



## **HOW WE MISUNDERSTAND TERRORISM**

**by Adam Garfinkle**

Auguste Comte once wrote that “intellectual confusion is at the bottom of every historical crisis.” Insofar as the United States finds itself in a foreign policy crisis, intellectual confusion is indeed the cause, and in this case it is three-part.

First, two post-Cold War U.S. administrations have misconstrued the implications of a unipolar world. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations thought American influence would grow as a result of the U.S. victory in the Cold War, but the opposite has been the case.

Second, there is a widespread American misunderstanding of both the origin and scope of Islamist apocalyptic terrorism. That threat is enabled to some degree by poverty and social injustice, by grievances over Western policies, and by the authoritarian political cultures of the Muslim world. But it is not caused by any of these. Its underlying cause is the inability of most Muslim--and especially Arab--societies to effectively adapt to the growing pressures of modernization.

Third, there is the dominant cadence of our own political culture: Enlightenment universalism. Our belief in the universal applicability of what is actually a parochial point of view obscures awareness of the true source of Islamic terrorism.

The error of assuming greater U.S. influence when there is actually less has compounded the misunderstanding of terrorism, producing counterproductive policies that have reduced U.S. influence still further. Only by escaping our confusion can we end the crisis.

### **NEITHER POVERTY NOR TYRANNY**

When confronted with a novel challenge, the human mind reasons by analogy. We then become prone to reading the world in ways that reaffirm the choice we have made. Since 9/11 most Americans (and many others) have tended to reason by analogy about Islamist terrorism in two basic tropes, both idealist in nature—one quintessentially liberal and one quintessentially conservative.

The liberal idealist approach is to alleviate the poverty and social injustice thought to be the “root cause” of terrorist violence and address the supposedly legitimate grievances of those who hate us in the Middle East. Those who took the poverty approach to deal with terrorism were simply recapitulating the Cold War catechism: Communism festers when impoverished people lack hope in the future.

But the idea that stimulating rapid economic growth in Middle Eastern countries would reduce the generation of terrorism is ahistorical. Rapid economic growth invariably brings disruptive social change in its wake. It does not “settle down” societies; at base, change--even progress--that comes too rapidly to be assimilated *is* the problem.

As to grievances, there is a general tendency to exaggerate the role of Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts in the broader Middle Eastern context. The idea that an Israeli-Palestinian peace arrangement, could one be produced, would reduce the terrorist threat to the United States and the West is delusional. Indeed, Western brokerage of a settlement that leaves a Jewish State of Israel in any borders whatsoever would increase, not reduce, terrorism. In fact, the depredations of Arab autocracies are better accelerators of the frustrations that can congeal into terrorist violence than anything that goes on in Israel/Palestine. Moreover, just as rapid economic growth would produce more angst and, hence, more terror recruits, making Israel the scapegoat to appease radical Muslim demands would only help radicals in their internal social battle against more moderate and traditional forces. Those who think that alleviating poverty in the Middle East and “addressing the grievances” of our enemies are the best policies to deal with Islamist terror would only substitute different counterproductive policies for current ones.

That said, the counterproductive potential of current policies is undeniable. The “democracy deficit” trope of conservative

idealism analogizes the oppression of Soviet and East European societies to that of societies abused by authoritarian governments in the Muslim and especially the Arab worlds. President Bush's frequent assertion that freedom is a gift of God universally applicable to all people is the clearest example of this highly moralized view of international politics. Combined with a simplified version of democratic peace theory, this view encompasses a secular messianist vision of permanent world peace. Its core theory is that terrorists arise because other avenues of political participation are closed off. These violent malcontents blame the West, the United States in particular, for the stultified environments in which they suffer.

Liberal templates for understanding Islamist terrorism have fallen behind the "democracy deficit" analogue in recent years. Not only did the poverty approach fly in the face of obvious facts about 9/11 and other terrorists, but conservative idealists have controlled the bully pulpit and employed talented White House speechwriters to make use of it. However, the democracy deficit template remains a misleading analogue for understanding Islamist terrorism.

Social injustice and acute income stratification have been features of authoritarian Arab and Muslim societies for the entire modern independence era, and even before that. Yet the sort of terrorism we experienced on 9/11 is new; Al Qaeda was founded only in 1988. How can conditions that have existed for decades and even centuries explain this recent phenomenon?

The Bush administration's policies have produced predictably counterproductive outcomes in Gaza, for example, and in Iraq, where a premature election strengthened a proclivity for sectarian voting. This has reinforced the downward spiral where decision-makers continue to see the world through the prism of their chosen analogue.

### THE REAL PROBLEM

The root causes of apocalyptic terrorism have to do with a condition of blocked or distorted modernization. A monumental, culture-cracking collision between the Muslim world and "Westernization" has been ongoing for a century and more, gaining momentum in the last two post-Cold War decades with the accelerating Western cultural penetration of the Muslim world. Mostly traditional societies are being increasingly stressed by external pressures even as changes well up within from greater urbanization, literacy and social mobility. To various degrees, these societies are being pluralized, and this is placing enormous strains on established ways of thinking and behaving.

Pluralization--a process in which people become aware that there are multiple ways to interpret and act in society--tends to divide traditional societies into three basic groups: a minority that wants "in" to the modern world; nativists who fear for the identity of their society and use religious symbols to mobilize people against the alien intrusion; and those seeking a living tradition to negotiate entry into modernity on culturally acceptable non-Western terms. Western historians of the many precedential movements sometimes refer to them as chiliastic, or end-of-the-world, millenarian religious risings. Such movements are generally quietist and inward-turned. Sometimes, however, they turn their energies outward into mad and often suicidal violence against real or perceived enemies. At such times, believers usually think that violence is part of a divine plan to hasten the end of the world, bring the messiah, re-establish the Caliphate, or whatever the theology requires. Such movements generally arise at times of disruptive change, anything that renders normal frameworks of social understanding obsolete.

One reason many Middle Eastern societies have problems dealing with the stresses induced by rapid change: the endogamous family structure. Endogamy generally means marrying close to one's family, but in the Middle East, it defines a tribe. It refers to the strong preference for marriage within extended family defined by strongly patriarchal lineages, and it even provides a survival rationale for men having multiple wives. These "segmentary lineages" shift about with cousin marriage to give rise to a kind of internal balance of power among subunits.

In most Arab societies, everyone knows where they fit into the overall structure. Loyalty is to extended family, individual agency is weak, and the entire structure tends to resist outside influence. Religion is organic to birth and reinforces the authority of the patriarchal system. However, it is the social structure, which predated Islam, that comes first. Assaults to tribe and family, real or imagined, are therefore assaults against religion, and vice versa.

Endogamous social organization helps explain why these societies tend to split into factions when they come under pressure. The Taliban, which most Westerners consider motivated by religion, are as much driven by concern over their tribal structures' viability. Westerners divide politics from religion and religion from social structure by second nature, but these divisions have no parallel in the Middle East.

Why do they hate us? They don't. Sometimes we disgust them because of what they consider our materialist, impatient and promiscuous ways. But mainly they fear us. They are afraid that our cultural-economic intrusion into their social space will destroy their corporate identity and undo the authority structures that for thousands of years have protected them against the vicissitudes of history. They interpret the threat through the prism of religion and use religious pride to mobilize resistance. But at base this has nothing to do with theology as Westerners understand the term.

In times of stress, joining chiliastic movements is not the only mode of coping. Many react instead by becoming more conventionally religious. This is why rapid upward mobility is frequently associated in the Muslim world with greater piety, not less. This is the opposite of what postwar Western modernization theory expected, an error caused by a spasm of unreflective universalism that led its practitioners to superimpose Western templates on non-Western societies.

Alas, we Americans don't often bother distinguishing between pious traditionalists and politicized nativists, and we generally don't realize how scary we are to traditional peoples. Now, when large enough chunks of any society generate outward-turned chiliastic movements, all hell is liable to break loose. But the real targets are always close to home, with the exception of those, e.g. Mohammad Atta, living in Europe, uncomfortably suspended between the old and the new. We in the West are primarily props in their arguments.

The motivation for 9/11 came from nativists attacking the "far enemy" to undermine those of their countrymen who opposed both their views and approaches to cleansing their societies. The presence of U.S. forces on Saudi soil provided a handy pretext, the end of the Cold War made the United States the only obvious target of such an attack, and modern transportation and communication technologies provided the means. The hope, clearly expressed by Al Qaeda principals, was that U.S. forces would be lured subsequently into Afghanistan and smashed as were Soviet forces before them.

If there is any good news in this account of our terrorism problem, it is that episodes of chiliastic violence invariably burn themselves out. They require lots of un- or under-employed young men to constitute the armies of protest, but young men grow up fast. Above all, suicidal violence tends to create self-limiting organizations. So even if salafi groups were better organized than most are, the threat they pose is limited by the time horizon. To call this conflict a "long war" is therefore exactly wrong. It will only become a "long war" if we act in such a way as to make it one.

The bad news is that a policy of exporting democracy will not curb chiliastic violence. Indeed, by threatening and weakening the very Arab and Muslim state elites which we need to contain these movements, we make the prospects of that violence worse. By implying that we are politically and morally superior to them, again, we help nativists in their internal struggles with those who are our natural allies. It is, therefore, good that the Bush administration's "forward strategy for freedom" in the Middle East has been quieted, because further efforts to promote it would have been disastrous.

#### WHAT WE MUST DO

If we substitute a blocked-modernization understanding of the problem for a democracy-deficit understanding, what would change in U.S. foreign policy?

First, we would rethink efforts to promote economic growth and political liberalization in the Muslim world. It is fine to want to alleviate poverty and spread liberal institutions and democratic government to others. But it is hard for outsiders to do liberal good works in places where the institutional and attitudinal precursors--a pervasive sense of individual agency and the idea of equality before the law; belief in an intrinsic source of moral-political authority; and the existence of a concept of a loyal opposition--are largely absent.

More than that, introducing democratic forms prematurely can be counterproductive to the eventual success of liberal institutions. For example, elections, interjected into heterogeneous societies not used to individual political agency, can drive societies back toward their tribal roots. The January 2008 election in Kenya seems a case in point.

Therefore, we should cease the rhetorical policy of promoting democracy in the Muslim world. Traditional Muslims do not accept distinctions between theology and ideology. In this they are consonant with the flow of history, in which political theology has always been a fact of life. More than that, "democracy" carries baggage in the Muslim world, much of it negative. To some, democracy vaguely means government that is not arbitrary and corrupt. To many pious Muslims, however, it is vaguely associated with apostasy. In his anti-election campaign in Iraq in 2005, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi suggested that voting was tantamount to participation in a Christian religious ritual.

Moreover, when U.S. officials claim that our way of doing politics is sanctioned by God, they are saying in effect that traditional Muslim concepts of government are not sanctioned by God. This turns the conflict into a more explicitly religious dispute that helps radical nativists for whom the religious pride of ordinary people is a natural ally.

U.S. policy, therefore, requires a low-profile, long-term emphasis on assisting gradual, sustainable economic reform, and on promoting locally acceptable forms of the rule of law. This is in our interest not just because alleviating poverty and promoting justice are good in and of themselves, or because such programs will stamp out terrorism in the short run (they won't), but because we need stronger states in the region to contain religious energies and movements.

For the time being, then, first, we should prefer "soft" authoritarian rule to weak and warlike young democracies. We should save our high-profile rhetoric and any muscular action for states actively supporting or abetting terrorist violence.

Second, we should stigmatize terrorism, using indigenous sources of authority to do so, but without linking that effort to democratization. We should patiently pursue a state-strengthening liberalization agenda even as we separately pursue a terrorism-stigmatization campaign.

Third is public diplomacy. We have botched this in the Middle East over the past six years. We have been worried about our image, but the problem is the failure of most Muslim societies to audibly condemn terrorism—a practice that is abhorrent to any reasonable reading of Islam. We should have been quietly networking traditional Muslim intellectuals and clerics to help them articulate that terrorism is morally wrong. We have done some of this, mainly at the Defense Department, but the State Department has wasted years perseverating on the wrong question. In an absentminded fit of post-Cold War economizing, Congress destroyed the institution arguably best suited for the purpose—the United States Information Agency—and tried

unsuccessfully to stuff its remains into the Department of State. One solution would be to re-establish USIA, but a new public-private partnership of some kind is probably the better way to go.

Fourth, we should try not to lose, or appear to lose, the war in Iraq. Being seen to lose in Iraq is the single most effective way to help Al Qaeda recruit an ample next generation of terrorists. Not losing is the best way to deflate its conviction that God is on its side. Nor should we lose the struggle in Afghanistan, which may turn out to be harder than Iraq. And we should not underestimate the huge symbolic value of finding and killing bin-Laden and al-Zawahiri. But this does not mean we should stay in Iraq in full military strength until we have helped midwife a liberal democracy. Rather, we should seek an Iraq that holds together in a federal state, and that is neither so strong as to threaten its neighbors nor so weak as to entice violence from them.

It is safe and wise to set minimalist goals for U.S. Iraq policy for two reasons. First, Iraqi society will probably not collapse into acute sectarian violence if the U.S. reduces its military profile there; and the regional consequences of negative events in Iraq would not in any event be as significant as many fear. National leaderships in that part of the world are generally cautious and conservative, aware of their own weakness and the neighborhood's dangers. More important, if we keep assuming that small shifts in what we do will have outsized regional consequences, we will become in perpetuity a nation of caring and hence incompetent imperialists. An "indispensable nation" attitude of this sort for the Middle East is a formula for protracted disaster.

Fifth, if we understand that rapid social change occasionally produces violent chiliastic movements, we should expect to see more such movements over the next several decades. We should also expect that if the U.S. remains the number-one power, we will remain the prime target for such groups. This leads to an important observation: When we think of a nexus between WMD and terrorism we typically think of nuclear weapons. But nuclear weapons are hard to make, hide, transfer and use compared to bioweapons. By all means we should continue efforts to contain the nuclear weapons proliferation threat. But if the future WMD of choice will likely be bio-weapons, we need to devise ways to better control the uses of bioscience. We need an international regime to both monitor and set standards for bioscience research, and we probably should criminalize certain behaviors.

Lastly, we must take the full measure of what the crisis of modernity in the Arab/Muslim world means for the Western approach to the region. As a rule, we should make ourselves scarce, and when we cannot, try to join with our European, Asian and Middle Eastern allies.

Of course, whether the U.S. government keeps its profile high or low, it cannot tell NGOs what to do or tell U.S.-based corporations where to buy, sell and invest. The products of American entertainment culture, especially action films, do a lot of damage. They convey images of American society wildly at variance with reality. We need to reconsider what, if anything, we can do about this as a matter of public policy.

We need also to adjust homeland security policy. Terrorism sets a trap that requires the object of its attention to conspire in its own undoing. We have fallen into that trap. What should we do now to reverse the errors we have made?

First, the U.S. government must stop injecting fear into the American population. It should eliminate Orwellian security announcements in our subway systems and avoid messages telling us vaguely to "report suspicious activities." Such policies tell all potential terrorists that it doesn't take much to rattle us. They constitute not deterrents but incentives to strike us.

Second, we need to stop treating so many visitors to our country as potential terrorists. We are alienating our best potential friends abroad with bureaucratized paranoia. We must also stop violating international legal norms regarding prisoners and detainees. It is true that the Geneva Conventions no longer speak adequately to the times, but we should err on the side of compliance wherever a question of interpretation arises.

Third, we should examine whether the FBI can ever mount a serious effort at domestic counterterrorism. We may need a new organization, comparable to Britain's MI5, for this purpose.

Fourth, we must get a handle on immigration. The U.S. Customs and Immigration Service cannot possibly be expected to find the "signal" of terrorism crossing our borders when the "noise" of 12-14 million illegal immigrants eats up its resources. Congress needs to fix the problem, but it won't unless the next White House forces the issue.

Fifth, we need to re-conceive the structures of both the Directorate for National Intelligence and the Homeland Security Department. Both of these "reforms" are over-centralized, over-layered bureaucratic monstrosities that probably make us less safe. We need, instead, to become a more resilient nation, both to deal with contemporary salafi terrorism and with the more daunting prospects of post-salafi bioterror in the future.

Sixth, as we need to say less from our bully pulpits about the danger of terrorism, we need quietly to do more about it. We need to reduce the number of lawyers in the Defense Department who keep telling U.S. Special Forces units what they cannot do, for example, with Predator missiles.

Seventh and finally, if the problem of apocalyptic terrorism is a "war of ideas," then as with any war someone needs to be in charge of it. The U.S. government needs unity of command, but today no one is in charge. No one has even undertaken the elementary exercise of working up a functional budget to show what resources we are spending across half a dozen Executive

departments and agencies. The preparation of such a functional budget would make a worthy exercise for a transition team between an election and an inauguration.

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