Countering the Global Islamist Terrorist Threat

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Abstract

Worldwide terrorist attacks since September 11 suggest that the threat from Islamist terrorism is far from being over. This is despite the arrests and elimination of a significant number of leaders, both of Al Qaeda and its associated groups. With the loss of its leadership, Al Qaeda has become more dispersed and more difficult to predict and preempt. More significantly, Osama Bin Laden has become a beacon for jihadi insurgents everywhere.

On the other hand, the use of overwhelming force in the global war on terror is counterproductive. A militaristic approach has further radicalized the Islamic world, increasing the ranks of the jihadis. Similarly, the U.S. invasion of Iraq exacerbated Muslim resentment and nourished those forces, which the world community wishes to undermine and destroy. Terrorists have a powerful advantage: they need to succeed only occasionally; but as defenders, the global community needs to be successful always.

This article argues that failure to understand the Islamist terrorist threat in its entirety and to deal with the threat poses significant danger—not only for the United States and its interests, but also for the international community as a whole. Islamist terrorism represents a global ideological battle. It is a battle of hearts and minds. As ideology is at the centre of the current wave of Muslim terrorism, it is necessary to undercut the appeal of radical Islam. This involves empowering moderate Muslims to counter the influence of the radicals. No single country can do this alone.
Introduction

In a message aired on January 19, 2006, Osama Bin Laden—the leader of Al Qaeda—asserted that jihad is on its way, regardless of the aggressive military campaigns by the United States and its allies against the followers of Islam. In a way, the global terrorist campaign, which the radicals call “jihad,” is not unique. The best historical analogy is the wave of bombings and assassinations by anarchist and nationalists engaged in political violence at the beginning of the 20th century. However, while the anarchists did not succeed in overturning the Westphalian state system, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in June 1914 led to the outbreak of the First World War. Similarly, the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States led to the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. The failure of the anarchists is a reminder of the likely outcome of the jihadi vision of a global caliphate replacing the existing international system.

As Osama Bin Laden claimed, the occupation of Iraq by the United States and its allies synergized the campaign for jihad in the Muslim world. Currently, the jihadists believe that the war in Iraq and Afghanistan is definitely going their way. They would fight the enemies of Islam with patience until they (the enemy) wear out. In this campaign, the jihadists believe that history is on their side. Their belief is reinforced by the legacies of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the triumph of the mujahideen against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the sense of fear and vulnerability created by the September 11 attacks. The jihadists have a strategic advantage as well; there are “no territories or citizens or assets,” that their adversary can readily “threaten, overwhelm, or destroy” with military might.1

From the perspective of the international community, the September 11 incidents significantly changed global perceptions, especially involving those that were willing to make exceptions for the “freedom fighters,” and those who did not give their opposition to terrorism priority over other foreign policy issues. As a result, states came together

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to work more closely with each other against terrorism. Increased coordination to break terrorist webs and their support structures were the results of shifts in perceptions of interest arising from what Robert Keohane termed “the public delegitimation of terrorism.” As an immediate outcome of the U.S.-led coalition’s assaults in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda lost its bases, training facilities, and other logistical networks, along with its state sponsor—the Taliban. Governments all over the world worked closely together to get at the leadership, support structures and sanctuaries of Al Qaeda and its associates. Since then, many top-ranking leaders of Al Qaeda and its associate groups have been either killed or captured in almost 102 countries across the globe. They include Mohammed Atef; Khalid Sheikh Mohammad—mastermind of the September 11 attacks—as well as Abu Zubayda; Ramzi Binalshibh; Ibn Al-Shaykh al-Libi; Abu Zubair al-Haili; Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri; Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani; Mohammad Naeen Noor Khan (the Al Qaeda computer specialist and communications expert); and Riduan Isamuddin (alias Hambali)—Al Qaeda point man for Southeast Asia and operational commander of JI. In many countries, plots to stage terrorist strikes such as in Singapore; in Bangkok, coinciding with the APEC summit in October 2003; and the plot to target U.S. financial centers, were disrupted. In May 2005, Pakistani authorities arrested Abu Faraj Farj al Libi, Al Qaeda’s third most-important figure. The arrest was a severe blow to the group’s ability to replenish its leadership.

With its leadership in disarray, Al Qaeda was severely restricted to planning and executing multiple large-scale attacks on its own. Meanwhile, counter-terrorism cooperation also became more institutionalized with the participation of the United Nations and other regional and multilateral agencies and institutions. Involvement of the UN and other specialist institutions was especially invaluable in denying terrorists their sanctuaries and support systems. Thus, as Cofer Black, former head of the U.S. State Department’s counter-terrorism office claimed, it

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“proves that the global war on terrorism has been effective, focused and has got these (terrorists) on the run.”

However, worldwide terrorist attacks since September 11 would suggest that these successes by the international community have not been able to keep pace with the regenerative and adaptive capabilities of the Islamist terrorist groups. Al Qaeda and associated groups continue with their campaign of terror, targeting not only the interests of the United States, but its allies and supporters worldwide. Al Qaeda continues to be a source of inspiration for dispersed local and regional groups that share its agenda for global jihad. The group has mutated into new forms with deadlier manifestations. It has become largely self-sustaining. Even with diminished infrastructure and impeded leadership, Al Qaeda is still able to plan and execute significant attacks in a wide variety of locations, and against an even wider array of targets. Attacks against Western targets in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Indonesia, Pakistan, Britain and Iraq indicate that the threat from Al Qaeda is far from over. On the other hand, many obstacles have emerged in counter-terrorism efforts and the international coalition against terrorism seems to be weakening.

It is important here to explain these setbacks for the global counter-terrorism regime. Firstly, the international community has failed to understand the nature of the threat, especially the “Al Qaeda phenomenon” in its entirety—including the vision, capabilities, acumen and the organizational skills of Osama Bin Laden, “terrorism’s CEO.” This is more problematic in the context of Islamist terrorism in which it is necessary to explain terrorist motivation in terms of abstract ideologies. Secondly, there is also a failure to address the core issues that have brought transnational Islamist groups together in conflict against the West in the first place, and helped sustain their campaign.

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More importantly, the spirit of cooperation, witnessed among the world community, immediately after the September 11 attacks, appears to be weakening. This is not to say that there is an acceptance of terrorism and the terrorists’ methods by the members of the international community. In fact, measures contemplated by the world community to interdict terrorists and their infrastructures are robust and pack sufficient punch to substantially debilitate the terrorists—both militarily and financially. What has been increasingly lacking is the international political will for a sustained campaign on this front. In the absence of sustained universal cooperation, these measures have now become patchworks of domestic, bilateral, and regional efforts—working, at best, at cross-purposes.7

This paper seeks to examine each of these issues. We argue that failure to understand the Islamist terrorist threat in its entirety and to deal with the threat poses significant danger not only for the United States and its interests, but also for the international community as a whole. While we do not believe that jihadi terrorists can overturn the international system and establish a global caliphate, complacency against a dynamic threat that targets all and spares none, could only be counter-productive. The threat today is just not a new form of asymmetric warfare explainable in terms of military or quasi-military doctrine and manageable through the use of force. Islamist terrorism is more about a global ideological conflict. The Muslim radicals exploit the fundamentals of Western culture and the tolerance of its political system, targeting vulnerabilities in what the West views as its virtues.8 The threat therefore, needs to be countered on a variety of fronts, not just with armies. The response would require cooperation of a variety of national governments, regional and global agencies and arrangements, dissuasions and denials.9 As ideology is the centre of gravity of

Islamist terrorism, it needs to be countered with ideas. It is a battle of hearts and minds. This involves empowering moderate Muslims to counter the influence of the radicals. No single country can do this alone.

**Al Qaeda: From a Group to a Movement**

Al Qaeda has become a global social movement, a “global insurgency,” that continues to challenge the world’s most powerful nations successfully. With the significant loss of its bases and support structures, and the dispersal of its top leadership, Al Qaeda metastasized from a centralized entity to a scattered global network. However, this did not diminish its ability to conduct attacks or to inspire others to join its global jihad bandwagon. Al Qaeda has clearly emerged as the vanguard of the current wave of terrorism in many parts of the world. It has become an even more formidable adversary. Islamist groups, like Al Qaeda, have adapted and are able to operate with flattened hierarchies without centralized command and control. Unlike hierarchical structures that can be eliminated through decapitation of its leadership, these structures resist fragmentation because of their dense interconnectivity. Furthermore, these structures grow spontaneously and are able to self-organize. In fact, even though most of its top leadership has been taken out, Al Qaeda has not ceased to exist. It has simply become more disaggregated and hence more difficult to predict and pre-empt. More significantly, Osama Bin Laden has become a beacon...
for jihadi insurgents. Al Qaeda’s influence arises from the inspiration Osama Bin Laden provides and the ideas and techniques he has spawned.

An essential component of Islamist terrorism has been networking. Contemporary Islamist groups now operate with an international matrix of operational, logistical and financial networks. Such networking compensates for the loss of centralized command and control structures. Additionally, the radical Islamists are becoming increasingly embedded in the Muslim Diaspora, humanitarian organizations, and international financial systems. Diasporas in countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Belgium and Switzerland have become important hubs of operations and recruitment for the Islamists.\(^{15}\) In contrast to the historical legacy of transnational Islam during the 13th century (Indian Ocean trading networks) or the early reformist movements, when Islam spread far and beyond through trade and indentured servitude, the growth of the Muslim Diaspora in recent years is attributed to people fleeing the lands of violent conflict. Within the Diaspora, a shared sense of collective injustice fosters the formation of distinct Islamist identity. The autarchic isolation of the Diaspora from the surrounding society makes them sanctuaries for the radicals who manipulate the religious tolerance of the host societies for fundraising and recruitment, and even for planning and executing operations.\(^{16}\) The Diaspora is quite flexible, linked to other Muslim communities through ethnic affinity, common Islamic belief systems, family ties as well as perceptions of injustice. Instead of integration within the host societies, the development of a supranational Muslim identity has made radicalization and violence within the Diaspora potentially serious issues in recent times.\(^{17}\) The July 2005 bombings in London’s subway


system by local Muslims are an indication of the consequences of such “failed integration,” where the lack of a direct link to Al Qaeda reflects the ideational influence of its message about the liberating effect of suicide attacks.

What makes Islamist groups “so simultaneously successful and elusive” is the fact that they inhabit the “same nebulous channels of communication and transmission that define contemporary globalization.” The infrastructure of the global liberal economy is in effect the “transmission line that political Islam rides.”18 Paradoxically, globalization has enabled “modern supranational networks and traditional, even archaic, infra-state forms of relationships (for instance, tribalism or religious schools’ networks),”19 which is now being manipulated by the Muslim militants to keep recreating the hatred against the West and its allies. Even puritanical movements seeking a strict adherence to the lifestyle of the Prophet and a literal interpretation of his teachings have embraced modern technology, jet travel, global trading, and finance and instant communications networks to conduct their campaigns,20 an approach not unique to Muslim fundamentalists as it is also seen in the networks spawned by puritanical Christians. With a combination of decentralized cells operating across the globe, united by religion and ideology, the relatively cheap cost of carrying out attacks and the ability to disguise fund transactions, such terrorist movements have now emerged as the “harbingers of a new and vastly more threatening terrorism, one that aims to produce casualties on a mass scale.”21

After it was disrupted from its safe haven in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda rapidly adapted itself to an environment of borderless existence. This was possible as Al Qaeda was already successful in crafting a complex “confederation” of militant groups and “aggregating support networks.”22 This goes back to the days of anti-Soviet Afghan jihad in

18 Karasik and Benard, “Muslim Diasporas and Networks,” pp. 433–34.
which many Muslims from the Arab world and other parts of the globe—the Chechens, the Egyptians, the Saudis and those from South and Southeast Asia—volunteered to take part. After the Soviets withdrew, Al Qaeda was able to spread its influence worldwide with well-entrenched and extensive networks. Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden were able to co-opt dispersed local conflicts in different parts of the world, making this part of an international Islamic jihad. The platform of universal jihad brought disparate Islamist groups from the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia and the Horn of Africa together under a common platform and a common agenda.\textsuperscript{23} The movement subsumed Islamist struggles in many parts of the world with the result that more territorial Islamist groups today espouse universal agendas.\textsuperscript{24}

Driving this movement currently is an abstract and hate-based ideology targeted against the West, especially the United States, its allies and regimes, including moderate Muslim governments, accused by the group of imposing dysfunctional and immoral ways of life across the globe.\textsuperscript{25} The movement uses Islam as a tool of mass mobilization through the citation of prophetic truths from the Koran to show ‘the inherent incompatibility of modern day concerns with the sacred texts.’\textsuperscript{26} One of the most significant accomplishments of Osama Bin Laden was the effective “melding of the strands of religious fervor, Muslim piety and a profound sense of grievance into a powerful ideological force,”\textsuperscript{27} and turning it into an “effective weapon with the tech-
nological munificence of modernity.”28 As Peter Bergen puts it, “This grafting of entirely modern sensibilities and techniques to the most radical interpretation of holy war, is the hallmark of Osama Bin Laden’s network.”29 Besides, locational opacity and absence of negotiable political objectives has rendered the movement a hard adversary to deal with. Attacks in Tunisia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Yemen, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Spain, the United Kingdom and in Iraq tell us how the movement’s strength is not in its location in a defined geographical territory, but in its fluidity and flexibility.30

In the campaign for global jihad, the United States is perceived to be the main Western power threatening the very existence of Islam and the Muslim Ummah. Many of the U.S. policies—its support for Israel and for “apostate” Muslim regimes, the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iraq—mixed up with a historical residue of frustration arising from what many see as a series of defeats of the Arab and Muslim world, have galvanized the Muslim anger.31 This dates back to the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Presently, the West—led by the United States—is occupying a center of Islamic civilization and the “Jewel of the Arab world”—Baghdad.32 Paradoxically, Washington’s policies that are supportive of Muslim issues—such as its support for Kuwait in 1991, and its involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo, do not affect this-anti-U.S. sentiment.

In Osama Bin Laden’s own words, the United States has created “an ocean of oppression, injustice, slaughter and plunder” and has thus merited responses like the 9/11 attacks.33 As examples, Osama Bin

28 Ibid., p. 35.
31 Asher Susser, Director of the Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University—cited in *The Muslim World After 9/11*, p. 87.
32 Ibid.
33 “Azzam Exclusive: Letter from Usamah Bin Muhammad Bin Ladin to the American People,” *Waaqiah*, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Oct. 26,
Laden cites U.S. interventions and foreign policy accountable for the loss of millions of Muslim lives around the world, including in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Kashmir, and Central Asia—and now in Iraq. As Osama Bin Laden explains: “Our method thus far in this battle has been to continue to pile up more American corpses . . . until we break the arrogance of the United States, crush its pride, and trample its dignity.” His message of hatred has now transformed into rhetoric of revenge, focusing on the United States and its allies. This message resonates well with sizeable pockets of disaffected youth across the globe. Bound together by an increasing hatred against the West, such individuals and groups continue their domestic struggles, but add the prism of a global cause and a global purpose—the defense of Islam.

Thus “Al Qaedaism” has become a movement on its own. Al Qaeda has become a beacon of light for worldwide Muslim liberation. It has shown itself to be a remarkably nimble, flexible and adaptive entity. For some analysts, the group now is more a worldview or ideology than an organization. “Because of what Al Qaeda sees as America’s global “war on Islam,” the movement’s sense of commitment and purpose today is arguably greater than ever.” It would not probably much alter the dynamics of the militant Islamic terrorist threat even if Osama bin Laden is killed or captured or if Al Qaeda is completely decimated. As Osama Bin Laden himself put it, “Regardless if Osama is killed or survives, the (Muslim) awakening has started.”

2002.
36 Ibid., p. 493.
Al Qaedaism: The Global Ideology of Hate?

In a narration, Eliot Cohen observes:

“The enemy in this war is not “terrorism”—a distilled essence of evil, conducted by the real-world equivalents of J.K. Rowling’s Lord Voldemort, Tolkien’s Sauron or C.S. Lewis’ White Witch—but militant Islam. The enemy has an ideology, and an hour spent surfing the Web will give the average citizen at least the kind of insights that he might have found during World Wars II and III by reading Mein Kampf or the writings of Lenin, Stalin or Mao. Those insights, of course, eluded those in the West who preferred—understandably, but dangerously—to define the problem as something more manageable, such as German resentment about the Versailles Treaty, an exaggerated form of Russian national interest, or peasant resentment of landlords taken a bit too far. In the reported words of one survivor of the Holocaust, when asked what lesson he had taken from his experience of the 1940s, “If someone tells you that he intends to kill you, believe him.”41

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States; there is now a tendency to treat the Islamist terrorist threat more as a civilizational conflict. Equating contemporary terrorism with Islam has also become the predominant discourse of security debates. In The Roots of Muslim Rage, Bernard Lewis wrote how “we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and governments that pursue them.”42 Similarly, Samuel Huntington argued that the present conflict could turn into a “clash of civilizations”—one of the cultural conflicts he predicted in his now famous work, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, several years ago.43

Sweeping generalizations such as “Al Qaeda spearheaded universal

43 Ibid.
jihad;”44 “Islam’s inherent incompatibility with modernity;”45 and “moral and ideological crisis” that has beset “the collective Muslim mind,”46 seek to explain conflicts that may have something more to do with their respective sociological, historical, and political contexts, rather than abstract philosophies and radical ideologies. The temptation to stereotype the conflict in this manner has also taken its strength from the fact that the game the terrorists are in today is almost zero-sum. “There is no room for compromise except as a tactical expedient. America may be the main enemy but it is not the only one.47 The message of universal jihad offers no real solutions to the more urgent problems of the Muslim community.48

As Gilles Kepel describes, the ideology is an extremist Islamic paradigm based on “respect for the sacred texts in their most literal form [combined with] an absolute commitment to jihad.”49 This in essence underscores the fact that extremist statements like those calling for jihad against the West have more to do with a bitter struggle now unfolding between moderates and radicals within the Muslim community itself.50 Many Islamic scholars point to the “moral and ideological crisis” that has beset “the collective Muslim mind.”51 A category of

self-appointed defenders of orthodoxy seems to have hijacked some of the key instruments of the religion, i.e. jihad, fatwa, and the Shariah, to make them serve their politically utilitarian and instrumental purposes.\textsuperscript{52} The current form of radical Islamic thought is firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of sizeable pockets of ideologically exclusionist and politically repressed young Muslims throughout the world.\textsuperscript{53} This has been made more complicated and difficult by the conditions imposed on the community as it makes the painful transition to modernity. Muslim communities are finding themselves threatened, disadvantaged and marginalized by the processes of globalization. For many Muslims, globalization is a strategy of hegemony, of “cultural infiltration or penetration” (\textit{al-ikh\textsuperscript{t}iraq al-thaqaf\textit{i}}), which leads to more social fragmentation.\textsuperscript{54} Political Islam has exacerbated the conflict by transforming economic grievances into a mistrust of Westernization and even into an antagonism to modernity.\textsuperscript{55} A result of failed and incomplete modernization, radical Islam has festered in societies where contact with the West has produced more chaos than growth and more uncertainty than wealth.\textsuperscript{56}

Radical Islam has manipulated this inherent tension between “secularizing, homogenizing and avaricious capitalism and ethnic and religious fundamentalism”\textsuperscript{57} to construct and nurture its campaign of hatred against the West. In the context of growing disillusionment with

the conventional modes of political dialog and negotiation, the radicals have misused the Islamic religious discourse as a framework for a moral/ethical critique of power and recreated a religiocentric view point from which, as they claim, an idealistic pan-Islamic Muslim society can be constructed. This form of radical Islam has become immensely appealing. It negates the existing order in quest of a more just society. It purports to explain the loss of values and cultural disorientation facing Muslim societies confronting the challenges of globalization and modernization.

The radicals form a minority of Muslims but they hold the advantage because they are able to exploit the roots of Muslim rage and the avenues to peddle the same among the dispossessed community worldwide. While Muslim moderates are beset with a sense of ideological paralysis, often unwilling to confront the radicals, there is a consciousness of the need to acquire political space to avenge the perceived inferior position of Muslims. This led to initial reservations among Muslim moderates against public criticism of the radicals spearheading jihad through acts of terror.

As Samuel Huntington wrote, for Islam, the problem is about the people who “are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.” They know “their knowledge is superior, and have the capacity to affect change,” but are overwhelmingly frustrated and angered by the “inadequacy, by the sense of being left out and the sense of being done injustice, to the point of desperation.” This is a powerful message that nurtures a strong commitment among those recruited for such radical Muslim move-

60 Francis Fukuyama, “History and September 11,” How did This Happen? p. 32.
ments. For a group of persons ready to hate, to uncritically believe and to attempt the impossible, radical belief systems provide a venue for self-expression. This also makes them aggressively defensive against an enemy whom they perceive as challenging their belief systems.64

Factored into this equation is Osama Bin Laden’s call for revenge. In an audiotape released on April 7, 2003, Osama Bin Laden urged his followers to mount suicide attacks “to avenge the innocent children . . . assassinated in Iraq.” Osama has projected the ruling to kill Americans and their allies as a sacramental obligation and a duty against the enemy who is corrupting the life and the religion.65 Referring to “more than 80 years” of dispossession, Osama bin Laden in his first broadcast after the September 11 attacks described that what America suffered was insignificant compared to more than 80 years of humiliation and degradation that the Islamic world was subjected to.66 For the likes of Osama, the dispossession and humiliation must be redressed through revenge. The enactments in Iraq now follow this trend. As a resident of Fallujah himself expressed, “it is a shame to have foreigners break down . . . doors . . ., to have foreigners stop and search their women. This is a great shame for the whole tribe. It is the duty of that man, and of that tribe, to get revenge on this soldier—to kill that man . . . we cannot sleep until we have revenge.”67 Radical Muslims often project the world as satanic, dominated by the forces of imperialism and decadence. The rage and a sense of injustice leading to disappointment, disillusionment and frustration are breeding revengeful followers with extreme positions.68 This rage is projected onto scapegoats—hence the need to have enemies—and results in violence.69

64 Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks, p. 88.
65 Ibid., p. 19.
69 See, Vamik Volkan, The Need to have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to
The governing elite in some of the Muslim countries themselves often provide the basis for Muslim anger. For one thing, many Islamists cast the rulers in those countries as apostate and heretic, being slaves to modernization and by extension to the West. These are the regimes, which according to the radicals “claim to be Muslim, but whose implementation of Islamic precepts is judged to be imperfect.”

Significantly, today’s archetypical Muslim radicals clearly place themselves and their enemies in a theological context. They understand themselves to be fighting on behalf of Islam against the enemies of God, epitomized by the United States—the “Hubal of this age’ and literally “satanic”—being in league with the devil. The mujahideen are not necessarily the marginalized elements in society—ill-educated, impoverished, destitute or disenfranchised. Ironically, these new brands of supranational neo-fundamentalists are more a product of contemporary globalization than of the Islamic past. What motivates them is not material deprivation but an all-consuming ideology. In a survey of Al Qaeda affiliates, Marc Sageman found that 75 percent of those interviewed were from upper-middle classes; 60 percent were educated, from inclusive families and were either professionals or semi-professionals. Seventy-five percent of those interviewed were married, the majority of them with children. Fifty-percent of them come from religious families. Interestingly, less than one percent demonstrated any signs of mental pathology. Most of them are very computer savvy. They are not religious fanatics; they go the mosque not for religiosity always, but mostly for companionship. The Jemaah Islamiyah members in Southeast Asia, those detained in Singapore and

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International Relationships (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994).


73 Roy, “Neo-Fundamentalism.”

74 Notes taken at the conference on “Al Qaeda 2.0: Transnational Terrorism After 9/11.” For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon see, Marc Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
Malaysia, and those on the run, also fit into this profile. These persons are not just Muslims but also Islamists pursuing goals they consider higher than life itself. They read the sacred text with the same degree of intensity as they would read a textbook on physics or engineering. This mono-dimensional reading of the scripture leads them to see things in very stark terms. More than reacting against Westernization, which they believe “masquerades as globalization and whose chief instruments are the military, cultural, and economic powers of the United States,” Muslim anger is being propelled by a vision that treats Islam as the answer to every conceivable problem. And it is not just about releasing pent-up frustrations, but also about seeking spiritual answers through violence. Beset by alienation and loneliness, and consumed by an intense search for identity, such radical Muslims have often fallen prey to a formalistic understanding of Islam that breeds violent radicalism. While Islam has always been the faith of “the very rich and the very poor,” the radical orthodoxy has united “the very angry and the very worried (and eager to channel this anger away toward conflicts with what they perceive as the ‘hegemonic powers.’)”

The War on Terror: An Unending War?

Reviewing the progress of the global war on terrorism in October 2003, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asked his advisers, “Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every

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75 See Desker, “The Jemaah Islamiyah Phenomenon.”
day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"\textsuperscript{81} This is reflective of how after more than four years; the U.S.-led coalition’s “war on terror” remains ineffective. The failure stems from the fact that, in responding to Al Qaeda and its jihad, the policymakers and analysts have systematically failed to understand the enemy. Whereas Osama Bin Laden has worked effectively to “convince the Islamic world” that the West or the United States is their “common enemy,” (the West) “have done little or nothing.”\textsuperscript{82}

The present conflict, as the 9/11 Commission noted, is not just about terrorism—“some generic evil.”\textsuperscript{83} The root of the conflict is a radical ideological movement in the Muslim world. Rather than being a “clash of civilizations,” the present conflict is more about a struggle for the soul of Islam within the global Muslim community today. Viewed in this context, the discursive about the inevitability of conflict between Islam and the West is rather problematic. It is rather far too easy to assume what Ann Coutler said, “... not all Muslims may be terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims.”\textsuperscript{84} As Farish Noor puts it, “[the Islamist] threat must not be taken seriously as an epistemic category,” or as Edward Said, “many Muslims cannot be simplified.”\textsuperscript{85} At the same time though, it would be dangerous to discount the potency of the Islamist religious discourse in fuelling the contemporary wave of terrorism. It is therefore important to undermine the appeal of radical ideology and purge it of its universalistic appeal, which creates and sustains the psychic tensions that demand release “through a spasm of violence.”\textsuperscript{86} An overemphasized militaristic approach risks further


\textsuperscript{83} The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 362.


\textsuperscript{86} Kumar Ramakrishna and Andrew Tan, “The New Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prescriptions,” \textit{The New Terrorism}, p. 4.
marginalizing the disaffected and increasing the ranks of the jihadists. As former U.S. diplomat John Brady Kiesling cautioned, “The more aggressively we use our power to intimidate our foes, the more foes we create and the more we validate terrorism as the only effective weapon of the powerless against the powerful.”

Ideology is at the center of the current wave of Muslim terrorism. To counter the threat, it is necessary to undercut the appeal of radical Islam. This involves changing the minds and winning the hearts by addressing the grievances that underlie the call for jihad. In the political spectrum, it behooves the West, especially the United States, to convince Muslims that the West is a friend of Islam and prove it through concrete action. There is a need to persuade Muslims that the West harbors no ulterior motives, no desire to subjugate them, as claimed by radical Muslim activists. At the same time, the West must assist moderate, progressive Muslim leaders and intellectuals who want Islam to make a successful transition to modernity. For the ideological combat against radical Islamism to be effective, “Muslims must conduct it.” The Muslim community must rescue key concepts of the ideological discourse from the rigid pedagogical structures that have kept it in static mode and enthuse it with inherent conservatism. It is not Islam which obstructs its progress, but its “wrong and rigid interpretations.” As the 9/11 Commission Report succinctly observed, Muslims themselves would have to reflect upon such basic issues as the concept of jihad, the position of women, and the place of non-Muslim minorities. “The West can promote moderation, but cannot ensure its ascendancy. Only Muslims can do this.”

89 Desker and Ramakrishna, “Forging an Incident Strategy in Southeast Asia,” p. 168.
90 Ibid., p. 167.
At present, moderates are generally unwilling to confront the radicals. This is due to the values and the belief systems and the visions of the future social order that both moderates and the radicals share together. Moderates are also wary about the consequences of challenging the radicals. More importantly, most moderates are unlikely to be able to influence Muslim radicals. The challenge to views that supports acts of terrorism is likely to succeed only when it comes from deep within the Islamic tradition. This is possible only when those challenging the radical’s worldview are themselves as deeply steeped in Muslim doctrines and can argue on the basis of the texts so frequently cited by the radicals.

The United States, as the former Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong said, cannot “lead the ideological battle.” It has little credibility. The sources of Muslim distrust of the United States are complex, and its anger greater today than ever before. Washington has also failed in public diplomacy directed at the Muslim world. “In many instances,” American Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld admitted, “We’re not the best messengers.”94 This has much to do with what many perceive as America’s double standards: taking action against Iraq but not against Israel for noncompliance with UN Security Council resolutions and for Tel Aviv’s policy of “targeted assassinations.”95 The revelations of mistreatment of Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad and abuse of the Holy Text in Guantanamo Bay, and the accompanying global revulsion have further undermined any U.S. claims to the high moral ground.

Additionally, the global coalition against terrorism is being undermined by Washington’s “proclivities toward unilateral multilateralism,”96 and very “aggressive go-it-alone” attitude.97

94 Cited in Kinnane, “Winning Over the Muslim Mind,” p. 94.
95 Goh, “Fight Terror With Ideas.”
is obsessed with its own security and has unleashed the passions of its own nationalism in a wave of redemptive violence abroad, as in Iraq.\textsuperscript{98} Since September 11, Washington’s policymakers appear obsessed with the idea that the war on terror can be a prescription for global order. This may stem from the legacy of vulnerability that the September 11 incidents set up for the Bush administration. Under threat from non-state actors with global reach, the Bush administration shifted to a policy of pre-emptive defense, which culminated in Washington’s controversial engagement in Iraq. It went on the offensive to forestall or prevent hostile acts by its adversaries, and if necessary, to strike terrorists abroad so as to keep the homeland safe. The overall strategic goals for its war on terror are woven around the key concepts of preventing a “nuclear Pearl Harbor”—“forestall or prevent hostile acts by . . . adversaries [and] . . . if necessary, act preemptively.”\textsuperscript{99} Translated into strategy, this means aggressive unilateralism, less importance accorded to multilateralism and almost total neglect of international institutions. This strategy nevertheless has put too many issues at stake—non-proliferation, democratic transformation, regime change and the like.\textsuperscript{100} As the dust settled down on the ruins of the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, this “go-it-alone” and “mission defines the coalition” attitude has deprived America’s global leadership of much of its legitimacy.\textsuperscript{101}

Moreover, the war in Iraq exacerbated Muslim resentment and further radicalized the Islamic world against America and its allies. As French Judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere commented, “In Iraq, a problem has been created that didn’t exist there before.”\textsuperscript{102}

militants’ anger and became a rallying point remobilizing dormant jihadists, and recruiting new militants to the cause. For the jihadists, Iraq is now the “front that (they) want to utilize for fighting the Americans, like the other fronts [of Jihad].” Ironically, by going into Iraq as part of its war on terror, the United States has provided “political oxygen” and nourished those very forces that it wished to undermine and destroy.

The U.S. engagement in Iraq has seriously jeopardized the global terrorism campaign as coalition forces increasingly get diverted to deal with the Iraqi insurgency. The Iraq war created the additional political risk of sharpening the divide between the Muslim moderates and radicals. Within the Western community itself, debates are emerging regarding the extent to which acts of Muslim terrorism are anti-American and how much is against the West as a whole. This division has been more pronounced in U.S.—Europe relations. To the Europeans, Americans appear to be besotted with power, and becoming increasingly “overbearing, jingoistic and rash.” According to a survey by the Pew Research Centre, skepticism about U.S. motives in the global anti-terror campaign has led to growing popular support for disengagement with Washington in foreign and security policy, including on terrorism. The growing evidence of disagreement at the political level is having its obvious repercussions on the campaign on various fronts against terrorism, and is making the global counter-terrorism strategy less and less effective.

Conclusion

“I want to say that the war will be won by either us or you. If we win, then it will be a shame for you forever. If you win, then history will witness our courage to fight for dignity. We have nothing to lose. He who is swimming in the sea does not fear the rain.”107

(Osama Bin Laden, in his message to the American people on January 19, 2006)

“The war against terrorism is not just a war of arms, but also a war of values.”108 As Gal Luft, Executive Director of the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, puts it, “Ideological wars take decades to decide. This is why we must brace ourselves for a protracted conflict. The strategy we should adopt must be comprehensive, enduring and multidisciplinary.” The international community must develop what George Kennan called a robust “political warfare” capability,109 to deal with the threat from radical Muslim ideology that, like Marxism-Leninism in the past, serves as an intellectual, political, and emotional foundation of a worldwide revolutionary movement.110

Osama Bin Laden, in his May 2004 audio message urged mujahideen to avail itself of the rare opportunity in Iraq to bury the “head of international infidelity.”111 Unfortunately however, as the ranks and the resolve of the terrorists seem to be on the rise, the well-established mainstays of the global order—the Western alliance, European Union, and the United Nations—seem to be cracking under the stress.112 Inter-

107 Full translation of Osama bin Laden’s audio-taped message aired by Al Jazeera TV.
state cooperation on the terrorism issue in many parts of the world improved significantly with an increasing awareness of the transna-
tional character of the challenge posed by the current wave of Islamist terrorism. However, the continuing emphasis on national sovereignty,
and the relative youth of most states facing this challenge, resulted in
limits to the degree of cooperation envisaged. This explains why there
is a preference for national mechanisms rather than regional or interna-
tional initiatives to combat terror. There is also reluctance by states to
be involved when the threat does not seem be directed at their own soil.

Developments in Iraq in the coming months would be a critical
determinant in shaping future challenges from terrorism spearheaded
by Muslim radicals. If the efforts to rebuild Iraq fail, it will help popu-
larize the cause of the jihadists against the West, especially the United
States. This could severely undermine much-needed reforms in the
Middle East. There is no denying the fact that one way to deal with a
violent extremist ideology is to provide peaceful democratic avenues
for expressing dissent. The international community needs to ensure
that democracy in Iraq is given a chance. It is very important that the
insurgents in Iraq do not get away with the feeling that they succeeded
in defeating the world’s sole surviving superpower. A repetition of
what happened to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan will embolden vio-
lent insurgencies around the globe.

at http://www.fareedzakaria.com/articles/newsweek/032403.html
113 John Harrison, “Call for U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq: Democrats’ Pullout