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WORK IN COMMON: DEMOCRACIES AND OPPOSITION TO TERRORISM

Abstract

The paper argues that there is in Bin Laden's work a certain superficial novelty. But below the surface are the familiar twisted arguments and misplaced moralism of a long line of similar incitements to killing. In this regard, the paper focuses on the ideology of the anarchists of the late 19th century and the Soviet Communists of the early 20th century, Latin American bomb-throwers of the 1960s, Italian Red Brigadists of the 1970s and neo-fascists of a few years later. All these claimed to speak for neglected majorities; all have had their bloody day; all have since passed on. Clearly, politicized religion – one major current concern – has much company in the present and the past of terrorism. The paper further argues that there is a corrosive effect on the democracy that does not meet its foreign or internal challenges from violent extremists.

One of the finest of the world's declarations, in the wake of 11 September, came from Mr. M. Shameem Ahsan, Minister and Charge d'Affaires, a.i. of Bangladesh to the United Nations. While speaking for Bangladesh at the fifty-sixth session of the United Nations General Assembly on 1 October 2001, he treated this tragedy with

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sensitivity and intelligence. He looked to UN principles to give “global legitimacy” to the struggle against terrorism. He supported Security Council efforts to bring justice to the perpetrators – indeed, he argued that absence of punishment would mean future dangers to innocent civilians. The Minister then took note of how 60 countries lost citizens in the carnage of that day. Sixty countries, including Bangladesh.¹

Despite such important speeches, too many of limited or corrupted vision still imagine that Osama Bin Laden somehow speaks for humanity, or for the Muslim world, or for Arabs. In fact he speaks for al-Qaida, and few others. To excuse, or apologize for, Bin Laden’s acts, these observers must have weak eyes that overlook his murder of Bangladeshis in New York in 2001, just as they cannot see his murder of over 200 Africans in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

For anyone who has been studying terrorist tracts for long, there is in Bin Laden’s work a certain superficial novelty, and there has naturally been great interest in his *fatwa* and his terror manuals like the “Declaration of Jihad Against the Country’s Tyrants.”² But below the surface are the familiar twisted arguments and misplaced moralism of a long line of similar incitements to killing. There were the tracts of the anarchists of the late 19th century and the Soviet Communists of the early 20th. There were the communiqués of Latin American bomb-throwers of the 1960s. There were the leaflets of Italian Red Brigadists of the 1970s and neofascists of a few years later. And there have been publications by American white racists of

¹ Statement by Mr. Minister and Charge d’Affaires M. Shameem Ahsan on “Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism,” United Nations General Assembly, 56th session, New York, 1 October 2001. www.un.int/bangladesh/ga/st/56ga/terrorism.htm

² The self-described *fatwa*, signed by Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and four others, first appeared in the publication *Al Quds al-Arabi* (in Arabic) on 23 February 1998, p. 3. That same year, authorities in Manchester, England recovered from the house of a Libyan suspected to be a member of Al Qaeda the aforementioned terrorist training manual, which is some 180 pages in length and has since been used by prosecutors in several trials.

the early 1990s. All these claimed to speak for neglected majorities; all have had their bloody day; all have since passed on.

Al-Qaeda is clever and talented, but so were many of these earlier failures. Bin Laden is not a philosopher, but a sophist who labors to make the weaker argument stronger, by punctuating his paragraphs with explosions. He is not a religious teacher. How does he even dare to issue a *fatwa*, as though he were a devout scholar? Bin Laden is not a guerrilla, or not usually: guerrilla war can indeed be sanctioned under international law, but it starts by leaving aside civilians while using unconventional military tactics to fight military forces.³ There can be honor in that, as there was honor in the Russian and Yugoslav resistance to Hitler's armies. Nor is Bin Laden a nationalist; his Saudi brethren ejected him years ago, and many of his new Afghan friends were bought with his father's purse. "The Contractor" is what al-Qaida people apparently call this man....the contractor, a skillful organizer of killers whose victims are usually civilians.

No wonder that governments everywhere have condemned Osama Bin Laden, as they have often condemned terrorism generally. The recent resolutions of the UN come readily to mind. Before those, the Security Council imposed sanctions on several regimes for sponsoring or harboring transnational terror. Leaders of Muslim nations had earlier taken their stand against terrorism. Meeting in December 1997, the Organization of the Islamic Conference—with 55 members—condemned terrorism committed in the name of Islam and declared that their religion forbids the killing of innocents, and that states must deny asylum to terrorists. Three years earlier, meeting in Casablanca, members called terrorists

³ Geneva Accords of 1949 lay down four requirements for minimal legitimacy for guerrilla forces; terrorists rarely meet any of the four. I made approaches to the differences between terrorism and guerrilla warfare in Chapter 5 of my book, *Terrorism Today*, (London: Frank Cass, 2000) and in an earlier article "Terrorism: A Matter for Moral Judgement," in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (vol. 4, no. 1, Spring, 1992), pp. 1-21.

relying upon the Koran “a blatant disgrace to Islamic teachings and a violation of our values, culture and heritage.”⁴ Nothing I could say today could be better spoken, or more principled, than those declarations.

The nature of terrorism will never change: It is, and always will be, the deliberate abuse of the innocent to inspire fear for political purposes. But the character of terrorism can differ from time to time and place to place, and the profile of the terrorist of today is not an easy one to draw. It is not one face, but something multifaceted.

Whether here in Bangladesh, or in the U.S., the next attacker could surprise us in more ways than one. For example, she may be a woman; look to Sri Lanka, where not only some Prime Ministers have been women but some terrorists too. In the Middle East, there are female suicide bombers for the first time in memory—two women in February and March.⁵

The next attacker may employ unexpected technologies. My book of two years ago warned at length of a number of “mid-tech” possibilities as terror weapons, including small aircraft. Those sad possibilities remain. But I did not foresee use of great passenger liners as bombs. As analysts, six months after September 11, we must ask ourselves, what are we not foreseeing now that we ought to?

Consider the great variety just in political typologies.

Democratic societies everywhere, no matter their size, stages of industrialization, or wealth, struggle continuously with indigenous racists. Some of them are middle-aged or old, and very ideological, like the Ph. D. novelist, and seller of propaganda and “White Power”

⁴ Associated Press story in the *Washington Post*, 12 December 1997. The many other relevant published condemnations of terrorism include the “Cairo Declaration” by the heads of the African states and the European Union, meeting 3-4 April 2000; www.medea.be/en/index445.htm

⁵ Wafa Idris and Darin Abu Eishah, *New York Times*, 11 February and 1 March 2002.

music who lives in a rural compound in West Virginia, within easy driving distance from Washington, D.C. Others are young, and overtly violent, and nihilistic, like the 26-year old white male who read and admired one of those novels (*The Turner Diaries*) and blew up a building full of people in Oklahoma City. Here was a familiar and potent combination of evil doctrine and love of action.

The world's democratic states must also deal with racism's polar opposite: the "class warriors" of Marxism-Leninism. Adherents of these schools bled some European cities in recent decades, and many a village in Latin America and Asia. Some leaders live on, in jails in Turkey and Peru, for example. Would-be successors of these Leninists carry on, holding up flags (and spirits of cadres) in mountains and forests and city slums. In Nepal and India, they are at work. Many Communist terrorists are well-educated, and some live at higher standards than the peaceable lower classes who focus on their families, work, and culture. Strong attachments to Mao, or Castro, or Lenin mean by definition fierce hatreds of democracy. Propagandists of extremist groups ridicule democracy's alleged weakness and disorganization and chaotic capitalism. It is a good corrective to such tracts to recall how, in the 1930s in Germany, the far Left joined the far Right in ridicule of the moderate political center. But neither extreme has survived in power in Germany. Democracy is stronger than terrorists imagine.⁶

National separatism, paradoxically, is another source of international terrorism. No hard rule settles the question of how large or small, how uniquely national or multinational, a given state should be. These complex matters are best determined by agitation, communication, debate, leadership, and compromise. But we know

⁶ For an excellent address on the potential for democracy in the Middle East and Asia, see, Merrick Carey, "Defending and Extending Democracy: Sustaining the Idea of Self-Government", an address in Newport, Rhode Island on 5 November 2001, printed by The Lexington Institute of Arlington, Virginia, and reprinted in *Vital Speeches of the Day* (Mount Pleasant: South Carolina), 1 February 2002, pp. 239-245.

that in practice they are sometimes spurred along by violence: covert violence; or open terrorism; or the clash of arms by recognized military forces; or all of these. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command has struck near Israel but has had cells in Scandinavia and on the European continent. The Tamil Tigers draw money from Canada, but it is Sri Lankans who actually pay in blood for LTTE terrorism. Irish nationalists have plotted in Gibraltar, and attacked English troops in West Germany; three even turned up recently in a guerrilla zone of Colombia, apparently to trade knowledge of bombing techniques. All this gives evidence of the international character of much of terrorism today.

Clearly, politicized religion – one major current concern – has much company in the present and the past of terrorism. The problem has been made immediate because a group mouthing religious slogans has literally declared war on all citizens of the United States. The problem is manifestly international—not just because this enemy operates internationally, but because there is little about most religions that keeps to state boundaries. The problem challenges democracies because, unlike despots and totalitarians, parliaments do not have unlimited counter-terrorism budgets and unnumbered personnel for security; many other priorities press for attention. Indeed, if our democratic governments did have unlimited money for security, they could not spend it all; our sort of polity sets limits. What would life be like otherwise, without limits on security measures? Intolerable. Instead, prudent democracies take more or less security measures as suits the real threat, and the particular circumstances, and otherwise they strive to bar unnecessary intrusion, to protect non-violent assemblies, and to protect speech that does not aim to incite violence. Wise observers know that when democracies err in finding this balance, it is most often on the side of freedom that they err. Even license is often tolerated, for freedom's sake.

Terrorists, far from being “mindless” as some have said, are ever-calculating. Terrorists exploit the freedoms of democracy in

order to attack democracy. They use guaranteed freedom of assembly to plan the funeral of the balanced constitution. They often violently attack open elections, lest polling results undermine their causes, and their opportunity for dictatorship, be it of a man, a party, or a religion. Terrorists exploit the free press to publish language of persecution. They use the unsupervised border, which is a hallmark of the broadening of cultures and minds through travel, to move weapons. Terrorists find an agricultural supply store, unfettered by petty regulations; in it they buy the ton of fertilizer they need to make a truck bomb. Where we see free trade, terrorists see a cheap imported cell phone which could detonate *plastique* hidden in a shopping bag left in a busy market place. The convenient town-center bank branch, where honest families deposit savings, becomes an unwitting cache for interstate illegal monies. The open-handed and open-hearted charity, established to aid refugees, might become penetrated by a group that launders illicit money there, or moves personnel about the globe under cover of relief work. The same regulation that makes it easy for a citizen to renew her driver's license becomes a way to acquire an excellent false identification card. Al Qaida just did that in the State of Virginia last year.

Every society is blemished by spots of violence. There is crime, or racial anger, or rioting over dramatic price rises. Terrorism is something more. It is a direct and self-conscious challenge to the very existence of democracy. It is not just opposed to order; it is opposed to the principle of 'order under law.' Terrorism assaults that middle ground of social and political life that is bounded on one side by anarchy and on the other side by oppression. As the old saying has it, terrorism kills one and frightens ten thousand.⁷ It drives out the sense of community, and replaces it with polarization. It saps attention from deserving public initiatives, and compels unredeeming

⁷ This useful expression about terror is often attributed to an ancient Chinese source, and may well be. Despite some secondary sources, however, the quotation can not be found in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

devotion of tax dollars towards inflated security forces, both public and private.

In short, the challenge of terrorism is moral, social, political, and economic – and it may even become military. Democracies as different as Uruguay and Turkey, when pressed too hard by the terrorists actually collapsed into military dictatorship for a time. Clearly, this challenge of terrorism must be met firmly and promptly. There is a corrosive effect on the democracy that does not meet its foreign or internal challenges from violent extremists. Terrorists' "low intensity conflict" or "war of nerves" works inside a society, like acid. We are reminded of the 1920s and 1930s in some European countries, when external threats and internal bands of hate-filled extremists ate away at the intestines of the political order until these countries were too weak to resist an enemy's determined strike. Those governments imagined that they were loving peace, while in fact they were refusing their responsibilities, and making extremists more confident.

Today, no such blunder is in evidence. The democracies are healthy and fighting back against the unrepresentative, unjust violence of transnational terrorism. As an American, permit me to thank you for your own work in this struggle. It is a mutual effort that will make the democracies better partners, and it is an effort that will make the world a better place.