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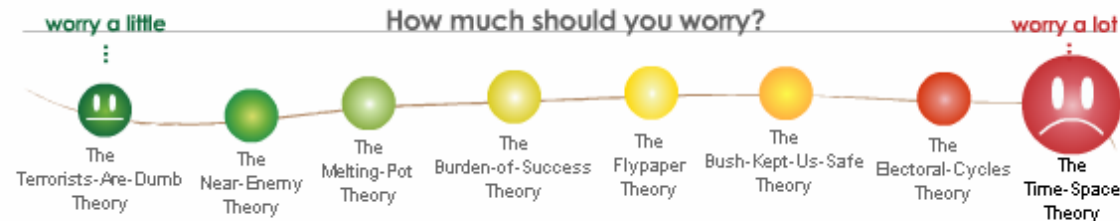
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## The Time-Space Theory

Is a rational al-Qaida merely biding its time?

By Timothy Noah

Updated Thursday, March 5, 2009, at 4:37 PM ET



*This is the last essay in a series of eight exploring why the United States suffered no follow-up terror attacks after 9/11. To read the series introduction, [click here](#).*

The RAND Corp. is headquartered in a [blindingly white temple of reason](#) a few blocks from the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica, Calif. It was here—or rather, next door, in the boxy international-style offices it inhabited for half a century before moving four years ago into a new \$100 million structure—that America's Cold War nuclear strategy of "mutual assured destruction" was [dreamed up](#). Also, the [Internet](#). Created by the Air Force in 1948, the nonprofit RAND would "invent a whole new language in [its] quest for rationality," *Slate*'s Fred Kaplan wrote in his 1983 book *The Wizards of Armageddon*.

RAND is the cradle of [rational-choice theory](#), a rigorously utilitarian mode of thought with applications to virtually every field of social science. Under rational-choice theory, belief systems, historical circumstances, cultural influences, and other nonrational filigree must be removed from consideration in calculating the dynamics of human behavior. There exists only the rational and orderly pursuit of self-interest. It is the religion that governs RAND. "You can leave your backpack in my office," RAND senior economist Darius Lakdawalla told me as we headed for a conference room. "There's no theft at RAND." I asked whether "[externalities](#)" were permitted anywhere inside the building. He chuckled politely.

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Lakdawalla and RAND economist Claude Berrebi are co-authors of "How Does Terrorism Risk Vary Across Space and Time?" a 2007 paper. (To download a copy, click [here](#) and pay \$30. To download an earlier draft of the same paper free of charge, click [here](#).) An underlying assumption of Berrebi and Lakdawalla's analysis is that—contrary to arguments put forward by game theorist [Thomas C. Schelling](#); [Max Abrahms](#) of Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation; and [Marc Sageman](#), a forensic psychiatrist and former CIA case officer—terrorists pursue concrete goals in a rational way. On the small-bore tactical level, Berrebi says, terrorists are *very* rational. It's entirely possible, Lakdawalla explains, to pursue an irrational goal in a rational manner. Berrebi cites terrorists' tendency to use suicide bombers only when no other alternatives are available. In general, terrorists prefer poorly protected targets to well-protected ones. "When stuff becomes harder to hit," Lakdawalla says, "terrorist groups, like anyone else, tend to look for easier opportunities." Don't worry about getting killed at the airport, where security measures have proliferated. Worry about getting killed at the shopping mall, where your only protection is a bored security guard.

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When Schelling, Abrams, and Sageman argue that terrorists are irrational, what they mean is that terror groups seldom realize their big-picture strategic goals. But Berrebi says you can't pronounce terrorists irrational until you know what they really want. "*We don't know* what are the real goals of each organization," he says. Any given terror organization is likely to have many competing and perhaps even contradictory goals. Given these groups' inherently secret nature, outsiders aren't likely to learn which of these goals is given priority.

One goal inherent in the 9/11 attacks was to do harm to the United States. In "[The Terrorists-Are-Dumb Theory](#)" and "[The Melting-Pot Theory](#)," we reviewed the considerable harm that the furious U.S. *response* to 9/11 caused al-Qaida. But that response harmed the United States, too. Nearly 5,000 U.S. troops have [died](#) in Iraq and Afghanistan, and [more than 15,000](#) have come home wounded. More than [90,000 Iraqi civilians](#) have been killed and [perhaps as many as 10,000](#) Afghan civilians; in Afghanistan, where fighting has intensified, more than 2,000 civilians died [just in the past year](#). "In Muslim nations, the wars in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq have driven negative ratings [of the United States] nearly off the charts," the Pew Global Attitudes Project [reported](#) in December. Gallup polls conducted between 2006 and 2008 found [approval ratings](#) for the U.S. government at 15 percent in the Middle East, 23 percent in Europe, and 34 percent in Asia. To be sure, civilian casualties have harmed al-Qaida's standing, too, as I noted in "[The Terrorists-Are-Dumb Theory](#)." But to whatever extent al-Qaida hoped to reduce the United States' standing in the world, and especially in the Middle East: Mission accomplished. The Pew survey found most countries anticipated an improvement under President Obama, who already has [ordered](#) that Guantanamo be shuttered and that the Bush administration's creative interpretations of the Geneva Convention be revoked. But with the Obama administration [escalating](#) troop levels in Afghanistan and a growing sense that U.S. forces will remain in Iraq for [years to come](#), the United States won't be loved by the Muslim world anytime soon.

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Rational-choice theory is most at home with economics, and here the costs are more straightforward. In March 2008, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, and Linda Bilmes of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, put the Iraq war's cost at [\\$3 trillion](#). In October 2008, the Congressional Research Service [calculated](#), more conservatively, an additional \$107 billion for the Afghanistan war and another \$28 billion for enhanced homeland security since 9/11. According to CRS, for every soldier the United States deploys in Iraq or Afghanistan, the taxpayer spends \$390,000. Let me put that another way. Sending a *single soldier* to Iraq or Afghanistan costs the United States nearly as much as the estimated [\\$500,000](#) it cost al-Qaida to conduct *the entire 9/11 operation*. Not a bad return on Bin Laden's investment, Berrebi says. President Bush left office with a budget deficit of nearly [\\$500 billion](#), and that's before most of the deficit spending that most economists think will be required to avoid another Great Depression even begins. "We are facing the recession starting from a worsened standpoint," Berrebi says. Al-Qaida may not be the only reason, but it certainly helped.

Page: 1 | 2

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Berrebi and Lakdawalla's "How Does Terrorism Risk Vary Across Space and Time?" focuses on Israel's experience, but it can be applied to the question of why al-Qaida hasn't attacked the United States since 9/11. The "space" referred to in the title is the particular site chosen for a terrorist attack. *Proximity* to the terrorist headquarters and easy access to an *international border* are, Berrebi and Lakdawalla write, hugely important in deciding whether to carry out a terrorist attack. "When distance to a terrorist home base doubles," they calculate, "the



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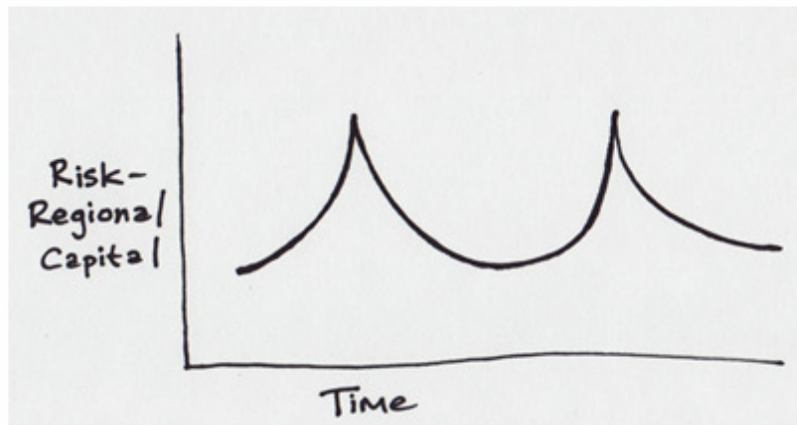
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frequency of attacks falls by around 30 percent." Areas near international borders "are more than twice as likely to be hit" as areas far from international borders. Following this logic, Israel is a veritable paradise for Islamist terrorists. It's located right in the Middle East, and, east to west, it's only [85 miles](#) wide. The United States, by contrast, is a jihadi's worst nightmare: halfway across the world and 3,000 miles wide. The two countries' comparative experience with terrorism reflects these realities.

The "time" referred to in the title is the interval between attacks, and it's a lot less comforting to people who live in the United States. To simplify things as we spoke in a RAND conference room, Berrebi drew a rudimentary graph on a whiteboard. The vertical axis represented the risk of attack in a regional capital. The horizontal axis represented the passage of time. It looked like this:



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#### Why No More 9/11s?



The risk of attack increases sharply before an attack occurs (*duh*), then falls, then levels off and eventually starts to rise again. I mentioned to Berrebi and Lakdawalla that my girlfriend had travelled to New Delhi a couple of weeks after the Mumbai terror attack and that I'd worried about her. Guess I shouldn't have worried! Berrebi shook his head and tapped on the line just to the right of the first peak. The risk *immediately after* an attack, he said, is still very high, because it takes the authorities some time to figure out what's happening and to beef up security—and because the terrorists' planned mission may not be completed. Gradually, security measures are put in place. Then gradually, these security measures slacken, creating new opportunities for attack. In Jerusalem, Berrebi and Lakdawalla found that after a terror attack the risk of a follow-up attack begins to increase after *only two* incident-free months. "This suggests," they conclude, "that long periods of quiet actually indicate *elevated* risk for sensitive areas." Berrebi and Lakdawalla are restating the familiar war-movie cliché in which two soldiers stand guard over a peaceful nighttime landscape. "It's quiet," says one. "Yeah," says the other. "Too quiet." Then the enemy emits a battle cry and the fighting begins.

In Jerusalem, it's two months from peak to trough. In the United States, it's X months, where X has an unknown value greater than 44.\* If the United States suffers another major terror attack, Berrebi and Lakdawalla will be able to calculate the value of X. They think they'll probably get that second data point. They just don't know when.

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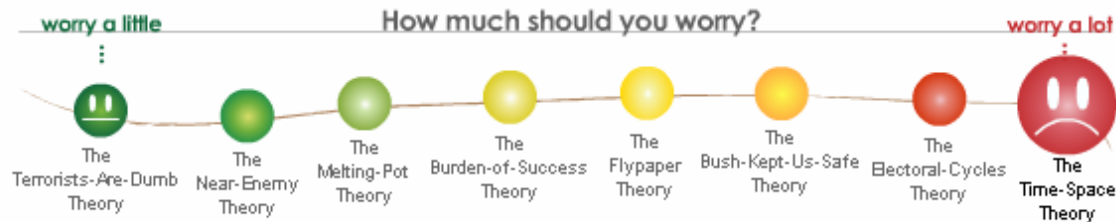


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**Correction, March 6, 2009:** An earlier version of this column erroneously set the value of  $X$  at greater than 89 months, which denotes the period from peak to peak. Measuring from peak to trough, it's approximately half that, i.e., greater than 44 months. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

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