

# How to Fight a Religious Protest Movement?

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**W**hat is the nature of the problem the United States is trying to resolve? What are the methods chosen for the task? And what does the choice show about the prospects for the United States at the international arena? These are the three simple questions about the chain of events set in motion on 11 September.

My thesis is that the United States did not define the problem for what it really is. As a result, the method chosen to deal with the problem will not resolve it, and the United States is risking grave repercussions on the international arena.

## **The Problem: What It Is and How It Was Defined**

As soon as the World Trade Center came down, President Bush defined the problem the country faced in unequivocal terms. It was an act of war. Therefore, the United States was declared to be in the state of war against terrorism. Such an act allows fighting terrorism without defining exactly what terrorism is. Who is the enemy? Where is the enemy? What are our war aims if it is a war?

The often-proclaimed war aim is to capture Bin Laden and the perpetrators of the terror attack, to smoke them out of their holes and to destroy those who harbor them, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. What is it, then: a general war on terrorism as such, or a war to capture a particular terrorist?

This definition of the problem implies that once these objectives were fulfilled, the problem would be resolved. In fact it is highly naïve to think that once Bin Laden is captured, the problem of terrorism would be resolved. On the contrary, it would become deeper. If he is captured and killed, he would become a martyr for the cause. If he is not captured, he would acquire a legend of invincibility. In either case we lose.

The method chosen of going after him likewise does not promise an ultimate success. The United States approached the task as in 1991. Our military establishment went about this war as if it were a regular war. We built an internation-

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al coalition, or so it seems, and went about the war with bombing raids, smashing the nonexistent infrastructure of the Taliban regime. European skeptics of this course point out that this is a replay of 1991. Yes, this approach may destroy a Taliban regime, but will it move us closer to eradicating terrorism or, more specifically, Bin Laden's infrastructure or his capacity to deliver terrorist attacks on the United States? Can anyone guarantee that after the Taliban regime is smashed there will be no attacks on the United States? Of course not. Going after the Taliban is pursuing a secondary objective that may or may not be helpful in dealing with the problem.

The problem we face is much deeper than it appears at first. It is not just a matter of capturing a bunch of terrorists. It is not just a matter of smashing their organization's infrastructure, although this must be done. One cannot destroy a state of mind by bombing raids. The course the United States has chosen not only will not resolve the problem, it most likely will make it worse by antagonizing Muslims, glorifying Bin Laden, and spreading the curse of fundamentalism even further.

### **A Religious Protest Movement**

To choose a correct response one must first diagnose the problem. What we are dealing with is a state of mind, not of a fringe group but of a part of the Islamic community in scores of countries. Bin Laden is but a spokesman for a broad-based movement of the so-called Islamic fundamentalism. What is the nature of that movement? Why did it appear? What do these people want? Unless we grapple with these questions, we will not be able to develop a remedy that works.

Islamic fundamentalism is a dream. It is a projection of wishful thinking about the way things should be and contrasting it with the sorry reality. Its appeal is precisely in the projection of the ideal perfect legend of the Caliphate. It glorifies the pure past and contrasts it with the impure reality of the contemporary world. In this sense, it is first and foremost a religious protest movement.

We know enough about religious protest movements in history. Protestantism, for one, was essentially very similar. It too appealed to the pure Christianity and protested against the corruption of the contemporary church. It stood for a return to the purity and honesty of the original teaching.

The past models are usually idealized and projected as desirable, perfect examples. In reality, of course, these are no more than mental constructs that have very little to do with historical reality. Yet their appeal is enormous. Protestantism in Europe spread like fire and engulfed the entire continent in a protracted and bloody civil war for several decades.

The similarity of Islamic fundamentalism with Christian Protestantism is in its appeal to the hearts and minds of the believers for a pure, old model of belief. The fundamental difference is that Islamic fundamentalism is a protest against development as we know it, whereas Christian Protestantism fostered it.

The call for a return to pure and simple and old forms of Christian belief went hand-in-hand with honesty, hard work, and thrift, which propelled Christian ethics toward modern industrial society. Muslim fundamentalism is first and foremost a protest against modernity as we know it. It is a profoundly conserv-

ative movement whose very essence is fear of modern life. Islamic fundamentalism's biggest enemy is the melting pot of the contemporary world. In the minds of its proponents, everything associated with modern life undermines the very heart of Islam.

Modern life has brought about secularization of traditional societies. Western dress, music, communications, speed of everyday life, the very appearance of cities—everything is changing all the time and becoming more Western with every passing day. The United States is an epitome of this development. We are the most dynamic, cosmopolitan, multicultural society mankind has ever seen. Moreover, the United States is the major propeller of that change. We are the suppliers of the new technology, the new lifestyles, Internet music videos, and films. We are convinced that our way is the best way and the rest of the world will follow. Some people do not want to do so.

To succeed in the contemporary world, Arab societies over the decades have introduced Western banking and technological advances and imported modernization wholesale. This was a kind of change that affected everyone. Women increasingly are attracted to secular models of behavior. Young men abandon the traditional hierarchy of values, obedience, and respect and melt into the common secular pot of twenty-first century globalism. This is the source of fear.

Urbanization, communications, the Internet, fashion, industry, banking, wealth, music, travel—all of these things undermine and destroy the traditional way of life. These are the conduits of change. They undermine the established authority structure, undermine traditional belief systems, and undermine the very essence of Islamic civilization. At least that is how the fundamentalists perceive it.

I will not dwell here on the subject of whether modern life as such undermines Islam. More important is that the fundamentalists believe that it does. The very term fundamentalist underlines that it is a protest against modernity itself. A world without borders is unacceptable; a world where women go about their lives on their own without a veil is unacceptable. A world where young Arab men wear jeans, drink alcohol, and imitate Western behavior patterns is unacceptable. A world where modern secularized elites in Arab countries dress and act like westerners is unacceptable. A world where separateness is lost and Islam is forgotten is the enemy.

Islamic fundamentalists are scared. Fear is their main motivator. They are scared that time is working against them. They are scared that the pace of modern change would secularize the masses and that their very identity as Arabs and as Muslims would disappear. Their radicalism and their extremism are simply a reflection of their fear.

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As in all radical movements, fear and terror are related. The more one fears the more radical one is. These people also confront what they perceive as corrupt and incompetent governments in their home countries. From the point of view of a Muslim fundamentalist, most Arab governments are no more than stooges of the West. They take money from the West, they participate in Western schemes and alliances, and some even welcome American forces. They have succumbed to Western ways, Western dress, and Western thinking patterns. They have forgotten the old values and are only pretending that they support Islam. In fact, they are destroying it with their very existence. That is how fundamentalist critics view Arab governments.

### **Similar Movements**

Protest movements against modernity are not new in world history. As mentioned earlier, Christian Protestantism was similar in its appeal. In modern times, scores of revolutions, political parties, and movements in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were nothing but protests against modernity.

The revolution of 1848 was a mass protest against an industrial revolution. Uprooted rural folks seeking employment in growing cities and forced to work in factories and mines saw their traditional world crumbling down. They had to adapt to life in a big city. They had to learn a national language different from their dialect. They had to live by the clock and rearrange everything in their lives. They were alienated from the product of their labor. These feelings of frustration were captured well by Karl Marx who wrote about the spirit of communism wandering in Europe. That was a metaphor for a dream of a just society that would replace cruel reality. Socialist and communist teaching were but the varieties of protests against capitalism.

In Russia, a rural country, the protest against modernity took the form of a terrorist movement such as People's Will, and then the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Their main goal was to avert capitalist development of Russia, to safeguard the traditional people's way of life, and to wreak havoc on the government, the tsar, and his ministers. Terrorists assassinated dozens of police officers, governors, and state officials. It was a war against modernity represented by the state and the tsar.

Movements such as these are fanatical in their religious fervor, although they may espouse secular ideology. It is devotion to the cause that makes their adherents similar to religious fanatics. The adherents of such movements, be they Christian, Muslim, or secular like the Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia, are fervent fighters for the truth as they see it. They are ready to die with joy for their cause and for their ideals.

The Bolsheviks who replaced the SS as fighters against modernity likewise initially came to power by promising the peasants to divide everything equally and destroy the state. The Russian revolution, in that sense, was a protest against modernity. It was a realization of the peasant desire to live in their traditional lifestyles in peasant communes. It was a movement against development, against state and commerce as such. Only much later, when in power, did the Bolsheviks discover that to survive they had to preserve the state and strengthen it.

Later in the twentieth century, Europe saw numerous outbursts of protest against modernity, against change, and against modern capitalism. Baader Meinhof gangs terrorized German society in the 1970s by declaring war on capitalists as a class and killing influential entrepreneurs. Red brigades in Italy also declared war on Italian establishments, bringing Italy to the brink of civil war. Fanatical movements against established order and modernity are not new. They are part of our own Euro-American experience.

### **The Appeal**

The appeal of Muslim fundamentalism has been growing in the last three decades. The first major eruption was the Iranian revolution of 1979. It too was a classic case of a revolution against Western values, like the Russian revolution against modern life and modern development. It was a revolution restoring Islamic values and the Islamic way of life. Iran became a pariah state, living in self-imposed isolation and ruled by a Muslim theocracy.

The second eruption was the victory of the fundamentalists in elections in Algiers. Westernized, secularized, and utterly corrupt French-speaking elite confronted the challenge of the young Turks, believers in Islamic purity, who had increasing support of the downtrodden masses. They won elections but were prevented from taking power, with the silent approval of the Western powers. The result is endless terrorist acts, assassinations, and civil war in Algiers.

The third eruption was the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt. Ever more radical and fanatical, this movement confronted a powerful secular Egyptian state. Operating underground, the movement showed its existence by spectacular terrorist acts against symbols of Western presence—hotels, tourists, politicians.

The fourth outburst was of course the rise of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and its marriage of convenience with Bin Laden. As in Iran, the Taliban regime attempted to live the utopia and to establish the ideal Islamic regime. The Taliban regime turned into an ugly dictatorship. It proclaimed purity of Islam and for this cause ruthlessly killed people who did not comply. It subjugated women into medieval slavery. The Taliban regime denounced Western values and yet used Western technology along with deceit, terrorism, and even the drug trade to pursue its goals. Like other virulently anti-Western regimes before it, such as the Bolshevik and the Iranian regimes, the Taliban turned out to be much less true to its proclaimed ideals and much more cynical and bloodthirsty than its teaching.

The appeal of Muslim fundamentalism is enormous. Its strength is its promise of return to purity. Even Western educated and Western dressed, prosperous members of Arab society's elites probably would experience a feeling of guilt when listening to the message of the Islamists. The message is a form of idealized self-representation of the way one used to be or should be, the way the forefathers had to have been.

To a poor person surviving in overcrowded slums, the appeal must be even more profound. It is not only a call for purity but also a promise for the future.

The message is that if corrupt Western stooges are thrown out and a true and pure Islamic order is established, everything would be fine. The appeal of the message is in its simplicity. It is very similar to the Bolshevik message. Workers and peasants would come to power, divide the land, return factories to the proletarians, destroy the bourgeoisie, and build a just new society.

We must understand that we are dealing with a powerful religious movement that has a potentially enormous following and that this movement is a response to the processes of globalization unfolding in front of our eyes.

### **The Way We Do It**

Is it possible to fight a fanatical religious movement with a potentially enormous constituency by bombs? Of course not. Not only will the bombs not inflict any damage on the movement, they would strengthen it. It is fundamentally self-defeating for the purpose of undermining Muslim fundamentalism to engage in bombardments of a Muslim country. The likely outcome of this campaign will be that the United States would bog down in a secondary goal—fighting supporters of Bin Laden, rather than Bin Laden himself, whereas he would recruit new supporters by exploiting our bombing raids. The United States may bog down in a protracted war between Afghan tribes vying for power. This approach will destabilize Pakistan, ignite passions in Jordan, and possibly lead to a general conflagration in the entire region. This course is a prescription for disaster. The United States needs a clever policy undermining Muslim fundamentalism rather than one that will ignite the passions of its adherents.

Terrorism is a method of conducting a war. How can there be a coalition to fight terrorism? There could be Christian right wing terrorists, Islamic terrorists, communist terrorists, or nationalist terrorists such as ETA in Spain or Chechen in Russia. Are we fighting all the terrorists in the world? If so, we will never win. Are we fighting Islamic fundamentalists? If so, why do not we admit this? If we decline to admit this, fearing that we would inflame passions in the Middle East, why are we then conducting bombing raids that inflame passions even more? If we are fighting Osama Bin Laden and his organization, why are we bombing Kabul? He is not there. Unless we clearly identify the enemy we can never win.

### **The Coalition**

Just as in 1991, the United States went about the conduct of war by fostering an international coalition. Outwardly at least, dozens of countries have signed up for the cause of fighting terrorism. In reality of course, most of the coalition members do nothing and have signed up only to stay on good terms with the United States. One would have expected that if the United States is engaged in a war, and it leads a coalition of countries in that war, the cornerstone of the coalition would be NATO because NATO has been the most important military alliance created and led by the United States and uniting its closest allies.

In the current war, however, NATO is absent. Oh yes, NATO planes fly in the United States so that U.S. planes can fly in Afghanistan. That arrangement underscores that NATO is not involved where it counts. The current crisis has revealed

the underlying weakness of NATO. In fact, one can say NATO is irrelevant since NATO is not taking part in the war.

Which members in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are actively involved in the current campaign? Great Britain is the only one. France and Germany no longer express willingness and solidarity. Italy, Spain, and the new members do nothing at all. Moreover, the attentive reading of public opinion in at least France and Germany suggests that there is little enthusiasm for the U.S. bombing raids. Moreover, if the bombing raids continue for a considerable period of time, it is very likely that France and Germany would openly distance themselves from the war effort. It is not totally inconceivable that irritation with what they call American unilateralism would spill into open anti-Americanism and break up the NATO alliance.

The United States must understand that the mainstream of public opinion in Europe is profoundly pacifist, liberal, and tolerant if not to say friendly to the north African countries. The French pride themselves on having long experience of knowing and living with the Arab civilization and dealing with Islamic culture. The Germans have been cultivating relations with the Arab countries as well. Sizeable Muslim populations in both France and Germany make it imperative for those countries to avert war between Christian Europe and Islamic Middle East. A realistic appraisal of the situation suggests that France and Germany are reluctant allies and that they may part ways with the United States.

### **Conclusion**

The United States should rethink its strategy of dealing with Islamic fundamentalism. There should be a package of measures, least important of which should be military action.

The current policy course will make things much worse. We may lose some of our allies. We may recruit new adherents for Bin Laden; we may make a superhero out of him. We may risk destabilizing a host of countries in pursuit of an elusive enemy. America's business is business. We will win by simply being who we are.