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UNDERSTANDING RADICAL ISLAM

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INTRODUCTION*

In considering radical forms of Islam, we need also to say something about Islam more generally, and, in so doing, we are addressing a theology, a civilization, a religion, legal and political systems, a military program, cultures, and philosophy and literature, over some 1400 hundred years. It now includes some 1.2 billion people, with a majority in 47 countries. Hence, we can hope only to scratch the surface.

Here I will concentrate on matters of history, especially on relations with the west, and what this reveals about much Muslim fear, hope, shame and anger, and about the ideology of the Islamists.

WRONG EXPLANATIONS OF RADICAL ISLAM

Islamist terrorist organizations are not composed of poor people or uneducated people who know nothing of the world. Hassan al-Turabi of the Sudan has advanced degrees from the University of London and the Sorbonne. Abbasi Madani, a leader of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, received a doctorate in education from the University of London. Mousa Abu Marzzok, the head of Hamas' political committee, has a doctorate in engineering from Louisiana Tech University. Sayyid Qutb, the shaper of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, spent several years in the United States, which is where he became a militant. The Ayatollah Khomeini lived in Paris for many years. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed studied in a Baptist college in North Carolina.

Nor were the attacks caused by poverty. No doubt, extremist leaders can get foot soldiers from amongst people who rot in refugee camps and who can get no education other than the radical training in madrasas subsidized by extremists. But most poor people, including Muslim poor people, have never fought as terrorists. The people from the poorest countries in the world, such as Haiti or Mozambique, are not attacking the United States or anyone else. The terrorists themselves are usually wealthy and privileged.

Nor is this simply a response to repression or injustice. Tibetan or Vietnamese Buddhists have at least as good a claim of persecution and

repression as any Islamist cohort but we do not find the followers of the Dalai Lama or the Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist church of Vietnam resorting to terrorism.

Nor are the attacks caused chiefly by globalization — the spread of a capitalist economic order dominated by large corporations, suffused with products and culture from television to blue jeans. The terrorists are also attacking Hindus in Bangladesh and India, killing Buddhists in Thailand, and slaughtering Muslims in Sudan and Algeria. The Taliban made Hindus and Buddhists in Afghanistan wear distinctive clothing and demolished the two largest Buddhist statues in the world (which other Muslims had let stand for 1,000 years). None of these victims are Westerners, and most have had little to do with the West.

Nor are the attacks caused largely by recent United States policy concerning Israel or by American attacks on Iraq in the Gulf War. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001 were planned and carried on right through the period of extensive peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians from 1992-2000, when hopes were highest for a peace settlement.

As Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has pointed out, Bin Laden never mentioned the Palestinians or the Iraqis much in the years before his attacks on the United States. “He never talked about them before.” (Reuters, October 20, 2001). In the lists of grievances mentioned in his fatwas and TV interviews, he referred to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (Islam’s third holiest shrine) but not to the Palestinians per se.

THE CONFLICT IS SHAPED BY RELIGION

While poverty, ignorance, globalization, and U.S. policy may play some part, the root of this wave of terrorism is extremist religion. Certainly bin Laden’s views are not those of the majority of Muslims around the world. Certainly the United States and its allies are not waging war to attack or defend a particular religion. The opponents of this terrorism include Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, and others.

But there is absolutely no hiding the fact that bin Laden, his lieutenants, and his foot soldiers have repeatedly stated their aim to impose their version of Islam on, first, the Muslim world and, then, the rest of the world. They want each country to accept or be forced into submission to their version of Islamic Shari'a law. As the Ayatollah Khomeini put it, "We did not create a revolution to lower the price of melon."

As bin Laden repeated in his 1998 *Al-Jazeera* interview, "There are two parties to the conflict: World Christianity, which is allied with Jews and Zionism, led by the United States, Britain and Israel. The second party is the Islamic world."

"This war is fundamentally religious.... Those who try to cover this crystal clear fact, which the entire world has admitted, are deceiving the Islamic nation. This war is fundamentally religious.... This fact is proven in the book of God Almighty and in the teachings of our messenger, may God's peace and blessings be upon him. This war is fundamentally religious. Under no circumstances should we forget this enmity between us and the infidels. For, the enmity is based on creed.... The unequivocal truth is that Bush has carried the cross and raised its banner high." Osama bin Laden, November 3, 2001.

"It is a religious-economic war.... Therefore, religious terms should be used when describing the ruler who does not follow God's revelations and path and champions the infidels by extending military facilities to them or implementing the UN resolutions against Islam and Muslims. Those should be called infidels and renegades.... the confrontation and conflict between us and them started centuries ago. The confrontation and conflict will continue because the conflict between right and falsehood will continue until Judgment Day." Osama bin Laden, March 2004.

Their principal enemy is Christianity, and its allies, Jews. They believe that the collapse of the Islamic world in the face of "Christendom," ongoing since the failure of the second Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, can only be explained by Muslims' apostasy from true Islam and can only be reversed by a return to the purity of their version of Islam.

REMEMBERING HISTORY

Americans are prone to try to put things historic behind us; indeed we often believe that we can put things historic behind us. The rest of the world, especially the Muslim world, is very different. There a version of history lies close to the heart and gives rise to ideology, emotion and ambition. Saddam Hussein could refer to George W. Bush as ‘Hagalu’ knowing that his Iraqi listeners would remember the Mongol sack of Baghdad. Bin Laden know that his references to Al-Andalus will find a receptive audience.

For us, well, Ambrose Bierce wrote, “War is God’s way of teaching Americans geography.” I hope it now becomes our spur to history.

Muhammad was successful as a religious teacher, as a political leader, and as a military leader. He promised his followers similar success. They expected to be victorious, and to keep on being victorious. For centuries, the promise and expectation of victory turned out to be correct.

After his death, Muslim armies attacked and invaded the then majority Christian areas that are now Jordan, Israel, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. They were blocked by the Byzantine Empire centered in Constantinople, but went around it in the East by attacking Persia, then Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the west by invading Spain and France.

One hundred years after the death of the prophet, Muslim armies were simultaneously 200 miles from Paris and in Western China, and they controlled most areas in between. The expansion continued with the invasion of India and Russia, repeated attacks on Italy, and the gradual encroachment on the Byzantines, who held out against the Arabs but succumbed to the Turks.

On this scale, the crusades were irrelevant: they were a short lived, failed, counter-attack that briefly pushed the invading Muslims back a few hundred miles before their advance resumed, eventually into Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Serbia and Austria.

Islam stretched across Europe, Asia, and Africa, from the Atlantic to the western shores of the Pacific, from Nigeria to China, from Tanzania to the rivers flowing into the Baltic Sea. It stood at the crossroads of the continents and controlled world trade.

In comparison, the Christian world was poor and barbaric. The Hindu world of India was under Islamic control. China remained powerful, but was content to maintain its civilization within its borders. The rest of the world was considered marginal.

In this sense, Islam ruled the world. For over a thousand years it was the dominant power.

For Muslims, their success confirmed the rightness of their beliefs and the finality of their revelation. Islam believes itself to be the final religion, and it expected to succeed in making the rest of the world submit (“Islam”). Everything they saw in the world about them confirmed the truth of this. Religious truth and secular history were congruent. The truth was winning.

Then everything changed.

The changes happened gradually of course, with increasing defeat interspersed with victory. Little in history turns on a dime.

But, if we want to put one date on the turning point, the best candidate might be September 11, 1683. This was the high water mark of Islamic expansion. The following day, combined European forces defeated the Ottoman Turks at the second siege of Vienna. It was the beginning of an ongoing, grinding, disheartening process of defeat, surrender, and subjugation that lasted for centuries, spread throughout the world, and reached into the heart of Islam itself.

After the Ottoman armies were driven out of Austria, then Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Albania were freed from Ottoman rule. The Greeks revolted against their overlords and slowly drove the Ottomans back to Istanbul. The Russians drove east and south, conquering Muslims as they went.

This was bad enough, but the European advance did not stop at recovering European lands. Through their naval power and newly discovered sea routes to the east (largely developed as a way to get around the Islamic realms), the Europeans challenged Islam throughout Asia and Africa. The British took over India from Muslim rulers, and did the same with what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh. They then conquered Muslim Malaysia and Singapore. Only the Afghans resisted them successfully. The Dutch took over Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. The Spanish conquered the Philippines, including its southern Muslim areas.

The advance continued through east and West Africa, as the French, Spanish, Belgians, Portuguese, Germans and British took over areas formerly controlled by Muslim rulers. Meanwhile the Russians continued their expansion and took over Muslim areas in the Caucasus, such as Chechnya, Dagestan, and Azerbaijan. They also invaded east, taking over the ancient Muslim civilizations of Central Asia, which are now Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. They were stopped only when they, like the British, tried to take over vast mountains and fiercely independent tribes of Afghanistan.

Worst of all, the unbelievers of Europe inexorably invaded and overcame Arab lands, seen as the center of the Islamic universe. In 1798, Napoleon invaded Egypt, easily conquering it. The French stayed several years and were only driven out by a British force under Admiral Nelson. In the nineteenth century, French forces took over what are now Algeria and the Muslim areas of the Sahara desert. The Spanish took over the Atlantic coast. Now, infidels were overcoming even those who spoke the language of the Qur'an itself.

The final debacle came at the beginning of the 20th century. In the First World War, the Ottomans allied themselves with Germany, and they shared in its defeat. When their Empire, fragile for years, finally collapsed, its remnants were picked up by the victorious Europeans. The Greeks annexed more of the land that they desired. Under a mandate from the League of Nations, the French took over the governance of Lebanon and Syria; the British took over Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and portions of the Arabian Peninsula. Unbelieving powers now ruled in the Middle East itself.

THE REMNANTS OF ISLAM

By the first decades of the 20th century, more than 90 percent of Muslims lived under European and, to them, Christian and infidel, rule. Only five areas remained independent — Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

As Osama bin Laden put it in his November 3, 2001, videotape broadcast, “Following World War I, which ended more than 83 years ago, the whole Islamic world fell under the Crusader banner -- under the British, French, and Italian governments. They divided the whole world....”

For strict Muslims, Turkey and Iran were as good as lost anyway. Ataturk had grabbed Turkey by the scruff of its neck, separated religion from the state, written a secular constitution, liberated women, adopted Western dress, and mandated that Islam be denied political power. Since he had established a secular state and decreed that Islam would never again rule there then, for Muslim extremists, he was an apostate, deserving of death, and Turkey was an apostate country. For many, Iran was little better.

This left, as the only remnants from the dominant Muslim world empires of scarcely two centuries before, only Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. The former was populated by warring tribes and was remote, poverty stricken, and isolated. But Saudi Arabia was, and is, the heartland of Islam, the land of the Two Shrines, and the only significant Islamic territory not to fall under the sway of the infidel. It is where Muhammad lived, taught, fought, ruled, and died. It is the destination of the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage enjoined on all pious Muslims. It is the focal point of prayer.

For extremist Muslims, Saudi Arabia’s independence and submission to Allah alone has now been lost. They believe that, with the arrival there of American troops to protect the Saudis from Saddam Hussein, the land has fallen to the infidel. Osama bin Laden has called this “the latest and greatest” example of infidel aggression: “Now infidels walk on the land where Muhammad was born and where the Qur’an was revealed to him.”

WHY THIS FAILURE?

Continuing the sweeping generalizations I have used, we can say that Islam has experienced a thousand years of stunning success followed by three hundred years of crushing failure, and, of course, the burning question is “Why has this happened?”

There are several suggested answers, and one of the most influential is the assertion that the core problem is that most Muslims, especially Muslim leaders, have forsaken true Islam. Muslims have become corrupt and impious, refused to follow the teachings of the Prophet, and copied the ways of unbelievers. The failure of the Muslim world is rooted in the unfaithfulness of Muslims themselves. Hence, the only solution to their problems is that they return to the purity of the faith as some think it existed during the life of Muhammad and his immediate followers. The model should be Islam as it was thought to have been lived in the seventh century.

