then in an indirect way as a dramatic show so powerful as to change people’s perceptions of the world.

But the fact that the ISIS activists and the assassins of Prime Minister Rabin and Chief Minister Beant Singh hoped that their acts would make such a statement does not mean that they in fact did. As I noted, public symbols mean different things to different people, and a symbolic performance may not achieve its intended effect. The way the act is perceived—by both the perpetrators and those who are affected by it—makes all the difference. In fact, the same is true of performative speech. One of the leading language philosophers, J. L. Austin, has qualified the notion that some speech acts are performative by observing that the power of the act is related to the perception of it. Children, for example, playing at marriage are not wedded by merely reciting the vows and going through the motions, nor is a ship christened by just anyone who gives it a name.¹⁷

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, carrying further the idea that statements are given credibility by their social context, has insisted that the power of performative speech—vows and christenings—is rooted in social reality and is given currency by the laws and social customs that stand behind it.¹⁸ Similarly, an act of terrorism usually implies an underlying power and legitimizing ideology. But whether the power and legit-

imacy implicit in acts of terrorism are like play-acted marriage vows or are the real thing depends in part on how the acts are perceived. It depends, in part, on whether their significance is believed.

This brings us back to the realm of faith. Public ritual has traditionally been the province of religion, and this is one of the reasons that performance violence comes so naturally to activists from a religious background. In a collection of essays on the connection between religion and terrorism published some years ago, one of the editors, David C. Rapoport, observed—accurately, I think—that the two topics fit together not only because there is a violent streak in the history of religion, but also because terrorist acts have a symbolic side and in that sense mimic religious rites. The victims of terrorism are targeted not because they are threatening to the perpetrators, he said, but because they are “symbols, tools, animals or corrupt beings” that tie into “a special picture of the world, a specific consciousness” that the activist possesses.¹⁹

The street theater of performance violence forces those who witness it directly or indirectly into that “consciousness”—that alternative view of the world. This gives the perpetrators of terrorism a kind of celebrity status and their actions an illusion of importance. The novelist Don DeLillo goes so far as to say that “only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith,” is taken seriously in modern society.²⁰ When we who observe these acts take them seriously—are disgusted and repelled by them, and begin to distrust the peacefulness of the world around us—the purposes of this theater are achieved.

SETTING THE STAGE

In looking at religious terrorism as theater, the appropriate place to begin is the stage—the location where the acts are committed, or rather, performed. When members of the Al-Qaeda network searched for a location to target their resentment against the United States and its global economic and military power, they chose the same location previously selected by a group of their comrades associated with an expatriate Muslim sheikh living in New Jersey. For this Jersey City group of conspirators, this target was literally the most dramatic stage in sight: the World Trade Center. It turned out to be an apt location for a variety of symbolic reasons.

Designed to be the tallest buildings in New York City, and at one time the highest in the world, the 110-story twin towers of the World Trade Center housed the headquarters of international businesses and

financial corporations. Among its many offices were quarters for the federal Secret Service and the governor of the state of New York. More than fifty thousand employees daily entered the huge complex, which also included a hotel, shops, and several restaurants. From the windows of the penthouse restaurant, Windows on the World, the executives who came to lunch could scarcely identify Jersey City and the other industrial areas stretched out across the Hudson River in a distant haze.

From across the river in Jersey City, the twin towers of the building were so tall that when no other part of the skyline in New York City was visible, the tower tops were seen ethereally suspended above the eastern horizon. In 1993, when Muhammad A. Salameh came to the Ryder truck rental lot on Jersey City's busy Kennedy Boulevard to rent a ten-foot Ford Econoline van, therefore, he could catch glimpses of the World Trade Center in the distance.

Two days later, at noon, shortly after the van was driven to level B2 of the parking basement of the World Trade Center, an enormous blast shuddered through the basement levels, collapsing several floors, killing several workers instantly, and ripping a 180-foot hole in the wall of the underground Port Authority Trans-Hudson train station. On the 110th floor, in the Windows on the World restaurant, young executives who were attending a career-launching lunch felt a thump and heard what seemed to be a mild earthquake or a clap of thunder. When the electricity went off, they were told to leave the building—a poignant rehearsal of the hurried evacuation on September 11, 2001. On this occasion, their fears were initially less severe, and they headed downstairs jauntily singing "One Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall." Their joviality turned to nervous apprehension when they were greeted with clouds of soot and smoke as they groped their way down 110 flights of stairs into a scene of confusion and suffering on the ground floor.²¹

Throughout the world, the news media projected images of American power and civic order undermined. Based on the belief by government officials that the World Trade Center was targeted primarily as a public symbol, security was rushed to federal monuments and memorials in Washington DC later that afternoon. Although six people were killed in the blast, it was the assault on the building itself that received the most prominent reportage. Within an hour of the World Trade Center bombing, a coffeehouse in Cairo was attacked—allegedly by the same group implicated in the World Trade Center incident. This bombing killed more people but garnered very little attention outside of Cairo. Regardless of the number killed, a coffeehouse is not the World

Trade Center. The towers were in their own way as American as the Statue of Liberty or the Washington Monument, and by assaulting them activists put their mark on a visibly American symbol.

The same can be said about the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. In this case the number killed was much greater than in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and an enormous outpouring of public sympathy for the victims overshadowed any concern about damage done to the building. Yet there were several similarities between the two events: McVeigh and Nichols used a mixture of ammonium nitrate fertilizer and diesel fuel not unlike that used in the 1993 World Trade Center blast, and they mimicked the World Trade Center bombers by employing a Ryder rental truck. Like Mahmud Abouhalima and his colleagues, these self-designated soldiers were fighting a quasi-religious war against the American government, and they chose a building that symbolized what they regarded as an oppressive government force.

In the downtown area of Oklahoma City, the Murrah building was an imposing edifice. It served as the regional headquarters for a variety of agencies linked with the federal government. The overwhelming majority of these offices were related to the beneficent side of governmental affairs, such as welfare and social security. But the building also housed the regional offices of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), from which agents were sent to Waco, Texas, to enforce firearm laws in a confrontation that led to the standoff at the Branch Davidian headquarters. For this reason the Oklahoma City offices of the ATF, along with the regional offices of the FBI (whose headquarters were also in Oklahoma City, but some fifty blocks away from the Murrah building), had been the frequent target of verbal abuse by protesting members of right-wing militias. The sidewalk in front of the Murrah building had been the site of antigovernment demonstrations from both ends of the political spectrum: antiwar protestors from the left and firearms supporters from the right.

If one had to choose a single building that symbolized the presence of centralized federal governmental power in this region of mid-America, the Murrah building in Oklahoma City would be it. When the dust settled after the devastating roar of the enormous explosion on Wednesday morning, April 19, 1995, the entire front of the building had been sheared off, killing 168 and injuring more than five hundred. Among the dead and injured were scores of children in the building's day-care center, but only four ATF officials were injured, and none were killed.

Clearly, the target of the attack was not so much the government agents, or even an agency such as the ATF, as it was the building itself and its everyday staff of government workers.

What was targeted was a symbol of normal government operations. In this scenario of terrorism, the lives of the workers were, like the building, a part of the scenery: they and the edifice constituted the stage on which the dramatic act was to be performed. If the building were attacked at night without the workers present, the explosion would not have been a serious blow to government operations, nor would the pain of the event be felt as acutely by society at large. If the building's employees had been machine-gunned as they left their offices, with the building itself left unscathed, the symbolism of an attack on normal government operations would have been incomplete. Such targets as the World Trade Center and the Oklahoma City federal building have provided striking images of a stable, seemingly invulnerable economic and political power. Yet all buildings are ultimately vulnerable, a fact that perpetrators of terror such as Mohamed Atta, Mahmud Abouhalima, and Timothy McVeigh have been eager to demonstrate.

Some groups that have targeted the lifeblood of modern society have chosen a different symbol of centrality: its major transportation systems. In today's cities, the most vibrant structures are often the airports. Their importance is demonstrated by the sheer size of their landing fields and the frequency of their air traffic as much as by the grandeur of their architecture. Therefore, some terrorist attacks have focused on airport buildings and landing fields. The 2016 attack on the Brussels airport, the 2002 shooting at an El Al Airlines counter at a Los Angeles air terminal, and the 2006 attempted bombing at John F. Kennedy airport in New York City are cases in point.

But because air traffic itself is indicative of a society's economic vitality, often airplanes rather than airports have provided terrorism's stage. Some of the largest numbers of victims killed in terrorist attacks have been in airline bombings, including the Air India attack over the Atlantic Ocean near Cork, Ireland, that killed 329; the Pan Am explosion over Lockerbie, Scotland, in which 270 victims perished; and the midair bombing of a Russian Airbus over the Sinai desert after leaving Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in 2015, that killed 224. If it had been successful, one of the most dramatic acts of terrorism would have been Ramzi Yousef's Bojinka plot, aimed at eleven U.S. trans-Pacific passenger airplanes and alleged to have been funded by Osama bin Laden, which would have created a catastrophic event on one fateful day. The term

Bojinka was one that Yousef himself had chosen and was the label for the file in the hard disk of his white Toshiba laptop computer that listed the details of the plot—where flights would depart, what routes they would take, and where the participants in the plot should deplane in order to escape the explosions caused by the bombs that they were to leave behind. Only one plane, a Philippine Airlines aircraft, was actually destroyed in a trial run carried out by Yousef before the full plot could be carried out. In the trial that convicted him of conspiring to commit these acts of terrorism, Yousef, acting as his own lawyer, offered as his main defense the notion that anyone with computer expertise could have planted such information on his hard disk. Yet he was not able to refute the testimony of witnesses who heard him talk about the plot and the Philippine Airlines stewardess who saw him sitting in the very seat under which a bomb exploded on a later leg of the flight, after Yousef had departed. In December 1994, Yousef is said to have boarded the plane and, once it was aloft, entered one of the bathrooms and mixed a highly inflammable cocktail involving a liquid form of nitroglycerin. He sealed it in a container and attached a blasting cap and a timer. Returning to his seat, he strapped the device underneath the cushion and departed the plane at its next stop, leaving the bomb beneath the seat to explode in midair as the plane journeyed on to its next destination. It is a scenario eerily similar to one account of how TWA Flight 800 may have exploded shortly after takeoff at Kennedy Airport in New York on July 17, 1996, two months after Yousef's trial began, which is one reason some journalists jumped to the conclusion that the plane must have been downed by Muslim activists allied with Yousef.²²

Though increased airport security following the 9/11 attacks have greatly diminished the number of midair bombings in the twenty-first century, some of the attempts have been spectacular. In 2001, for instance, jihadi activist Richard Reid attempted to explode bombing material hidden in his shoe on an American Airlines plane midflight between Paris and Miami, Florida. On Christmas day in 2009, a young Nigerian man attempted to ignite an explosive hidden in his underwear as the Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam was descending to land in Detroit, Michigan. The so-called "underwear bomber," Umar Farouk Abdulmatallab, was allegedly carrying out his murderous mission under the instructions of the American jihadi activist Anwar al-Awlaki who was then based in Yemen. If he had been successful all 289 passengers on board would likely have been killed.

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, according to a chronology maintained by Bruce Hoffman at the RAND Corporation and St. Andrews University, twenty-two airliners were bombed worldwide in the last three decades of the twentieth century, and many others were hijacked. A nation can feel dishonored by the bombing of one of its airlines even when the plane, such as the downed American aircraft, Pan Am 103, is far from home. In that case the bomb—plastic explosives hidden in a portable radio-tape player, allegedly placed by Libyan intelligence agencies operating out of Malta—blew up the aircraft as it flew above Scotland in 1988, the shredded pieces of the plane landing near the small town of Lockerbie. A Libyan intelligence officer was indicted and imprisoned by the Scottish government in 2001 for his role in the plot, and the U.S. government insisted on an admission from the Libyan for its complicity. In 2002 Libyan President Muammar el-Qaddafi accepted responsibility on behalf of his government and agreed to pay compensation to the families of the victims, though Qaddafi himself denied any prior knowledge of the plot. During the 2011 uprising in Libya in which Qaddafi was overthrown and killed, a former government official revealed that Qaddafi had in fact known about the plot and authorized it.²³

When an Air India jumbo jet exploded in midair over the Irish coast, in what was assumed to be a terrorist act, the plane was also far from home. It was also far from the struggle for a Sikh homeland in the northern Indian state of Punjab, which many people believe was connected to the bombing. Although Sikh activists deny that any of their groups were involved—"It simply did not serve our purposes," one Sikh leader told me—the act was most likely committed by someone with a grievance against the Indian government, perhaps a renegade Sikh unit unknown even to the movement's leaders.²⁴ Although the airplane was downed thousands of miles from India's soil, the attack on the Air India airliner was regarded by the Indian press and by the country's leaders as an attack on India itself.

Especially when the struggle that serves as the context for terrorist acts is a local feud—between two factions or between a separatist movement and the state—the transportation system targeted is often not an international carrier but a local one. Many of the bombing attacks in Baghdad have been either at bus stations or onboard buses, including minivans that serve as small private transports. In the conflict between the militant Muslim Hamas movement and the secular Israeli state, buses were the targets of suicide bombers in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Buses were also a favored target of Sikh activists in the Punjab, as

were trains, during the heyday of the separatist movement in the late 1980s.²³

Trains have been the target of some of the most spectacular terrorist attacks in recent years. As we noted earlier in this book, it was a fire-bombing aboard a train car that sparked the Ahmedabad massacre in 2002. Trains were also the target of another terrorist attack in India: synchronized bomb blasts on seven trains leaving the city of Mumbai on July 11, 2006. The bombs were put in pressure cookers to increase their intensity and placed onto the first-class compartments of trains leaving the financial district of the city center and fanning out to the city's suburbs during the evening rush hour. Over two hundred commuters were killed and another seven hundred badly injured. A terrorist group linked to the Pakistani militant Muslim movement, Lashkar-e-Taiba, claimed responsibility, in retaliation against the 2002 Ahmedabad massacre and other mistreatment of Muslims in India. In 2015, however, twelve Indian Muslims associated with the Indian mujahideen were convicted of conducting the attacks, though the accused have protested their innocence and their convictions have been appealed. A similar kind of simultaneous train bombing had occurred in Spain in 2004, when ten explosions were ignited on four trains converging on the city center of Madrid during the peak of the morning rush hour on March 11. The number killed was 191, and another 1,800 commuters were injured. It was popularly believed that the purpose of the bombings was to punish Spain for its support of the U.S. coalition forces in Iraq, and the general elections several days after the incident supported the candidacy of antiwar politicians. Only one person has been convicted for the Madrid train bombings, a Moroccan man, indicating a possible Islamic cell was responsible, though as of 2016 the causes of the attack were still shrouded in controversy. In the United States, saboteurs derailed an Amtrak train near Phoenix, Arizona, in 1995, killing one person on the train and injuring seventy-eight. A note at the scene signed by "Sons of the Gestapo"—a little-known local right-wing group—specified retaliation for the federal government's brutality at Waco and Ruby Ridge as the reason for the attack. Although Amtrak is a nongovernmental corporation, presumably the fact that the trains lumbering through the empty Arizona desert were part of a national transportation system was sufficient reason to identify the train as a symbol of an oppressive governmental presence in the American hinterlands.

It was the subway train system that was the target of a massive attack in London on July 7, 2005. Again it was a simultaneous attack during

the morning rush hour, in this case involving three separately detonated bombs, and slightly later, another bomb ignited on a double-decker bus. In this incident the bombings were suicide attacks, perpetrated by young men who carried their lethal weapons in backpacks. Fifty-two persons were killed and another seven hundred were wounded. Three of the young men were British-born sons of Pakistani immigrants, and one was a Muslim convert originally from Jamaica. In videotapes made before the attacks two of the terrorists cited the British complicity for the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and other alleged "atrocities" against Muslims committed by British authorities.²⁶ In Brussels on March 22, 2016, also during the morning rush hour, the subway station at the Maalbeek section of the city, along with the American Airlines counter in the Brussels airport, were the targets of three bombs ignited within an hour of each other, killing thirty-four. In Paris, subway trains and stations have been the objects of a series of terrorist attacks, including those in the 1990s allegedly undertaken by Algerian supporters of the Islamic Front Party (FIS) unhappy over the French government's support for the Algerian military regime. The regime canceled elections in the former French colony that would have brought the Islamic party into power. One of the most publicized of the Parisian attacks was a bomb placed in the St. Michel station, one of the busiest in Paris, located near the Notre Dame Cathedral. The placement of this bomb was strikingly similar to a terrorist action undertaken by a quite different group in another part of the world: the subway nerve gas attack committed by members of the Aum Shinrikyo movement in Tokyo. As I noted in the previous chapter, the multiple bags of deadly sarin that were unsealed on several subway lines were designed to achieve their maximum destructive power when the trains converged at the central Kasumigaseki subway station. The choice of this location was telling because it was calculated to simultaneously humiliate the government, whose main buildings were within walking distance of the Kasumigaseki stop, and cast questions on the ability of the government to protect the public and itself. Like acts of terrorism by groups in other parts of the world, the movement was assaulting the very concept of national security.

In virtually every other recent example of religious terrorism, the building, vehicle, structure, or locale where the assault took place has had symbolic significance. In some cases the symbolism of the locale was specific: the abortion clinics in the United States that were bombed by religious prolife activists or the western-style hotels in Kabul and

tourist boats in Egypt that were attacked by Islamic activists who regarded them as impositions from a foreign culture. Sheikh Abdul Rahman had proclaimed such tourist sites as "sinful" and insisted that "the lands of Muslims will not become bordellos for sinners of every race and color."²⁷ The shrine of the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, where Dr. Goldstein killed scores of praying Muslims, also had specific symbolic significance, for Goldstein and his group regarded the shrine as emblematic of the Muslim occupation of Jewish territory.

The symbolism of other locations has been more general: the locations represented the power and stability of the society itself. As we have seen, buildings such as the Pentagon, the World Trade Center, and the Oklahoma City federal building, along with transportation systems, are examples of such general symbols. One group—the Islamic al-Fuqra ("the impoverished") movement based in Upstate New York—attacked the power of the government in a literal as well as a figurative sense: it was accused of hatching a plot to disable Colorado's electrical system.²⁸ Computer networks and internet channels are also symbols of a society's centrality—its central communication system. As many computer viruses have demonstrated, acts of sabotage can cripple large corporations and government agencies. In response to the fighting in Syria and the war in Iraq, hackers electronically entered the computer systems of several U.S. government agencies, leaving antiwar messages in their wake.

By revealing the vulnerability of a nation's most stable and powerful entities, movements that undertake these acts of sabotage have touched virtually everyone in the nation's society. Any person in England could have been taking the London subway on that fateful day in 2005, and anyone in France could have been at the nightclub in Paris on that awful night in November 2015. Anyone in the United States could have been riding the elevator in the World Trade Center, visiting the Oklahoma City federal building, traveling on Pan Am 103, or using a computer when a virus invaded it, and everyone in the United States will look differently at the stability of public buildings, transportation networks, and communication systems as a result of these violent incidents.

Why is the location of terrorist events—of performance violence—so important? David Rapoport has observed that the control of territory defines public authority, and ethnic-religious groups have historically gained their identity through association with control over particular places.²⁹ Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht have taken this point further in an article comparing the struggle between Hindus and Muslims over a sacred site in the town of Ayodhya in India, and the conflict between

Muslims and Jews over Temple Mount in Jerusalem. They, along with Ron Hassner in his book *War on Sacred Grounds*, point out that religious conflicts are often not only about space but about the centrality of space.³⁰

Such central places—even if they exist only in cyberspace—are symbols of power, and acts of terrorism claim them in a symbolic way. That is, they express for a moment the power of terrorist groups to control central locations—by damaging, terrorizing, and assaulting them—even when in fact most of the time they do not control them at all. Days after the 2015 Paris attack the shops were open and business went about as usual on the city streets. Soon after the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in 2001, most businesses headquartered in the buildings were back to work, operating from backup information systems located elsewhere. In Oklahoma City, soon after the Murrah Federal Building was destroyed the governmental functions that had been conducted there continued unabated. Yet during that brief dramatic moment when a terrorist act levels a building or damages some entity that a society regards as central to its existence, the perpetrators of the act assert that they—and not the secular government—have ultimate control over that entity and its centrality.

The very act, however, is sometimes more than symbolic: by demonstrating the vulnerability of governmental power, to some degree it weakens that power. Because power is largely a matter of perception, symbolic statements can lead to real results. On the whole, however, the small degree to which a government's authority is discredited by a terrorist act does not warrant the massive destructiveness of the act itself. More significant is the impression—in most cases it is simply an illusion—that the movements perpetrating the acts have enormous power and that the ideologies behind them have cosmic importance. In the war between religious and secular authority, the loss of a secular government's ability to control and secure public spaces, even for a terrible moment, is ground gained for religion's side.

A TIME TO KILL

Much the same can be said about the dramatic time—the date or season or hour of day—that a terrorist act takes place. There are, after all, centralities in time as well as in space. Anniversaries and birthdays mark such special days for individuals; public holidays demarcate hallowed dates for societies as a whole. To capture the public's attention through an act of performance violence on a date deemed important to the group

perpetrating the act, therefore, is to force the group's sense of what is temporarily important on everyone else.

When I was contacted by the Norwegian television producers the day that Anders Breivik attacked the youth camp on an island near Oslo in 2011, I found two interesting temporal connections. One was the year in the title of his manifesto. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter in this book, Breivik titled the manifesto that he posted on line the day of the attacks "2083: A European Declaration of Independence." By searching through the posted manuscript I found a reference to the Battle of Vienna in 1683, so the date in the manifesto's title would mark the four hundredth anniversary of what is remembered by European nationalists as the decisive struggle that kept the Ottoman army from claiming northern Europe and turning it into a Muslim territory. In Breivik's imagination, the multicultural policies of the liberal party with which the youth camp was affiliated were tantamount to an Ottoman invasion, and would produce the same result of an Islamicized Europe if not stopped, and kept, in Breivik's words, independent.

There is another historical event that is referenced in Breivik's manifesto, however, which also is of temporal significance. Breivik writes about the historical background of the European resistance to Islam, focusing on a particular moment in the Crusades when the Kingdom of Jerusalem was established in 1099 (Breivik lists the date as 1098), liberating the holy city from Muslim rule and placing it under control of the Christian military organization, the Knights Templar. Breivik is enormously fond of the Knights Templar, and in fact characterizes himself as a modern-day member of that medieval order. In the introduction to his manifesto, Breivik describes himself (under the name Andrew Brewick) as "Justiciar Knight Commander for Knights Templar Europe and one of several leaders of the National and pan-European Patriotic Resistance Movement."³¹ On the last page of his diary, which closes his manuscript, written hours before he undertook his assault, he signs himself as "Justiciar Knight Commander for Knights Templar Europe." That fateful day was July 22, and perhaps it is just a coincidence, but the decisive battle establishing the Kingdom of Jerusalem was also on July 22. Given Breivik's sense of historical destiny, it is quite possible that he chose that date deliberately, thinking that his action was an equivalent moment of liberation conducted by a Knights Templar of today, namely himself.

When Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols chose the date of their explosion at the Oklahoma City federal building, April 19, it was also