

An Intellectual Response to the Terrorist Attacks:
Anatomy of a Cause
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Draft Essay: Not for Publication

In the wake of the terrorist fury unleashed by Osama bin Laden and his Islamic al-Qa‘idah organization on September 11, Western analysts have been scrambling to help us comprehend the competing ideologies that have brought about a violent collision between two adjacent cultures. Two themes can be identified in this rivalry: Americanization as the culture of consumerism and of popular entertainment has spread deep into the Muslim world, and there collided with Islamization as a moral struggle against infidels and their Muslim quislings.

For the most part writers on the subject have paid little heed to the character of these competing ideologies and their connection with the terrorist attacks, and instead have focused attention on what is closer at hand – and so easier to caricature - in terms of past U.S. actions and policies. Let’s consider some of these national actions and policies to see what connections there are, if any, with foreign terrorist groups.

During the Cold War, the U.S. actively fought Communism in Vietnam and Cuba, but there has been no comparable campaign against the Muslim world, so it seems unlikely that geopolitics alone could explain the vicious network that Islamic radicals have knit against the U.S. Furthermore, the Muslim countries with which Bin Laden is identified contain huge wealth, which undermines the notion that Bin Laden’s real enemy is Western-induced poverty—Bin Laden himself comes from a wealthy Saudi family, his chief strategist, Ayman Zawahiri, is a specialist pediatrician, while his terrorist network hasn’t shown particular solidarity with impoverished populations in, say, India, Africa, and Latin America. As far as we know, Bin Laden hasn’t challenged the economic injustice that was exacerbated by the phenomenon of “Petro-Islam,” which has funneled oil revenues to a tiny minority of Muslim elites.

The U.S. support of Israel, and its connivance in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s repressive policies in Gaza and the West Bank, has understandably caused outrage around the world, and that has been given as a reason for the attacks. While America’s unconditional support for Israel continues to hinder relations with Muslim regimes, it is, nevertheless, difficult to see how that could account for both fundamentalism *and*

terrorism. Many in the Middle East surely remember that America had little say in the founding of the state of Israel, and that it was Czechoslovakia that saved the infant state from certain oblivion by providing military aid. And in the Suez crisis of 1956, the U.S. intervened on the side of Egypt, against the British government, forcing the withdrawal of British, French, and Israeli troops from the Suez Canal. If that intervention was meant as a strategic geopolitical move, it backfired: in the aftermath of the Suez crisis, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria formed a Cold War alliance with the Soviet Union. (Malcolm Kerr described this shift in his indispensable book, *The Arab Cold War*.) Together the Soviet Union and its Arab allies attacked the U.S. on the floor of the U.N., and much present-day American resentment of the U.N. harks back to that time.

An oft-repeated reason given for anti-Western Islamic hostility is U.S. support for corrupt undemocratic Muslim governments, but that reason also seems inadequate given the relative weakness in conservative societies of domestic support for progressive social policies. To accuse the U.S. of allowing corrupt regimes to hold off on domestic social reform lest their people charge them with betraying their culture seems circuitous. What interest of the U.S. does it serve that authoritarian regimes engage in bloody suppression of dissent and otherwise promote the conservative cultural agenda to stem cultural defections to the West? It does not advance U.S. interests to leave Saddam Hussein in power in Iraq, or to turn a blind eye on Hafiz al-Asad of Syria when in 1982 he reportedly massacred some 20 to 30,000 protesters. This is a case where intervention would have been rightly condemned as Yankee imperialism. In any case, the external influence of the U.S. has not helped even its staunchest allies when the radicals have come calling, as the case of the Shah of Iran showed.

A litany of sins of omission and commission has been dragged forward and laid at the feet of the U.S. to explain the nature of the radical Islamic anti-Western campaign, including slavery, racism, global unilateralism—it has been widely noted that the U.S. government recently pulled out of the Kyoto agreement on the environment, refused to recognize the International Court of Human Rights at the Hague, held off on its U.N. dues, walked out of the U.N. racism conference in South Africa, and abandoned the ABM treaty. Yet it's not clear why sins such as these should outrage Muslim fundamentalists more than, say, trans-Atlantic leftists. In any case, it seems unlikely that the Muslim

world would rise in righteous indignation on the issue of race and reparations for slavery, since the Muslim practice and defense of slavery, so well-documented, from the Zanj slave revolt in the ninth century to the plight of captives in Sudan now, would spare it no less.

Another explanation is that anti-U.S. terrorism is yet another manifestation of anti-imperialism, but this is not a convincing argument, either—though it contains a grain of truth. The U.S. took a very active role in the process of decolonization, even if cold war considerations often overshadowed its commitment to nationalism. And there have been other imperialisms, too, such as those of Russia and Japan. In fact, Islam itself is not innocent of imperial pretensions, as manifest in Islamic expansionist regimes under the Arabs, the Mongols, the Ottomans, and the Moghuls of the Indian sub-continent. It will, for instance, be recalled that it was Ivan the Great who freed Russia of the Tartar yoke. One might argue, accordingly, that America has appropriated the sense of dominion that had once been Islam's. It has extended its influence over the entire world, not excepting the Muslim world, not by pursuing a policy of suppressing religion but by requiring no religious mandate for its policies. Americanization has meant secularization, has meant in effect the arrogant display of power without divine acknowledgment. That represents a direct challenge to the fundamentalist position of the divine nature of authority and of human stewardship of worldly affairs. And so when conscience-stricken Muslims find their public spaces filled with the unwholesome content of American mass culture, they recoil in outrage and look for a religious response. Poverty is not the issue here, but the excesses of a global consumer culture bearing marks of American dominance. Perhaps that is the grain of truth that stirs the passion of the radicals who see America standing in their way.

In the end, there's something circular about the nature of anti-U.S. feeling in the Muslim world, something that resists simple explanations of cause and effect. U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia include many who, according to published reports, have converted to Islam, and yet Osama bin Laden considers them infidels simply for their being American. That is why it's misleading to view the September 11 attacks as payback for a specific set of global grievances. For years, America has found itself in a Catch-22 in the eyes of the radicals. They are equally aggrieved by America's friendship with the

Muslim world and America's alleged hostility. And that makes a coherent or effective response difficult to formulate.

Bin Laden, his agents, and his numerous sympathizers have an agenda, a clear set of goals they have enunciated repeatedly. Bin Laden has attacked the stationing of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, saying they are an infidel defilement of sacred soil. He has also called for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops in the Gulf so that Islam may be left free to fill its God-appointed role of world dominance. And the establishment of the state of Israel continues to serve as cannon fodder for the fundamentalist anti-Western rhetoric. Indeed, the appeal of Bin Laden among the Muslim masses draws on a kind of free-floating conviction that America is an impediment to Muslim world dominion. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York City and at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. the highly esteemed Islamic jurist, Shaykh Tantawi, the shaykh al-Azhar of Egypt, reportedly handed Osama bin Laden a mild rebuke, rather than a stern fatwa stripping him of his identity as a Muslim. And the editor of a Muslim newsletter cautions President Bush against counting on a subservient Islam to support his campaign in Afghanistan. Islam's subservient status in the West, warns the editor, is being corrected by robust growth that will bring about Pan-Islamic resurgence (Abdul Hamid, *New Haven Register*, 10 October, 2001). Inexpedient as it may be for Muslim leaders to admit, Bin Laden's actions seem to evoke deep sentiments of Islamic pride against an overweening West. Stripped of any hope of a better life for themselves, and roused by ritual incantation of past Islamic greatness, the Muslim masses easily accede to notions of moral election, and to fundamentalism as fuel for worldwide righteous militancy. Bin Laden's trans-national terrorist network seems, to some Muslims, a symbol of international Islamic solidarity.

In light of that Pan-Islamic sentiment, anti-Western enmity seems more like the result of a worldwide divide. For Muslim fundamentalists, the world is embroiled in a cosmic conflict between truth and falsehood, between light and darkness, between virtue and vice. Because it draws a sharp line between man's inner private life and his outward public actions, the West inhabits the realm of enmity, and is judged guilty for having reduced religion to the level of the private and subjective, and elevated politics and economics to the levels of public good and objective commitment. That has produced a

culture of pornography, promiscuity, abortion, divorce, and other accumulated vices, proof of the West's guilt, and reason for waging a jihad against the West. For a long time, the radicals have concocted from this index of Western decadence a coarse-grind fundamentalism that seeks to subdue the West as a corollary to extending the rule of truth and virtue. They say believers are enjoined by God's revelation to line up on the side of truth and virtue against the agents of Satan, God's adversary.

When President Bush declared war on terrorism by saying those who are not with the U.S. are on the side of the terrorists, he appealed to a familiar fundamentalist polarization. But a significant difference is that fundamentalists claim Scriptural warrant to the effect that contending with infidels requires holy war in which the end justifies the means. Scriptural appeal for this fundamentalist view has the effect of handing embattled Muslims a doctrinal advantage and putting their modernist opponents on the defensive. Having all along professed adherence to the Koran as the infallible and exclusive divine speech, even moderate Muslims are constrained not to dissent too openly from this characterization of the West as infidel. Many Muslims, egged on by Western allies, would say publicly that Bin Laden's monolithic view is not representative of Islam, but privately, watched by their disaffected co-religionists, they are slow to defend the West's innocence. Against that reluctance, Bin Laden and radicals of his ilk have been pacesetters.

We may illustrate the balance of ideological forces in Islam with the help of a three-figure syllogism, thus:

- a) If Islam does not always produce victory, it is pointless;
- b) Islam is crucially important;
- c) Islam does not always yield victory.

These three statements, taken together, are inconsistent: they cannot all be true at the same time. Any two of them, however, are defensible, though precisely which two makes the difference between who is likely to be a fundamentalist and who is not. If proposition a) is dropped then Islam becomes a historical contingency suitable for moderate observant Muslims. If proposition b) is dropped then people become cultural Muslims, as Ernest Gellner describes of Muslim Bosnians. If, however, proposition c) is dropped then Islam becomes a creed of fundamentalist Muslims à la Bin Laden. Combinations b) and

c) or a) and c) allow for co-existence with the West, but not a) and b). Still, another step, a sectarian one, is necessary to turn a fundamentalist into a terrorist, and that step Bin Laden has taken.

Conservatives and radicals are made up of versions of combinations a) and b), and they are alike in their view of the West as the enemy that has few intrinsic virtues, though the West has many tactical uses. Aware of the inflammatory appeal of Bin Laden, for example, Saudi and Pakistani authorities have tried to walk a fine line between showing support for the U.S. cause and not giving offence to the sympathizers of Bin Laden, a native son in one case and an exalted guest in the other. These countries dislike it that America has put them in that position, and have said so. A rift between the ruling House of Saud, which wants to be rid of the phantom of Bin Laden, and rank and file Saudis who admire him, would erupt from a close alliance with the U.S. Bin Laden released an audio tape this summer in which he lashed out against the U.S. and Israel, and boasted about the weakness of the U.S. The tape became a hotly sought-after item on the black market, much to the alarm—and the embarrassment—of Saudi authorities. And a Saudi journalist, who asked for anonymity, recently admitted that in the eyes of ordinary Muslims, Bin Laden has become a symbol of anti-American defiance (*New York Times*, 5 October). In such an environment, energized by the imminent onset of Ramadan, the perception of a pro-American bias in the Saudi regime could provoke a widespread pro-Bin Laden backlash, and threaten the regime's stability. The same is true in Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbor.

The U.S. has cobbled together an anti-terrorist alliance, and, for very sound public policy reasons, has inserted into that a Muslim link to unhinge Bin Laden. Yet the U.S. also knows that such a Muslim link constrains the alliance against pursuing a prolonged or a heavy-handed Afghan military campaign, for Bin Laden would use that to rally support. Furthermore, the U.S. is certain to be asked to reward its Muslim allies, perhaps with weapons sales and with compromises on its pro-Israeli stance, as Pakistan in one case and Jordan in the other have demanded.

Typically, fundamentalist groups see their struggle as a war on two fronts: one against the compromisers within, and the other against the infidels without. Many Muslim countries are reluctant to spark an internal struggle against Bin Laden's forces,

and so they are circumspect about throwing in their lot with a secular America. By stressing that the war on terrorism is not directed at Muslims, and that Islam is a noble religion of peace and tolerance, President Bush has not, however, made it easier for these Muslim countries. Watched by suspicious clerics, Muslim leaders find a poisoned chalice in the endorsement of the infidel West.

So how should the U.S. proceed against the terrorists? The military alliance against terrorism cannot by itself be an adequate or effective response, in part because military action inflames fundamentalist passion, in part because a free society is a haven that cannot pre-empt a potential terrorist, and in part because terrorists are not a discrete ethnic or social group. A terrorist cannot be identified before an act of terrorism has been committed; before September 11, Mohamed Atta was, by all accounts, a person of normal habits, what Muslims call 'a mere son of Adam' (*min bani Adama*). And if the existence of the terrorist is established by the act of terrorism, then an effective defense would necessarily get to potential terrorists *before* they acted, by means other than force, assuming they can be identified.

An ideal but not unrealistic solution to the terrorist problem would be to persuade Bin Laden's supporters and allies to abandon their black-and-white division of the world and to concede that there are people of God even in unlikely places—among America's 5.8 million Muslim citizens, for example. This would require the fundamentalists to make a mental shift, to go back to the drawing board and reflect on how Muslims are commanded to proclaim, *Allah-u-Akbar* ['God, than whom is nothing greater'], a call that makes 'Allah' the greatest (*akbar*) goal of fallible human quest instead of making 'Islam' an end in itself. That would make God's compassion and mercifulness to which the Koran testifies our hope against permanent enmity with God or with God's self-appointed foot soldiers. In this view, the West would be seen as a mixed bag of good and bad, no different from any other society—including those in the Muslim world. In the words of the nineteenth century the Muslim scholar, Muhammad al-Kanemi, "no age and country is free from its share of heresy and sin, not even Egypt, Syria and all the cities of Islam in which acts of immorality and disobedience without number have long been committed." Al-Kanemi rejected drawing a hard and fast line between truth and falsehood, between faith and disobedience, saying only tolerance and mutual acceptance can avert permanent

war brought on by the blind champions of revelation. The logic here seems to be that although God the Judge will ultimately reward obedience, God the All-Knowing who sees our hearts will be forbearing with us. He argued that religious intolerance is a form of disobedience, for it sets out to force the hand of God. By contrast, the Koran admonishes believers to be securers of justice, witnesses for God, and not to “let detestation for a people move you not to be equitable” (5: 11). On his own terms, Bin Laden may be too implacable to be swayed by such arguments, but his sympathizers, cut off from personal contact with him and reached out to by peace-loving Muslims, may not be. They might agree with the view that Muslims, too, are fallible beings, and so they should preach forbearance with all humanity when they call for fundamental faithfulness to Scripture.

For balance, there should be on the side of the West a commensurate modification of the secular antagonism toward religion, not by way of a return to religious imposition, heaven forbid, but by way of overhauling the view that our political freedom is undermined by religious practice, and so is incompatible with it. James Madison, for example, affirmed in 1784 that the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience would be destroyed by the establishment of religion as an engine of civil policy, saying the infringement of religious freedom is not just an offence to the state, it is an offence against God. There are sound religious reasons for religious tolerance, Madison argues, saying in its early years Christianity existed and flourished against every opposition from the state rather than from dependence on the state. All

“are to be considered as retaining an equal right to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience. While we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace the religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us. If this freedom be abused, it is an offence against God, *not against man* (emphasis in original). The Christian religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them.”

A religion not invented by human policy cannot depend for the truth of its claims on human enforcement. That, says Madison, demonstrates the innate excellence of religion, making religion worthy of the free assent of men and women. Religion is not for saints only, but for stumbling people, too. Ironically, this tolerant view is anticipated in the injunction of the Koran to the effect that “there is no compulsion in religion” (2: 256) so that our obedience may be freely, if imperfectly, given. All of this is by way of saying that the Founding Fathers were prescient in intending neither to establish religion nor to suppress it. They certainly never underestimated the power of religion progressively to humanize us, even if that be by way of vigorous debate and disagreement. Their brand of liberalism was not against religion, only its establishment, and there is no reason, therefore, why today a reconstructed liberalism that is respectful of religion should be in conflict with our freedoms or with the demands for enlightened inter-cultural encounter with Muslims.

The dramatic events of September 11 have concentrated the minds of many on how to move forward in a constructive way in relations between Islam’s religious heritage and the West’s liberal tradition. The competition between the two worldviews represented by Americanization and Islamization will not be moderated or even changed by the military attacks that have commenced against Afghanistan, nor would that make it easier to focus on underlying issues of misunderstanding and mistrust. Yet outside the ominous sound of exploding bombs and beyond the reach of guided - or errant - missiles lie great tracks of the Muslim world that have, for their own reasons, embraced Islamization without demonizing difference. Similarly, above and beyond the din and spin of consumerism and fashion persists an enduring Western tradition of respect for freedom and tolerance of difference, religious or other. Given the fact that Islamization has spread in the West under conditions of religious freedom such as Madison described, it is relevant to ask whether a similar prospect can be envisaged for Americanization in the Muslim world. In part that has been happening, as with the U.S. engagement with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states without a demand for secularization. Perhaps the world that the fundamentalists see in simplistic terms of black-and-white has shrunk rapidly from the combined effects of Americanization and Islamization, which between them have complicated life for simplifiers, backing them into a corner. If so, the recent

spate of attacks against the U.S., from the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979 to the September 11 attacks, reflects a crisis of weakness in the future of the fundamentalist cause, prompting a spectacular bid to bump up falling stock. At any rate, given a choice, the majority of Muslims would likely prefer co-existence with the West and prosperity. Which might explain why the zealots have fanned their demonology to ignite terrorism abroad and unrest at home.

The terrorist attacks should not, because of their evil character and deadly toll, absolve us from the difficult and complex business of seeking moral justification for our response. The whole point about our implacable and unquenchable opposition to the terrorists is that, in spite of the massive power at our disposal, we do not flinch from moral scrutiny.

That message bears taking beyond our shores to the world the terrorists infest. To be successful, the Western-led coalition must add to the military option humanitarian assistance and commitment to dialogue. It would require the West to embark abroad on a long-term peace offensive by securing local military structures in an alliance for a ruled-based international order, by supporting the cause of moderate Muslims at home and abroad, and by fostering democratic renewal and exchange throughout the Muslim world where ultimately the battle of ideas must be won.