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It’s Not About Faith: A Battle for the Soul of the Middle East

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The horror inflicted on America on September 11 has raised not only fears about the obvious and serious dangers of global terrorism, but also questions about the relationship between these dangers and their apparent sources in the Middle East. These questions have provoked a debate about the relationship between Islamist terrorism, Islam as a religion and culture, and, most important, the prevalent anger in the region toward the United States.

DOUBLE FEARS IN AMERICA

The revelations about the background of the perpetrators of the September 11 terror have increased the public’s sense of fear and vulnerability: one can deal with evil, but a combination of that which is evil and that which is mysterious and irrational is doubly terrifying. How can well-educated seemingly “normal” men from middle-class families not only commit such mass murders, but also commit suicide? It flies in the face of our notions about causes of crime and suicide, and propels us toward explanations such as Islamic theology that we do not understand. In the process we grow more fearful: they hate us; they are driven by blind religious faith and thus insensitive to reward and punishment; they are ruthless and willing to die; and they can be among us awaiting their turn. But the perpetrators are merely evil, and their behavior is not as mysterious as it seems. One must begin by separating the ruthlessness of the terrorists from their willingness to kill themselves in the process.

Historically, those who have employed violence for political ends have come from the educated and

middle classes—whether in the Middle East or elsewhere. Often seeing themselves as revolutionaries, as in the case of Marxists such as Che Guevara in Latin America, the more-educated segments of the public are generally less accepting of their inferior position in society because they “know better,” and because they are also more aware of their capacity to affect change. Certainly, most employ nonviolent means to act, but like other segments of society, evildoers exist among the educated as well. If one is evil and educated, one is more likely to act.

In the Middle East, one of the most radical Palestinian groups in the late 1960s was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a secular organization founded by a Christian physician. The PFLP, which engaged in a series of highly publicized airline hijackings, attracted many members from among the better educated. The secularism of this group should also be a reminder of the mistaken assumptions many make about the relationship between the Islamic religion and violence. It is true that those religious groups employing violence find some theological justification for it, just as their opponents find the opposite interpretations. But justification, as we well know, does not add up to cause. The Jonestown cult did not represent Christianity any more than Baruch Goldstein and his supporters represent Judaism. It is telling that, when the violence in the Middle East was carried out by secular nationalists in the 1950s and 1960s, both the West and intellectuals in the region saw in Islam a passive religion, an “opiate of the masses” that accepted the status quo and bolstered stability. Theologically, the prevalent interpretation was that a Muslim simply accepted God’s will and did not seek to change it, repeating the phrase “*al-Hamdulillah*” (Thanks be to God) even in the face of obvious pain.

This should be a reminder that the issue of violence is not one of religion and theology. But it is

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inescapable today that much of the political militancy is carried out by Islamist groups in the name of Islam, and that these groups are on the ascendance. The question is why? Here, the answer is hardly mysterious: in the absence of democracy and legitimate means for organizing political opposition, people turn to social organization, and the mosque is one of the few vehicles for mass political mobilization. And there are profound reasons, both with regard to foreign and domestic policy, for people to want to oppose the existing order. Despair and humiliation are pervasive in the region. People turn to available vehicles of political organization, sometimes instrumentally, sometimes instinctively. This despair is the “demand side” of terrorism: terrorists who have their own aims, including personal ambition or greed, can exploit this despair to recruit members, gain financial support, and show a public that may be resigned to its humiliation that change is possible.

Indeed, as soon as the pounding of targets in Afghanistan began, the voice of Osama bin Laden was heard all over the Middle East—calm, confident, eloquent, and passionate. In a prerecorded tape, released just in time to counter a major speech by President George W. Bush, bin Laden addressed common grievances in the region: the suffering of Iraqi children, the pain of Palestinians, and the American military presence in Saudi Arabia. His message was woven through with golden passages from the Koran and strengthened by staging designed to appeal to his audience—an austere, rocky setting, rifle at the ready. Above all, he reminded people of what they had grown to believe over the years: the United States and the West do not value Arab and Muslim lives in the same way that they value Israeli and Western lives, and are now tasting the kind of pain that people of the region have long endured. Attempting to inspire hope in those who desperately want to see change in the region at almost any cost, bin Laden spoke of the “winds of change” brought by the horror inflicted on America.

PARALYZED

For those few in the Middle East who support bin Laden's aims and his means, the words were empowering. And for the majority of people who share the grievances he expressed but reject bin Laden's terrorism and even fear his aims, his message was paralyzing. In the end, he is pitted, in their eyes, against the United States, whose policies they find hard to defend and whose actions they mis-

trust. Whom will they choose to support? This is the battle for hearts and minds that the United States now faces.

The horrific attacks on the United States that have scared governments and elites in the region into asking, “Can we afford to live in Bin Laden's world?” have also had the consequence of inspiring those who will do almost anything to see change. If a few dozen men with mere knives can inflict so much pain on the sole superpower and threaten world order, they too can act by joining or emulating them. This is a haunting prospect, clearly not driven by religion or theology but by evil people exploiting despair. Few as bin Laden's true supporters in the region may be, they are on the offensive with the promise of change. They are mobilized to demonstrate in the streets of Pakistan and Gaza, and, more important, their voices dominate the airwaves.

Yet the majority of people in the Middle East are moderate. Even among Palestinians, 64 percent said in a recent poll that the attacks on the United States “violated Islamic law.” But the moderates, including leaders who are terrified by the prospect that the region could be dominated by militants or by the likes of the intolerant Taliban, find themselves on the defensive. They offer no alternative vision beyond rejecting terrorism as a method. Rather than pitting themselves courageously against the militants, they allow the militants to define the discourse, as if bin Laden's conflict is with only the West. This is, in part, the legacy of the 1991 Persian Gulf war, when the United States assembled an international coalition to dislodge Iraq from Kuwait. Then, as now, considerable popular anger was directed toward the United States. Indeed, two months before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, I visited several countries in the region, including Iraq, as a congressional staffer and wrote a report identifying the mood in the region as being the most anti-American since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. But Iraq's blatant aggression in invading Kuwait propelled many to put aside their anger to face the bigger threat.

The anger was not easy to contain; a Palestinian-Israeli confrontation in Jerusalem in September 1990 nearly derailed the coalition. But three elements were at work for the coalition partners then that do not exist today: a real threat from a powerful Iraq that had shaken the smaller Arab states in the gulf; a well-defined mission with a clear endpoint (the liberation of Kuwait); and a near-monopoly of the media that allowed regional governments to coordinate a public opinion campaign and limit Iraqi access to their citizenry.

This is in stark contrast to the current crisis. Today, many people in the region do not see bin Laden as an immediate threat to themselves. They do not see where the war on terrorism will end and believe that it is primarily aimed at Arabs and Muslims. And a large number of new and more independent media outlets—especially satellite TV—that have emerged in the past decade give militants prominent space and air time.

What vision do the moderates have to offer? In 1990 the United States and its coalition partners understood the immediate need to put forth an alternate vision to win the hearts of the public and to change the course of regional politics. It was a vision of a “new world order” to follow the end of the cold war and benefit the Middle East. The scheme was simple: a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the promise of an economic dividend that would lead the region to prosperity. The vision inspired hope and kept the public patient. But this paradigm crashed hard even before the collapse of Arab-Israeli negotiations last year. Now the public in the region asks what the moderates achieved by negotiating with Israel and courting the United States. The Palestinians remain under occupation after 34 years, Iraq’s population has suffered under sanctions while its government survived, and the economies of most Middle Eastern states went from bad to worse. The promises made to them by their governments at the end of the gulf war seem hollow.

Many factors are to blame for the economic failure, including government mismanagement, the hard costs of the gulf war, the decline in oil revenues, and rapidly growing populations. The failure to achieve Arab-Israeli peace also made financial investments in parts of the region more risky. But this is not about the objective reality of where the blame lies: it is about entrenched perceptions. The public in the Middle East blames the powers that be, and sees Israel as the most powerful state in the region, an occupier of Arab lands, and the United States as the anchor of that order. Conspiracy theories abound in the Middle East, the favorite explanation for every ill; even the September 11 attack is sometimes blamed on an Israeli conspiracy to discredit the Muslim world.

WHY SUICIDE?

While the prevalence of conspiracy theories can be accounted for by the cultural and political environments in the region, the use of suicide as an instrument of terrorism is more difficult to explain.

It is easy, in this case, to escape the need to explain the apparently irrational behavior by focusing on Islamic theology. But theology cannot explain suicide as a method of terrorism. Here again, the perpetrators and their supporters may twist religion to suit their ends, and to brush aside the basic Islamic doctrine prohibiting suicide. But if it is assumed that Muslims do not fear death because they believe they are rewarded in heaven, we need look no further than our television screens these days: tens of thousands of faithful Muslims are trying to flee Afghanistan fearing for their lives as the United States mounts its response to the terrorist crimes. And look no further than bin Laden’s own recruitment tapes that he distributes in the Arab world: his primary means of motivating his public is showing pictures of dead Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, and Chechnya to move his audience into action.

Certainly, the suicide bombers have come from Islamist groups in recent years, and they do employ the concept of “martyrdom” to explain and justify their actions. But it is forgotten that the PFLP and other militant secular Palestinian groups in the 1950s and 1960s (which included Christians) were called *fedayeen*, or those who sacrifice their lives. And it is also forgotten that when the suicide bombing began in Lebanon in the 1980s, Western analysts attributed them specifically to one branch of Islam, Shiite Islam, which happened to coincide with the religion of Hezbollah, the militant group carrying out these bombings. Since then Hezbollah has ceased to employ suicide bombings, preferring guerrilla warfare, and those who do employ the method, such as the Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas, are Sunni Muslims. Historically, other groups and people have employed suicide, such as the Japanese in World War II.

From the perspective of individual actors, suicide as a method is strictly irrational; from the point of view of a ruthless group, it is terrifyingly efficient. Bin Laden’s organization must be seen as a cult: its method of persuasion is akin to brainwashing, although any person willing to die always has individual reasons. Once a group is willing to employ ruthless methods and to kill so many innocent civilians, the sacrifice of group members is horrifyingly effective, since it is very difficult to defend against. And even from the point of view of total casualties for the group, fewer fighters will be lost and more casualties inflicted on its enemies than if the group used means such as guerrilla warfare.

The horror that befell America is a haunting reminder of the danger ahead. But to address this

danger, we must begin not with theories about mysterious religious doctrines and irrational people, but with three arenas of confrontation. First, confront the “supply side,” the merchants of death who exploit despair for their own ends. Second, work with the international community to delegitimize attacks on civilians as a political instrument, and suicide attacks as something to be celebrated; the war must also be a war of ideas. Third, do not forget the demand side: legitimate anger and genuine despair in the Middle East today provide the fertile ground for terrorists to exploit. Unless we address the roots of this anger and despair, new terrorists taking advantage of public hopelessness could replace the ones we destroy.

BUILDING BLOCKS

What can be done to address both the supply and demand sides of terrorism through specific policies toward the Middle East? First, the United States must not be disheartened by continuing images of hatred, because some people in the region will never be won over, no matter what the United States does. Second, the United States must cultivate its natural allies in the governments and elite in the region for whom bin Laden remains a threat. Third, the United States must provide an inspiring vision for the majority of people in the middle who love much about America and aspire to its standard of living, but also mistrust it and dislike its policies. When moderates debate

militants on television, they have no positive argument to offer, so they go on the defensive. They need ammunition to wage their war of ideas.

It is here that much can be done. Confronting the perpetrators of terror with military resolve is an important part of the campaign, and their demise will weaken the militants' hand. But unlike the liberation of Kuwait, it will be hard to know when they are truly defeated. To succeed, the United States–led coalition must offer an alternate vision that addresses the genuine problems in the region. Launching a forum for fueling economic and political development with the promise of cooperation and reviving serious Arab-Israeli negotiations are integral to this vision. To be sure, people in the region are tired of mere promises, and issues such as Iraq will be difficult to resolve. But what is needed above all is a signal that the international community is serious about committing resources and working with Middle Eastern states to advance economic development, and that the region's governments are also serious about undertaking badly needed political and economic reform; the absence of Arab-Israeli peace remains a major cause of public resentment. Although results will take time, an infusion of hope is needed in the midst of despair, a supply of ammunition in the war of ideas for those in the region who, deep in their hearts, reject the militants' way, but are sickened even more by their own daily humiliation. ■