

Massacre at Fort Hood Making Sense of Ft Hood Shooter Nancy Mroczek PhD

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The important question for assessing his behavior is: is religious zealotry and fundamentalist 'jihad' mental illness; perhaps also, what about the personalities or character of persons who follow its pursuit. By extension, one might ask, are the current US wars mental illness.

While compassion is essential to clinical practice, evidence and empiricism are indispensable to it, first and foremost. The key is to not let evidence lead to vindictiveness. Following are facts gleaned from news accounts about Major Nidal Malik Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter. I present these evidences as a person who is neither partial to religion (any), nor to the military, - and, - in most all circumstances that I can imagine or know of -, is opposed to war. At the same time I am in awe of our military (which I admit may not be all it may seem superficially, like most human endeavors). The caliber of United States military personnel is pretty impressive. I believe the military must exist for chickens like myself, I want the best for it, and I am very upset and pained when such great harm comes to it, and thereby to our beloved and freedom loving country. The Ft Hood alleged lone terror event was another brilliant breach and degradation to the fiber of our being. From outside the military, we cannot fathom the damage and repercussive sorrow this event has engendered. Mostly too, it has been swept aside for the military to deal with on its own.

The Ft Hood shooter, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a first born American of Jordanian/Palestinian ancestry (Real

Clear Politics 11-11-09), had email communication with several fundamentalist 'jihad' web sites under multiple email addresses. He had communications with the imam Anwar al-Awlaqi (Anwar al Awlaki), an American now living in Yemen, formerly a preacher at a mosque attended by Hasan and his family. This mosque had been attended also by two of the 9/11 hijackers. A fellow Muslim officer at Ft Hood reported that Hasan had "deep respect" for al-Awlaqi (Telegraph UK 11-07-09) . Al-Awlaqi sermonizes the propriety for lone Islamists to commit lone acts of terror against persons of countries engaged in conflict with people of the Islamic faith (Foreign Policy 12-09-09). There were 13 homicides of fellow soldiers/citizens, plus 1 legally uncharged homicide of an unborn child, 32 injured soldiers/citizens, and incalculable psychological damage at Fort Hood. After the killings, al-Awlaqi's blog contained a message of approbation signed by his name. In fact the blog contained a key point about the killer: that he was "a man of conscience who could not bear living the contradiction of being a Muslim and serving in an army that is fighting against his own people." Further, the alleged al-Awlaqi writer opined on his blog, "Nidal opened fire on soldiers who were on their way to be deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. How can there be any dispute about the virtue of what he has done? In fact the only way a Muslim could Islamically justify serving as a soldier in the U.S. army is if his intention is to follow the footsteps of men like Nidal" (Reuters 11-11-09). There have been also some Muslim citizens in this country who, when sampled for opinion about the massacre, publicly praised the acts of Hasan (CNN 11-06-09).

Accounts from persons who knew Hasan, as well as accounts of certain academic presentations he made as

part of his role in the military, indicate a person who was increasingly agonized and at odds with a military that had educated him and that he was sworn to serve. He was also financially constrained to remain in the military to pay his education debt. Hasan was conflicted by a sense of duty to his religion and by the fact that Islamic peoples were being hurt by US war. He equated the war on "terrorism" with war on Islam (Bloomberg 11-07-09). Hasan had given a PowerPoint presentation about a year ago in an environmental health seminar (he was both an MD and a Master's in Public Health) entitled, "Why the War on Terror Is a War on Islam" (Star Bulletin 12-12-09). Hasan is reported to have represented to colleagues many times that "I am a Muslim first and an American second" (New York Post 11-7-09). Hasan made his grievances known to military personnel, relatives, fellow worshippers, and to others. In 2007 he gave a slide presentation to fellow Army doctors describing, eg, "what the Koran inculcates in the minds of Muslims and the potential implications this may have for the U.S. military" which ended with a slide stating "we love death more than [sic] you love life!" (Washington Post 11-10-09). *Psychologically*, his evidentially likely conflict escalated as he was about to be deployed to work on the side of a war that killed Muslims in Afghanistan, a war he campaigned within the military to avoid. Given the bluntness and openness of his views, Hasan was effectively conveying and forewarning a conundrum he was having trouble enduring. Relatives said Hasan had been looking for a way to be relieved of military obligation, had offered to pay back his education debt, and had sought legal counsel to this end (UPI 11-06-09, Washington Post 11-17-09, NYT 11-11-09).

Hasan had been transferred to Ft Hood in June 2009

from Walter Reed Medical Center. Reports on the quality of his career performance were equivocal (USA Today 11-06-09). Hasan may well have been nice, and per several neighbor accounts in Texas, a seemingly gentle, guy. He has also been described as "withdrawn, unassuming, brooding, socially awkward and never known to have had a girlfriend" (Telegraph UK 11-07-09). Fellow Muslims described him to have been generally calm and very devout (NY Daily News 11-06-09). Some fellow mosque attendees said he complained of Muslim oppression in the army (Real Clear Politics 11-11-09). Military superiors found him polite and gentle except if discussing religion (Fox News 11-12-09). At the same time, many in the military questioned his fervorous disposition, one questioning whether he may be capable of fratricide (NPR 11-12-09). He reportedly had been reprimanded by supervisors for telling at least one patient that "Islam can save your soul" (NPR 11-11-09). Multiple reports from military personnel described Hasan as zealous, vituperative, and argumentative about his religion, and critical of the US wars. Hasan reportedly warned senior Army physicians in 2007 that the military should allow Muslim soldiers to be released as conscientious objectors instead of fighting in wars to avoid "adverse events" (Fox News 11-11-09). Hasan petitioned superiors to prosecute certain returning soldiers he had seen as clients for what he believed were tantamount "war crimes" (ABC 11-16-09).

Hasan was effectively telegraphing the cold bold reality of what could happen, especially, eg, on the precipice of being deployed to Afghanistan: fundamentalist 'jihad' as a moral obligation. Three weeks before the killings, Hasan purchased a semiautomatic pistol and several high capacity 20 round magazines which, together with a

handgun, he used in the killings. He had taken extra classes in weapons training in the past and had practiced at a shooting range in the weeks before the killings. Witnesses to the massacre described his killing performance as focused and as having taken determined aim to fallen but live victims as though to finish them off. Interestingly, per other fundamentalist jihadists, in the weeks before the shootings at least, Hasan had frequented a fully nude dancers strip club and bought lap dances at \$50 a pop (ABC News 11-16-09). Though he was making a base salary of \$92/93,000, Hasan lived poorly with very meager possessions, similar to certain previous fundamentalist jihadists in the US. He rented a \$350 somewhat run down apartment near Ft Hood (Fox News 11-12-09). Hasan is reported to have sent significant sums of money to Islamic charities overseas (CBS 11-20-09). Whether money had been sent to Pakistan terror connected entities as is known of other fundamentalist jihadists operating in the US has not been clearly disclosed to observers outside the investigation. Hasan's religious inspirer, imam al-Awlaqi, has advocated avoiding a life of luxury as well as the giving of one's wealth as an important means of jihad (Dallas News 11-12-09).

The most important question about Hasan's behavior is not one about vicarious war fatigue, stress, or crippling workloads. The important question for assessing his behavior is: *is religious zealotry and fundamentalist 'jihad' mental illness*; perhaps also, what about the personalities or character of persons who follow its pursuit. By extension, one might ask, are the current US wars mental illness.

Realistically, there are several reported evidences for

understanding the acts of Hasan as acts of terror. Hasan represented himself as an 'SoA', Soldier of Allah, on his psychiatry business card. The card did not contain reference to his US military affiliation (NYT, 11-15-09). Residential acquaintances outside the military base saw Hasan as quiet, shy, nice, and a highly religious person. He was seen to dress in his uniform, in street clothes, and also had begun to wear Muslim style attire for some time. He wore white Muslim attire the morning of the killings (CBS 11-06-09). [He was in military uniform for the massacre (Guardian UK 11-06-09)]. Hasan gave away Qurans on the morning of the killings (AP 11-06-09) - also some before that morning; gave away the remainder of his modest worldly possessions; and told some acquaintances he no longer needed his things, that he would be moving. He told one neighbor, with whom he used to talk frequently, alot about his faith, "I'm going to do good work for God" (Washington Examiner 11-08-09). When asked by that neighbor whether he had fear in deploying to Afghanistan as scheduled for the following day, he reportedly said "I'm ready for it" (NYT 11-07-09). Just before he started to commit his most brutal acts, it is reported by witnesses that Hasan took an empty seat at a table, bowed his head murmuring something as if in prayer, then jumped atop a desk, exclaimed 'Allahu Akbar' - 'God is great' -, and began shooting into a gathering logistically described as "sitting ducks". Hasan also pursued fleeing persons, shooting several of them in the back (CBS News 11-06-09, LA Times 11-07-09, Telegraph UK 11-09-09, WSJ Online, 11-09-09).

The president of the United States was at an event for American Indian affairs when Ft Hood broke. Cameras rolled for a live announcement. As the president went to

live broadcast for his statement about the breaking event, he began his comments in a lighthearted smiling tone, to and about the audience, including giving a 'shout out' to an attendee. He then gave brief words about the shootings, as psychologists might say, without affect. In the aftermath overall, the president's biggest message was to preclude viewing the massacre in terms of Islamic terrorism. The Congress moved to open investigation into how this could occur in the military; the White House counseled against it and Congressional hearings since have not been held. The president ordered an intelligence report on the massacre. It was completed on 11-30-09. A member of the Congressional Intelligence Committee, which is required by law to have oversight of such matters, has complained that the committee could not get the report and that requests for it were being ignored even as the committee legally has its intelligence oversight obligation (CNS 11-14-09).

In May of this year a gunman killed a late term abortion doctor. The president of the United States made a public announcement condemning the killing on the same day soon after it occurred. In June of this year, an American convert to Islam, Mr Muhammed, killed one, and wounded a second, soldier at an army recruiting station in Little Rock. There was no immediate national public government condolence about it - from anyone. Three days later, the president made a languid public statement about it - likely instigated by the criticism which had ensued. The decedent's father underwent his agony without official, and thereby broadly publicly reinforced, recognition or support, in the near aftermath. I happened to hear the decedent's father speak soon after the killing. He spoke with emotionally difficult to

hear anguish and pathos, conveying a dissipated emptiness of experience within a context of official disregard for a nationally disturbing set of facts, and his dead-US-soldier-son/so-what/expendable/gut wrenching/excruciation.

Occasionally, a shooter may be insane, even temporarily. On the other hand, by logic, a person's religion, if it is a value system believed with one's whole being, trumps all. (Hasan, eg, is also reported to have avoided contact with female colleagues and to have refused to do a Christmas photograph with female colleagues as a matter of Islamic principle. Hasan is reported to have said to a friend with whom he dined the night before his killings that "In the Quran, it says you are not supposed to have alliances with Jews or Christians, and if you are killed in the military fighting against Muslims, you will go to hell" (NYT 11-07-09). The fact that unswervingly held religious belief trumps all is also why, eg, admonitions generally to 'leave religion at the door' when matters viewed to have deep ethical implications are being considered, often does not hold weight.

In the United States, we give money and lip service to a war(s) and suppress its manifestations. I do not believe in vengeance. I do not believe in killing my brothers and sisters as a remedy to human schisms. I do not believe in blowing things up on the big screen or in war. (I do believe in defending myself if I am literally up against a wall. I do believe in applying common sense against personal harm.) I do believe in describing things, scientifically, empirically, as they are. The human service community, and observers generally, must, above all, be objective, and not put empathy, - nor

enmity -, before the facts, - nor let vendettas - of any concerned party - take hold, even when a horrible event unfolds. At the same time, persons known to be intent on harm, or known to potentially continue to harm, must not have access to potential victims. The United States Army may well have dropped the ball in allowing Hasan to continue in any conventional military role.

It is imperative to be empirical. Empiricism does not preclude sympathy, - or empathy. Have we taken to being skewed by empathy at all costs to preclude correctness in our factual assessments? Do we take empathic positions that skew the facts as they are in this or the other societal issues of our present day lives? Being factual and humanitarian is a hard and rigorous course, one that requires a lot of time to review the quick moving news happenings of the moment. Just how intellectual, or truly scientific, are we? Are we 'spinning' and glossing over the pablum delivery we limitedly consume from the media. Believe half of what you see and none of what you hear. Actions speak louder than words. What is a person to do when so many of the assessments require an awful lot of time and effort to pursue. Are we slow cooking to death in tepid and increasingly heating water. How much do we realize and really understand about the many many important happenings going on in our country - eg, unsecured borders, an escalating war at our borders, etc. How much of happenings do we *believe*, at face value, or, believe based on positive bias, about behavior that is untenable, to be guarded against, all the while unawares.

It has been proffered that Hasan may plead an insanity defense. This would be the egregious salt in the wound.

Judging from a few high profile cases, insanity seems often to be used as a defense when it is not appropriate, and not used as a defense when it is appropriate. This is one of a plethora of vacuums about which psychology should exert its expertise and worth. From what is presently known, the question is again, *is fundamentalist 'jihad' insanity* - to be followed by the natural corollary, *is war insanity*. How do persons resolve differences that make them really mad (no mental illness pun intended) or drive them to resolutely ravage, destroy, and lay waste. Here as in all things of existence, we need psychology, help with human behavior - other than to rehabilitate the inflictions of war. Is it immutable to be bellicose. We have to maintain being practical and sensible, and, at the same time try to do something about the rage and instinct for killing within the human soul.

Hasan likely planned his killings. Imminent deployment to Afghanistan likely was a point at which he felt it necessary and justifiable to act, to follow through with a plan. At the time of the killings, Hasan may have felt duty, spirituality, and calm. Those who encountered him on the terrible morning in point remember him as relaxed and calm (CNN 11-07-09), as he was generally known to be. He may have been calm especially too as a pressing conflict was coming to resolution; as he believed his cause was necessary; as he would meet his martyr brethren in heaven to partake the reward of his acts; as he would prevent enemy persons from ever being able to kill Muslims; and perhaps as following a call of a religious adviser that satisfied subjective longings of the heart and soul.

Hasan became more involved in religion after the

passing of his parents in 1998 and 2001 (LA Times 11-12-09). Hasan is reported to have email questioned imam al-Awlaqi as to whether it is acceptable to kill innocents in a suicide attack. He also is reported to have communicated to al-Awlaqi that he could not wait to have discussions with him over non-alcoholic wine in the afterlife. Terror analysts have interpreted the latter as probable code for communicating that Hasan was set to carry out his acts. Analysts advise that terror emails are written in code generally and thus typically appear more harmless than they actually may be.

Hasan is reported to have been calm as well as seemingly discriminating to shoot persons in uniform as he killed. If in a trial Hasan were to be shown to have been not able to sleep, feeling anxious, generating religious expressions of fervor, and becoming more out of step with his duties at the military base, etc (I'm guessing at what could be advanced as a legal argument), it would not be out of keeping with his excogitating, and ultimately pursuing, the path he chose. It also would not be out of step with an intensifying angst about the dilemma he felt himself to be in. The evidence to date does not show that Hasan 'snapped' in the common understanding of the word; the evidence also does not appear to legally indicate stress by vicarious US battle fatigue per se but rather stress about what was happening to Muslim peoples at the hands of a military to which he belonged. Psychiatric profile - be it as it may -, Hasan comported himself as a devoted, qualified, and knowledgeable Muslim fundamentalist, a jihadist who was "ready" and willing to give his life to the call of its cause.

There were in Hasan's residential neighborhood, which

was outside the base, and which included former soldiers, instances of hostility to Hasan's presentation of his religion, - such as, eg, an "Allah is Love" bumper sticker on his car. Acquaintances reported that Hasan did not feel particularly bothered by hostilities as if compared against a greater purpose of his overriding religious commitment. Hasan was referred to by some in his neighborhood as 'camel jockey', and, once, his religious bumper sticker was torn off and his car keyed (CNN 11-06-09). One neighbor questioned Hasan's feeling about the keying and reported that Hasan said Ramadan is "a time to forgive everybody who's done wrong against you". A second neighbor reported Hasan's response to the incident was that per Ramadan "he had to forgive people" and that "he forgave him (the perpetrator) and moved on".

Hasan's behavior follows a pattern of many who have committed strategic and systematic acts of murder for the cause of fundamentalist jihad. Unlike most, he was unusually upfront about the contemplations of his mind. On the fateful morning at Fort Hood, he likely was not just calm. He said good bye to neighborhood acquaintances with care and kindness as the person they had known him to be and were later shocked to find out he was. Think about it. As he calmly and graciously proceeded with what likely was a plan for the killings, he may well have felt steady, grounded, exalted and existentially high, infused with purpose, otherworldliness, to do good, in the name of God.

Given the path he was following, might Hasan have continued along similar lines had he found a way to leave the army in fact. How many other persons are emboldened by the acts of Hasan. How many other

persons are becoming increasingly imbued with fundamentalist jihad based on stepped up bombings in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Fundamentalist Islam and the purpose of jihad is being fought through a vast and serious network on the internet, a network to which Hasan had connected. If Hasan were to be spun as "insane", Islamic fundamentalist suicide agents the world over are likewise implicated. 'Stress' or 'breakdown' due to vicarious and/or potential war participation are not legitimate defensive reasons for the acts of Hasan either. Up to the moment of his last acts, Hasan was kind, compassionate, sensitive to suffering, intellectually methodical, seemingly effortlessly calm, masterfully controlled, and intelligently concealing, misleading, and focused on his goal. He chose his side. He was galvanized by his religion, impending deployment, and a call to jihad.

Empathy notwithstanding, first and foremost, clinicians, observers, and people generally, should strive to *tell it like it is*. If empirical reality is harsh and ugly, care must be taken to manage hostile emotional reaction to it as well as to not distort the facts. I do not want to hurt Hasan or wish for him to be hurt, though he must be sequestered. I do want to know that he represents a danger that continues to grow. It is reckless to frame events in Panglossian reality, assuage collective conscience, or to lean on politics and a current highly skewed media that sins by commission and omission in doing its task. To accord the most comfortable, *empathic* version of reality - in lieu of, and to the detriment of, empirical reality - is an ethical, nay moral, betrayal of truth, understanding - and peaceful coexistence.

