

Defeating Religious Terrorism – What Will It Take?

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By posing this mother of all questions, I hope to stimulate thinking rather than merely hazard answers or offer incomplete prescriptions. Indeed, no putative answer can possibly be satisfactory. Irrespective of the efforts and technical tools that can be brought to bear on this problem, those using violent means to impose their ideological goals can, at best, only be weakened. Mathematicians, physicists, and engineers have surely developed wonderful tools, but these are not the right ones for this job. As the pursuer uses ever better tracking tools, those pursued will also develop better means of evasion. So, while various technical fixes and mitigation attempts to be discussed at this meeting must not be belittled, serious thinking has to go far beyond these.

Some may object to this paper's exclusive focus on religious terrorism, and even more particularly to the terrorism perpetrated by Islamic groups. This is done to limit its scope although, arguably, other forms of terrorism may be equally or more deadly. If one defines terrorism as the deliberate targeting of non-combatant civilians with the intent to kill, harm, or terrify, then nation-states have shown a far greater capacity to exercise terror. The nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fire-bombing of Dresden, the wholesale slaughter of ordinary Bengalis by the Pakistani Army in 1971, the aerial bombardment of occupied apartment buildings in Lebanon by Israeli aircraft in 1982 and 2006, and the gassing of 100,000 Kurds in Halabja, are just a few examples. But these belong to a domain that lies away from the present focus.

In the following, I shall pose certain critical questions and suggest answers that may help provide an understanding of terror perpetrated by pan-Islamic groups around the world.

- 1. Is Islam The Problem?**
- 2. Who Are The Islamists?**
- 3. What Are They Fighting For?**
- 4. How Did They Become So Powerful?**
- 5. Combating Terror: What Should The West Do?**
- 6. Combating Terror: What Should Muslims Do?**

1. Is Islam The Problem?

An overwhelming majority of Muslims insists that Islam is only about peace and that it has been hijacked by extremists. The present epoch is regarded as an aberration rather than the norm. On the other hand, a common Western belief is that Islam is an inherently

violent religion. “*Islam has bloody borders*¹”, says Samuel Huntington, and “*This is particularly true along the boundaries of the crescent-shaped Islamic bloc of nations from the bulge of Africa to central Asia. Violence also occurs between Muslims, on the one hand, and Orthodox Serbs in the Balkans, Jews in Israel, Hindus in India, Buddhists in Burma and Catholics in the Philippines.*”

Both views are wrong; no religion is about peace or war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and the divine right to impose its version of truth upon others. But in any given historical period, it might have either a peaceful temper that allows it to coexist with others. Or it could be possessed with aggressiveness that seeks to conquer and subdue.

Deciding whether Islam today has a peaceful or warlike temper depends upon what one chooses to identify as the “real Islam”. Since there is no grand *mufti* endowed with central authority similar to the Pope in Catholicism, an enormous diversity of Islamic beliefs cohabits under a single canopy. If Islam is taken to mean Sufi Islam – or the vastly different forms of folk Islam that have become indistinguishable from tradition – then Islam is indeed a peaceful religion. There is no such a thing as a jihadist Sufi.

These are not marginal groups; Sufis were responsible for much of Islam’s rapid spread after its initial military conquests in the 7th and 8th centuries. Converts from caste-ridden Hinduism were attracted towards Islam because it was viewed as a people-friendly religion. The Kurds of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey were also converted in this way and still maintain their respective brands of folk Islam. For Sufis, the Qur’an has to be interpreted allegorically. Harsh instructions for punishment were smoothed away, just as divine Quranic miracles were smoothed away by 19th century Muslim rationalists like Syed Ahmad Khan. Charismatic Sufi masters like Mansur al-Hallaj and Jalaludin Rumi invested in the concept of subjugating the self (*jihad bi nafsih*) to the service of the Creator and His creation. Allah, they argued, must be worshiped not out of duty or fear but because he loved his creation and was loveable. Many dedicated their lives to the service of the weak and needy. In searching for that divine love, Sufi Muslims pray at shrines, venerate local saints, sing, and dance themselves into ecstatic oblivion. In India, Sufi saints continue to be revered by Muslims and Hindus alike.

But this kind of “soft Islam” has a mortal enemy in “hard Islam”, which vociferously lays claim to be the real Islam. The conflict between them has a long history. *Wahabism*, which originated in the 18th century in Arabia, started as a reaction to Shia’ism and Sufism. In its early years, it succeeded in destroying all shrines, together with priceless historical monuments and relics from the early days of Islam. Mecca today bears little resemblance to what it was a century ago; its history has been deliberately expunged. This process has continued. In June 2010, the widely venerated shrine of Data Darbar in Lahore was targeted by two suicide bombers who killed over 50 worshippers.

¹ *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* by Samuel P. Huntington, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996, ISBN 0-684-84441-9.

The *Salafis* – who seek the “purification” of Islam by returning to the pure form practiced in the time of Prophet Muhammad and his companions – are also prone to violent extremism. Among the most extreme manifestation of *Salafism* is *Takfir-wal-Hijra*. In 1996 the group is said to have plotted to assassinate Osama bin Laden for being too lax a Muslim. Muslims of the *Deobandi-Salafi-Wahabi* persuasion fiercely decry the syncretism of popular Islam, claiming that it arises from ignorance of Qura’nic teachings. Mosques in the US and Europe are increasingly dominated by *Wahabi* Muslims, and the process has been accelerated by imams imported from Arab countries, as well as some local ones. They insist on a literalist interpretation of the Qur’an. Salaries are often paid for by donations from oil-rich countries.

Steadily, the culture of the mosque is defeating the culture of the shrine. Petrodollars have promoted the work of leaders of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* (the Muslim Brotherhood) such as Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, and financed Maulana Abdul Maudoodi’s *Jamaat-i-Islami* in South Asia. Bosnians, who had welcomed Saudi-financed Wahabist fighters in their desperate efforts to avoid being ethnically cleansed by Serbs, soon learned that this came at a high price. To their dismay, the imported “saviors” soon set about uprooting “corrupted” traditional Bosnian Sunni Islam and asserted their purified brand as the only correct one.

The bottom line: although the overwhelming majority of Muslims remain peaceful and opposed to terrorism, the centre of gravity is moving away from soft Islam towards jihad-oriented hard Islam. Dangerous times lie ahead.

2. Who Are The Islamists?

It is conventional to understand violent Islamic fundamentalism as a response to poverty, unemployment, poor access to justice, lack of educational opportunities, corruption, loss of faith in the political system, or the sufferings of the working class. As partial truths they are indisputable. Those condemned to living a life with little hope and happiness are indeed terribly vulnerable to calls from religious demagogues who, in exchange for unquestioning obedience, offer a happy hereafter. Orphans and impoverished madrassa-educated lads in Pakistan can be readily turned into suicide bombers. But they are mere pawns used by those with better education and skills, whose distorted ideals and visions owe to factors other than poverty. Consciousness and world-view are not straightforward consequences of material conditions; its determinants include intangibles and are psychologically rooted. In fact, terrorists who have planned or carried out attacks inside Western countries are sometimes homegrown, relatively well off, and quite a few are university graduates. Many have had a technical education.

There are countless examples: Mohammed Atta, the 911 mastermind who piloted one of the two planes into the World Trade Center, studied architecture at Cairo University and then continued on at the Technical University of Hamburg. Among doctor terrorists, Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, described to be the real brains behind Al-Qaida, stands out. There are, of course, less well-known doctors too. Of the eight people arrested in Britain after two bungled car bombings in 2007, seven men were physicians and the lone woman, the

wife of one of them, was a medical technician. Hafiz Saeed, the founder of the *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* which executed the Mumbai attacks in 2008, was a professor at the University of Engineering Technology in Lahore. Syed Bashiruddin Mahmood, who was arrested after meeting with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, is a nuclear engineer with a degree from Manchester University and received a patent for a probe that detects reactor leaks². The list goes on.

Researchers at Oxford University have recently studied the sociology of those involved in extremist groups or in violent terrorism³. In a paper entitled “Engineers of Jihad”, they arrive at an interesting conclusion: “*We find that graduates from subjects such as science, engineering, and medicine are strongly overrepresented among Islamist movements in the Muslim world, though not among the extremist Islamic groups which have emerged in Western countries more recently. We also find that engineers alone are strongly over-represented among graduates in violent groups in both realms. This is all the more puzzling for engineers are virtually absent from left-wing violent extremists and only present rather than over-represented among right-wing extremists.*”

What explains this phenomenon? The authors consider four hypotheses⁴: “*Is the engineers’ prominence among violent Islamists an accident of history amplified through network links, or do their technical skills make them attractive recruits? Do engineers have a ‘mindset’ that makes them a particularly good match for Islamism, or is their vigorous radicalization explained by the social conditions they endured in Islamic countries?*”

While these hypotheses appear to be well-framed, and the answers found within this valuable study are interesting, it does not really help us understand what motivated these men. This is because the authors shy away from exploring the link between various Western invasions of Muslim countries and the anger they subsequently generated. But for a scientific understanding of motivations, we must not create mere hypotheses. It is very important to listen to what some violent Islamists are saying.

3. What Are They Fighting For?

Faisal Shahzad, the failed Times Square bomber with a degree from the University of Bridgeport, is a terrorist with a clear mind. Calling himself a “Muslim soldier”, he pleaded guilty on June 21, 2010 and read a prepared statement: “It’s a war... I’m going to plead guilty a hundred times over because until the hour the U.S. pulls its forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and stops the drone strikes ... we will be attacking the U.S. And I plead guilty to that.”

² Mahmood and the author had a rather vitriolic exchange about 20 years ago about whether djinns could be used to solve Pakistan’s energy problems. See the appendix of “Islam and Science – Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality” by Pervez Hoodbhoy, Zed Books, London 1990.

³ *Engineers of Jihad* by Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/swp.html

⁴ *ibid*

Shahzad was grandstanding, but his words inspired some resonant sympathy even among those Muslims who condemned his tactics. Indeed, I would hazard that Western foreign policy over the last few decades stands as the number one cause for Islamic radicalism. There can be little doubt that the illegitimate war waged by the United States in Iraq provided an extraordinary impetus to radicalism and terrorism.

Religious radicalism can be produced by carefully cultivating grievances, particularly those grievances inflicted by “the other” rather than one’s own side. The vodka-drinking Muslim Uighur from the Xinjiang province in China who has been discriminated against by the Han Chinese, the Chechen from bombed-out Grozny, and the nominally Muslim Palestinian peasant whose orchard of olive trees has just been destroyed by Israeli bulldozers, are victims of some oppressive order. Although initially they may not be driven by some theologically purist fantasy of the world caliphate, they can fall prey to religious ideologues and believers in violent solutions.

Radicalism generated by internal decline competes with that produced by Western military invasions. Faced by manifest decline from a peak of greatness many centuries ago, and afflicted by cultural dislocation in the age of globalisation, many Muslim societies have turned inwards. Muslims have little presence in today’s world affairs, in science, or in culture. This has led to diminished self-esteem, as well as increasing recourse to political Islam. Some dream of a new global caliphate.

Although Islamic radicalism may be bad news for Washington, Tel Aviv, and London, it is much worse for Muslims. It pits Muslims against Muslims, as well as against the world at large. Only peripherally directed against the excesses of corrupt Muslim ruling establishments, and taking opportunistic advantage of existing injustices and inequities, the primary targets of extremists today are other Muslims living within Muslim countries. Some religious fanatics terrorise and kill others who belong to the “wrong” Muslim sect. The Shia-Sunni conflict accounts for the majority of those killed in Iraq. In Bangladesh, religious fanatics set off 400 bombs in public places in just one day. These fanatics accuse “modernised Muslims” of being vectors of hellish sinfulness – the so-called *jahiliya* – deserving the full wrath of God. The greatest ire among them is aroused by the simplest of things, such as women being allowed to walk around bare-faced, being educated, or the very notion that they could be considered the equal of men.

Contrary to its claims, Islamic radicalism is indifferent to the suffering of Muslims; the victims of suicide bombings are often those praying mosques or at funerals. On the other hand, fundamentalist fury explodes when the Faith is seen to be maligned. For example, mobs set afire embassies and buildings around the world for an act of blasphemy committed in Denmark; others violently protested the knighthood of Salman Rushdie. Even as Muslim populations become more orthodox, there is a curious, almost fatalistic, disconnection with the real world. This suggests that fellow Muslims do not matter any more – only the Faith does.

To conclude: Islamists have gained enormous strength from the general anger generated by numerous Western invasions of Muslim countries. But their wider agenda is to

radically change society in the direction of 7th century Arabia. Even if the rest of the world was to mend its ways, or even to miraculously disappear, millenarian inspired zealotry will remain.

4. How Did Islamists Become So Powerful?

Every religion has its crazed fanatics who seek to kill and conquer by force. Generally, the “loony” part is small. This was true for Islam as well until 1979, the year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Indeed, there may well have been no 911 but for this game-changer. Since Western analyses often assign this to a mere footnote, I feel that this needs some substantive discussion here.

From day one, the US diplomatic strategy was to mobilize world opinion against the Soviets. American ire was aroused not out of sympathy for the particular victim but by the act of aggression itself and what it portended for the future. Afghanistan was declared to be a domino and the “warm waters of the Persian Gulf” stated to be the Soviet’s hidden goal. With Ronald Reagan as his rival presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter could not afford to appear soft on the Soviets. Officials like Richard Perle, Assistant Secretary of Defense, immediately saw Afghanistan not as the locale of a harsh and dangerous conflict to be ended but as a place to teach the Russians a lesson. Such “bleeders” became the most influential people in Washington⁵.

Given the highly conservative nature of Afghan society and the spontaneous resistance to the Afghan communist resistance, it did not need a genius to suggest that Islamic international solidarity be used as a weapon. The task of creating such solidarity fell upon Saudi Arabia, together with other conservative Arab monarchies. This duty was accepted readily and they quickly made the Afghan Jihad their central cause. For petro-sheikhs it was a natural course of action to take. First, they felt genuinely threatened by the Soviets. Second, it shielded their patron and ally, the United States, whose direct confrontation with the Soviets would have been dangerous and unwise in a nuclear-armed world. But still more importantly, to go heart and soul for jihad was crucial at a time when Saudi legitimacy as the guardians of Islam was under strong challenge by Iran, which pointed to the continued occupation of Palestine by America’s partner, Israel. An increasing number of Saudis were becoming disaffected by the House of Saud – its corruption, self-indulgence, repression, and closeness to the US. Therefore, the jihad in Afghanistan provided an excellent outlet for the growing number of militant Sunni activists in Saudi Arabia, and a way to deal with the daily taunts of the Iranian clergy.

Support for the mujahideen also fitted perfectly with the Reagan Doctrine – a global package of widely publicized covert aid for anti-Communist guerrillas fighting the established governments in Nicaragua, Angola, Kampuchea, and Afghanistan. Now the United States decided to play in the global game of guerrilla politics and to do what the Soviets had done in the sixties and seventies when they had encouraged wars of national liberation. The US would henceforth do the same by sponsoring right-wing guerrilla movements in the eighties.

⁵ “Bloody Games”, Eqbal Ahmad and Richard J. Barnet, *The New Yorker*, 11 April 1988, and, “Confronting Empire”, Eqbal Ahmad, interviews with David Barsamian, South End Press 2000.

The bleeders soon organized and armed the Great Global Jihad, funded by Saudi Arabia, and executed by Pakistan. A powerful magnet for militant Sunni activists was created by the US. The most hardened and ideologically dedicated men were sought on the logic that they would be the best fighters. Advertisements, paid for from CIA funds, were placed in newspapers and newsletters around the world offering inducements and motivations to join the jihad.

American universities produced books for Afghan children that extolled the virtues of jihad and of killing communists. Readers browsing through book bazaars in Rawalpindi and Peshawar can, even today, sometimes find textbooks produced as part of the series underwritten by a USAID \$50 million grant to the University of Nebraska in the 1980's⁶. These textbooks sought to counterbalance Marxism through creating enthusiasm in Islamic militancy. They exhorted Afghan children to “pluck out the eyes of the Soviet enemy and cut off his legs”. Years after the books were first printed they were approved by the Taliban for use in madrassas – a stamp of their ideological correctness.

At the international level, Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally, the United States, funneled support to the mujahideen. Ronald Reagan feted jihadist leaders on the White House lawn, and the U.S. press lionized them. When Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in the face of the U.S.-Pakistani-Saudi-Egyptian alliance in 1988, a chapter of history seemed complete. But, as things turned out, it was a pyrrhic victory. Even in the mid 1990s – long before the 9/11 attack on the US – it was clear that the victorious alliance had unwittingly created a monster now beyond its control.

5. Combating Terror: What Should The West Do?

From the early 1950s, following the era of decolonisation, a sense of grievance and frustration had produced a multitude of Islamist movements spreading from Algeria to Indonesia. But they were inconsequential. Had the US not cultivated them as allies against communism during the Cold War, history could have been very different.

All this is unchangeable. Today, relations between Islam and the West are worse than ever before. Although it may not yet be a civilizational clash, it lurks just around the corner. Can it be avoided? Focussing upon the US, imagine for a moment that it had a sudden change of heart, realised the error of its ways, and wanted to bury the hatchet with Muslims. How could the US atone for its past? Here are five key steps:

First, as demanded by both by Muslims and non-Muslims across the globe, the US needs an attitudinal change. Indeed, welcome steps in this direction have been taken by President Barack Obama, as in his Cairo address of 2009, in seeking to repudiate grand imperial designs as well as US claims to being an exception among nations. These reflect the growing realization within the US that economic realities will eventually force it to

⁶ See, for example, Craig Davis in *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2000. The author, who was a doctoral candidate at Indiana University, conducted fieldwork in Afghan education in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 1999-2000. The examples quoted in the present essay are from his work.

relinquish its earlier goal of gaining total planetary control (as in PNAC, Program for the New American Century) and, instead, accept the more modest goal of being just one of the world's big players. Now that America's wheels are coming off in Afghanistan, this seems increasingly more likely.

Second, the creation of a Palestinian state must not be further postponed. The dispossession of Palestinians has been appropriated as a Muslim cause with huge symbolic significance. The US had given Israel carte blanche for military action against the Palestinians, as in the invasions of Lebanon in 1982 and 2006. So far there is little reason for optimism here. A powerful pro-Israel lobby has resulted in even popular US presidents being forced to bow to Israeli interests. The point-blank refusal of Israel to halt its settlement expansion in spite of Obama's urging is clear proof.

Third, the US must take seriously the impact of collateral damage on civilian populations. The heavy use of airpower in Iraq and Afghanistan inevitably led to large numbers of non-combatant casualties. While drones have greater ability to discriminate, the rules of engagement need to be continuously upgraded to reach the goal of zero civilian casualties.

Fourth, the US must stop threatening Iran with a nuclear holocaust for trying to develop nuclear weapons, while rewarding, to various degrees, other countries – Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea – that have developed such weapons surreptitiously. It would, of course, be highly preferable if Iran could be dissuaded by peaceful means, including sanctions, from making a bomb. But if it does make the bomb in spite of everything, then it must be accepted as one more nasty fact of life. There is no strong moral argument available to the US against Iran's nuclear ambitions, given both its own nuclear stance and the fact that Iran's initial nuclear capability was provided by the US during the Shah's rule. Attacking Iran will unleash dynamics over which the US will be powerless, and perhaps exceed the global impact of the Iraq war.

Fifth, the West must seize opportunities that project it as generous, rather than aggressive. Providing disaster relief (including following the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake) did much to build a positive image. Flood devastated Pakistan offers the US a golden opportunity to reduce anti-Americanism. Soft power is critical. Draining the swamps where extremism breeds will require increasing foreign aid to poor Muslim countries, creating economic and employment opportunities there, and desisting from policies that reward only the elites of the recipient societies.

6. Towards Eliminating Terror: What Should Muslims Do?

A paradigm shift is essential. Muslims must realise that the awesome strength of Western civilisation – which also made possible its predatory imperialism – springs from accepting the premises of science and logic, respecting democratic institutions, allowing value systems to evolve, and boldly challenging dogma without being condemned for blasphemy. They must connect the West's success with personal freedom and liberty, superior work ethics, artistic and scientific creativity, and the compulsive urge to innovate and experiment.

Muslims, if they are to be a part of mainstream civilisation, will have to adapt to a new universal cultural climate that accepts human rights as defined by the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This specifically includes the equality of men and women. On the part of Muslim minorities and immigrants to non-Muslim countries, this means acceptance of different behavioural norms, and a move away from the current tendency of ghettoisation and towards greater integration into the larger society.

Meanwhile, Muslims themselves must stop believing convoluted conspiracy theories that purport to explain their states of weakness. For example, it is widely held that today's sectarian warfare is a consequence of some cunningly remote manipulations by enemies of Islam. Or, as in Pakistan, that suicide bombers are Blackwater recruits.

Muslims must also stop dreaming of theocracy and *sharia* law as solutions to their predicaments. This means acknowledging the sovereignty of the people rather than the rule of Allah, the latter by way of a self-appointed priesthood, such as *vilayat-e-faqih* and *khilafat-e-arz*. These are essentially prescriptions for a theocracy run by mullahs. It is simply impossible to run modern states while remaining shackled to medieval religious laws. Economic development, an expansion of individual liberties, democracy, an explosive growth in scientific knowledge and technological capabilities – these and a host of other benefits will forever remain distant dreams without the modernisation of thought.

The only way by which Muslim societies can become democratic, pluralistic and free from violent extremism is by going through their own internal struggles. Indigenous reform is difficult but possible. Islam is certainly as immutable as the Quran, but values held by Muslims have changed over the centuries.

CONCLUSION

Looking at planet Earth from above, one can see a bloody battlefield, where civilizations are poised to clash with each other. America and the West cannot win. Nor can the Islamists. This calls for reasonable compromise. Not all Islamist demands are ridiculous. Some are, and must be ignored. But some are rooted in objective reality, and must be negotiated with in the same spirit and manner as in other disputes.

Ultimately, the hope for a happier and more humane world lies in reason, education and economic justice. Secularism, universalistic ideas of human rights, and freedom of belief are non-negotiable and we must struggle for them. Biology, which endowed our ape ancestors with territoriality, is perhaps the ultimate problem. But biology may also be the solution because it has given us the human mind – the best survival tool known.
