Al-Qaeda: 9/11 Motives

On September 11, 2001 we see the attacks that define Al-Qaeda. If you look at the 1998 embassy attacks, there are similarities, but this is terrorism taken to an even higher level.

We have four near-simultaneous attacks. Two on World Trade Center buildings. One on the Pentagon. And there is an attempted attack on the U.S. Capitol that is foiled when very brave and heroic passengers bring the airplane down rather than have it continue its mission and strike the Capitol.

Now these targets are symbols. They are symbols of American commercial power in the World Trade Center, American political power, in the Capitol. And American military power, the Pentagon. And so Al-Qaeda is trying to strike at the heart of what makes America America.

At the same time, these attacks have other motives. One motive is simply revenge. Al-Qaeda believes that the United States is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslims. And this is a way of fighting back.

Some Al-Qaeda members also believe that if you hit the United States hard, it gives in. They point to the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon after Hezbollah did bombings of U.S. Marine barracks and embassy there. They point to the U.S. departure from Somalia after the famous Black Hawk down incident, in which Americans were killed on a peacekeeping operation there. And they say this shows that if America's hit, it will run.

But these attacks are also very effective and very dramatic attempts of propaganda by the deed. They grab the attention not just of the Muslim world, but the world in general. And because they're so high profile, because they involve what Al-Qaeda would consider martyrdom operations, the sacrifice of the pilots, that many people consider them heroic rather than savage, criminal acts.

In addition, they're hoping for the United States to respond, as it indeed does, by going into Afghanistan. And from Al-Qaeda's point of view this is desirable. They believe that Afghanistan was the place where the Soviet Union was destroyed. This is their home turf. And if they can bring in the United States there to fight, that's good news.

Also in general they're hoping for U.S. reaction around the Muslim world that will show America's true colors, that will show Muslims that the United States is indeed an oppressive power and essentially wake the world up.

Let's pause at 9/11 and look at Al-Qaeda's three main functions. First is, of course, terrorism, and this is the focus of the United States. And it's what grabs the attention of much of the world. But also very important is the organization's support for an array of terrorist groups and insurgencies around the Muslim world. Again, this idea of being the quartermaster of jihad.
And also very important is Al-Qaeda’s propaganda function. It’s trying to change the ideas of the Muslim world. It's trying to convince Muslims that they are one nation. But also that they are one nation under attack and that the United States is their true enemy.