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The Roots of Terrorism: A Reassessment after September 11th

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Abstract

The brutal terrorist attacks of September 11th, the anthrax attacks that followed and growing knowledge of al Qaeda's pursuit of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons have not only intensified concerns about terrorism but also created doubts about our understanding of terrorism. These attacks were in many ways unprecedented, and ultimately raise the question of the roots or causes of terrorism. Historically and today, there have been divergent views on this question, which reflect philosophical, religious, political, sociological and other differences. These differences are not merely academic, as they can affect our understanding of both the threat and of responses to terrorism in the aftermath of September 11th. Terrorism is too complex and diverse a phenomenon to speak easily of causes. But we may be able to discern the causes of specific acts. Our response to 9/11 and other acts of terrorism will be affected by our understanding of their causes. If 9/11 was caused by US Middle East policies, the response must involve a review of these policies. If it is a backlash against globalization, the response must address the realities underlying anti-globalization sentiments. Addressing causes will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes will be counterproductive. Actions to reduce those conditions that create support for terrorism and aid its recruitment, which need to be clearly identified, are critical in any counterterrorism strategy. So we must understand the reasons for terrorism and, in particular, for the attacks of September 11th. This paper will look at the question of the roots of terrorism

and then look to the specific case of 9/11 and its aftermath, with a special view to the impact of globalization.

Introduction

The brutal terrorist attacks of September 11th, the anthrax attacks that followed and growing knowledge of al Qaeda's pursuit of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons have not only intensified concerns about terrorism but have created doubts about our understanding of terrorism. These attacks were in many ways unprecedented, and ultimately raise the question of the roots or causes of terrorism. Historically and today, there have been divergent views on this question, which reflect philosophical, religious, political, sociological and other differences.

Terrorism is too complex and diverse a phenomenon to speak easily of causes. But we may be able to discern the causes of specific acts. Our response to 9/11 and other acts of terrorism will be affected by our understanding of their causes. If 9/11 was caused by US Middle East policies, the response must involve a review of these policies. If it is a backlash against globalization, the response must address the realities underlying anti-globalization sentiments. Addressing causes will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes will be counterproductive. Actions to reduce those conditions that create support for terrorism and aid its recruitment, which need to be clearly identified, are critical in any counterterrorism strategy. So we must understand the reasons for terrorism and, in particular, for the attacks of September 11th. This paper will

look at the question of the roots of terrorism and then look to the specific case of 9/11 and its aftermath, with a special view to the impact of globalization.

Understanding the Roots of Terrorism

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have given impetus to a debate over terrorism. Many foreign newspapers and other media blamed the attacks on the United States and its policies. The US news media echoed “Why do they hate us?” Such reactions have, after 9/11, resulted in a chorus of calls to get to the roots or causes of terrorism. Despite this renewed interest in causes, terrorism is a tactic or instrument that is largely independent of causes. It can, in principle, be used to promote any cause. We have seen terrorism undertaken under the banners of nationalism, left- and right-wing ideologies, religion and single issues. Most recently, concrete causes, or objectives, appear vaguer than in earlier decades, and may involve punishment or revenge.

Possible causes or objectives of terrorism depend on the definition of terrorism, which has proven elusive, as the phrase “one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter” suggests. With this ambiguity in mind, the roots of terrorism are, in principle, boundless.

According to Brian Jenkins:

There will be no shortage of potential causes for terrorism: rising population; increased poverty and scarcity; racial tension; inflation and unemployment; increased tension between the have and have-not nations; waves of refugees shoved about by wars and repression; immigrants

moving from poorer states to wealthier ones, often bringing them the conflicts of their home country, sometimes causing resentment among native citizens; rapid urbanization; the disintegration of traditional authority structures; the emergence of single-issue groups, the rise of aggressive fundamentalist religions groups or religious cults.

However, one must be cautious here. Research has not been able to demonstrate a connection between poverty, scarcity, inflation or any other socio-economic indicator and terrorism. Indeed, countries experiencing the highest levels of terrorism are often among the economically and socially most advanced nations in their region or in the world, and often the least authoritarian. Contemporary terrorism seems to come with modern society.¹

If anything can cause terrorism, is it relevant to seek its causes? Behind this question lies another: Should an act of violence be praised or condemned, accepted or opposed, on the basis of perceptions of its cause? From this perspective, differences over causes are not merely academic, as they can affect our understanding of both the threat and of responses to terrorism. Considering the causes of terrorism is difficult and has often confused the issues of terrorism and counterterrorism. To speak of its causes is frequently seen as or intended to be a justification, rationale, etc., for terrorism. Nonetheless, the quest for the causes is important at multiple levels and no doubt will be pursued by pundits, political

¹ Brian Jenkins, "Future Trends in International Terrorism," in *Current Perspectives on International Terrorism*, ed. by Robert O. Slater and Michael Stohl (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 249.

elites and publics. Moreover, the political benefits for the United States of demonstrating a concern for getting to the roots of terrorism are clear, for example, in the effort to maintain the counterterrorist coalition.

Terrorism is too complex to focus on a single cause. Acts and motivations differ among groups and individuals. We frequently do not understand motives of terrorists, but their causes can, in principle, be discerned in specific cases. No cause can justify an act of terrorism, and removing causes will not eliminate terrorism.

One must distinguish between causes of terrorism and the conditions that may make terrorism more appealing to a broader group of people. But the issues are complex. There is no clear link, for example, between poverty and terrorism. If certain indicators or correlates of, or conditions conducive to, political violence are present in a society or region, terrorists may or may not appear. If they do, the destruction of groups or individuals will not likely bring an end to terrorism. In a case where these conditions do not exist, again terrorism may or may not appear. If it does, effective counterterrorism can perhaps significantly reduce the terrorism (albeit not eliminate it entirely).

We must understand the limits of addressing the causes of terrorism. If we believe that there are overarching causes of terrorism, the goal of eliminating terrorism would require that all of the causes be eliminated as well. On the basis of the historical record alone, this end would require the elimination of poverty *and* wealth, strong *and* weak

governments, religion *and* secularism, pollution *and* environmentalism, globalization *and* autarky *and* so on.

Looking to ameliorate the conditions in which terrorism thrives is more realistic. But it still begs the question of what are those conditions (causes). If one believes terrorism has political roots, to combat it requires changing political conditions from which it emerged. There may be actions that can be effective in reducing the appeal of terrorism, including resolution of long-standing regional conflicts. If one believes poverty is the cause, economic growth and development is the solution. If one believes it is a manifestation of hatred, education can be a solution. If the terrorists are driven by a desire for punishment or revenge, nothing can be done other than disrupting, capturing or killing them.

This matter is not merely academic, as will be seen in a discussion of the causes of 9/11.

9/11's Causes

Understanding the Attacks

There has been a great temptation to see the attacks of September 11th in light of the theories of the post-Cold War period. So, it is said, the attacks refute the end of history thesis. They demonstrate the validity of the notion of a clash of civilizations. They are the forces of Jihad attacking McWorld.

There have also been efforts to link the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to US policies in the Middle East, to religious rage, to poverty, to ignorance, to evil, etc.

Zbigniew Brzezinski agreed that "it is the emotional context of felt, observed or historically recounted political grievances that shapes the fanatic pathology of terrorists and eventually triggers their murderous actions."² On this basis, the attacks were more political than religious. For Brzezinski, "American involvement in the Middle East is clearly the main impulse of the hatred that has been directed against America."³

From a very different perspective, Susan Sontag makes a similar point. She questioned: "Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed super-power, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq?"⁴ Sontag then declared: "A lot of thinking needs to be done, and perhaps is being done in Washington and elsewhere, about the ineptitude of American intelligence and counter-intelligence, about options available to American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and about what constitutes a smart program of military defense."⁵

² "Focus on the Political Roots of September 11," *New York Times*, September 4, 2002.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Susan Sontag, *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Kim Dae-jung, the President of South Korea, declared: "At the bottom of terrorism is poverty. That is the main cause. Then there are other religious, national and ideological differences."⁶

Elie Wiesel views the causes of terrorism in "fanaticism, hatred, and the will to live in ignorance What is it that seduces some young people to terrorism? It simplifies things. The fanatic has no questions, only answers."⁷

For President Bush, the attacks were manifestations of evil, perpetuated by evildoers. He expressed this view in the State of the Union address of January 29, 2002, declaring: "Those of us who have lived through these challenging times have been changed by them. We've come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and it must be opposed."

These and other explanations are clearly insufficient analytically. Poverty is not one of the grievances emphasized by Usama bin Laden, and the terrorists of 9/11 were not poor. But, in this case and others, such explanations probably reveal elements of the truth, and the issues raised are real. The attention given to grievances by Usama bin Laden and others cannot be dismissed. As will be seen below, however, going down this path does not appear to illuminate the motivations of the terrorists. And that is really what we need to know.

⁶ "Getting at the Roots of Terrorism, *Christian Science Monitor*, December 20, 2001.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Usama bin Laden and others criticized US policy in the aftermath of the Gulf War (deployed forces in Arabia and sanctions on Iraq) and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁸ US support for the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are viewed as repressive and anti-Islamic by al Qaeda, as well as US wealth and power and perceived US arrogance and hostility to Islam, were also issues raised by the terrorists.

These issues are no doubt serious. They are of concern to the United States and to the world (at one level). They are of special concern to Usama bin Laden's targeted audience and perhaps to the terrorists themselves (although they only recently began speaking of the plight of the Palestinians). As resolving these issues through terrorism or other means seems highly unlikely, questions about their role in motivating the terrorist actions are raised.

Realistic or not, were they the cause of 9/11—or only an element of the landscape in which the attacks occurred?

If these were the true causes of 9/11, it would mean that changes in US policy would have been sufficient to shut down al Qaeda's operations. This is hardly credible. Punishment or revenge for these grievances is more credible, but the hatred of the United States goes well beyond specific criticism of policies.

⁸“Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders,” *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, London.

In this context, Usama bin Laden stated his grievances, but did not make specific demands or issue ultimatums related to these matters or to any others.

A debate of US policies is warranted and there has been an effort to at least assure US policies do not hinder the war on terrorism. However, it is not possible to see fundamental changes of the kind implied by bin Laden's rhetoric. Moreover, even modest changes could be seen as a victory for al Qaeda, which is potentially counterproductive and must be addressed in any policy review. In the end, as suggested, it is not particularly useful to ascribe the brutal attacks of September 11th exclusively, or primarily, in terms of a reaction to US Middle East policy.

What then were the motivations of the attackers?

They appear to be a reflection of resentment toward what Edward Said called "bewildering interdependence." In this light, they reject what they cannot avoid in a globalized world.

In this context, Salman Rushdie said of the terrorists:

Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable

government, Jews, homosexuals, women's rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex.⁹

These views may be seen to reflect Rushdie's personal trials, but they are more widely held in the Islamic world and outside. Other commentators from the Islamic world have not suffered as Rushdie did, could also be mentioned.

Indeed, Usama bin Laden himself has in his rhetoric suggested the value of this perspective on the attacks.

In a post 9/11 al-Jazeera interview (that was run in part by CNN), CNN reported that bin Laden called the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon "great on all levels ... Those awesome, symbolic towers that speak of liberty, human rights and humanity have been destroyed. They have gone up in smoke."

So following Usama bin Laden's views, Rushdie and others—implicitly or explicitly—see the terrorists as driven by rejection of market capitalism and democracy and the values they share, notably freedom in the real world of the early 21st century. This is a rejection of modernism by minds rooted in the Middle Ages. This vision has been furthered over the last decades by the *madrasas*.

⁹ "Fighting the Forces of Invisibility," *New York Times*, 20 October 2001.

With all its complexity, this perception of the world is ultimately a rejection of globalization.

And terrorists of 9/11 and others are opposed to globalization.

Globalization is seen among critics in the West (anti-globalization movement) as an enemy of social progress—the cause of poverty—and the enemy of literacy, cultural autonomy, diversity, gender, equality, environment, etc.

In other parts of the world, globalization is hated as the *engine of social progress* with a corrosive effect in traditional politics and religion.

Those who dismiss 9/11 as a direct attack on the forces of globalization often claim it was an attack on the United States as a consequence of its policies, power or opulence or they even admit that it was an assault on modernity by traditional forces, but that globalization and Western “contamination” were of secondary importance. The United States was indeed attacked, but there were reported plans to attack other targets, some not directly related to the United States. But Usama bin Laden stated on one occasion the attack was not against the United States but against the “global crusaders.” Of course, the United States is seen as the primary crusader and the crusade is drive by globalization. The US is the driver and seen to be the principal beneficiary of globalization—the World Trade Center is a symbol of globalization (as Usama bin Laden admitted and nearly all believe). And the forces of globalization are the forces of modernity (or in some senses post-

modernity) that are seen to be assaulting traditional states and societies on the economic, political and cultural fronts.

Responding to 9/11

Differences over such issues can affect our understanding of both the threat and of responses to terrorism in the aftermath of September 11th. For example, the new war on terrorism -- the response of the United States and a wide-ranging coalition to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon-- has been seen as a “clash of civilizations” between the West and the Muslim world and as the end of the post-Cold War period with its assumptions of a triumphant and secure West riding the crest of globalization. This new form of warfare has also been compared to the Cold War as a great global and ideological struggle that will define foreign and defense policy for decades to come.

The stakes are high. The war on terrorism is being undertaken as a response to the attacks, and the military actions in Afghanistan and other theaters as well as other elements of the response would be necessary whatever the causes of the action. Beyond these actions, our understanding of causes matters. If 9/11 was caused by US Middle East policies, the response must involve a review of those policies. This is useful in any event. However, if 9/11 was a backlash to globalization, it will be important to think anew about the nature and impact of globalization. In practical terms, this will require concrete efforts to address anti-globalization sentiment and its roots. Beyond ideology, the appeal of anti-globalization was enhanced by the fact that during the US—and West’s—decade of peace and prosperity driven by globalization, many developing states experienced:

- greater dependence;
- unemployment;
- decay of basic infrastructure, health and social services, etc.; and
- violence at all levels of the conflict spectrum.

Globalization itself is probably not primarily responsible for these problems, even though it did not have as strong a political diversion as an economic one in the past decade and earlier. Clearly, those promoting globalization did not do much to address these issues.

Globalization has not served all the world equally well even though it is not the source of all economical and social problems. There must be a concerted effort to address this reality.

Rethinking will also be required in terms of establishing precepts of international order in the aftermath of the September attacks and the responsive actions—the war—they initiated, as well as for managing multicultural and multiethnic states/societies and their interactivities.

Can we build upon the mutual reciprocal interests in conducting the current war and meeting future challenges? Henry Kissinger declared:

The great changes in history, almost without exception, were driven by mankind's need for some kind of political vision and pursuit of a standard of justice as opposed to self-righteousness, nihilism and violence ...

The industrial democracies must preserve—and extend—the extraordinary accomplishments that fostered globalization. But they can do so in the long run only if they endow the economic aspects of globalization with a political construction of comparable sweep and vision.¹⁰

Kissinger's argument, and the rationale on which it is grounded, is even more urgent and feasible today than when he wrote it a few years ago. Today, one of the great dangers we confront comes from failed states, and the sub-national and transnational terrorism that they breed and harbor. The political requirements for addressing these dangers are immense and involve areas such as debt relief, migration policies, etc.; that is some ways have become problems and new threats will no doubt emerge from greater globalization by any means more intractable since 9/11. The prospects are not certain—but they do exist—US post-9/11 leadership will be critical. And we will have to think in terms that extend far beyond the requirements of the current war.

The Bush Administration's new national security strategy embodies elements of such an approach. Beyond its promulgation of counterterrorism, nonproliferation and counterproliferation policies, it states:

¹⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, "How Globalization Divides Developing Countries," *The Globalist*, Wednesday, November 7, 2001.

The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity. And this path is not America's alone. It is open to all.¹¹

Initiatives designed to meet these ends include promoting the connection between trade and development, improving the effectiveness of development banks in raising living standards, opening societies to commerce and investment, securing public health, etc.¹²

Conclusion

Terrorism is too complex and diverse a phenomenon to speak easily of causes. But we may be able to discern the causes of specific acts. Even if one can identify causes, they do not justify terrorism. Nothing can justify the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But our response to 9/11 will be affected by our understanding of its causes. If these attacks were caused by US Middle East policies, the response must involve a review of those policies. If they are a backlash against globalization, the response must address the realities underlying anti-globalization sentiments. Addressing

¹¹ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002.

¹² *Ibid.*

causes will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes will be counterproductive. Actions to reduce those conditions that create support for terrorism and aid its recruitment, which need to be clearly identified, are critical in any counterterrorism strategy.

On February 23, 1998, Al-Quds al-Arabi, an Arabic newspaper published in London, printed the full text of a “Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders.” According to the paper, the statement was faxed to them under the signatures of Usama bin Laden, and the leaders of militant Islamist groups in Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

“Since God laid down the Arabian peninsula, created its desert, and surrounded it with its seas, no calamity has ever befallen it like these Crusader hosts that have spread in it like locusts, crowding its soil, eating its fruits, and destroying its verdure; and this at a time when the nations contend against the Muslims like diners jostling around a bowl of food.” The statement goes on to talk of the need to understand the situation and act to rectify it. The facts, it says, are known to everyone and fall under three main headings:

“First—For more than seven years the United States is occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of its territories, Arabia, plundering its riches, overwhelming its rulers, humiliating its people, threatening its neighbors, and using its bases in the peninsula as a spearhead to fight against the neighboring Islamic peoples.

Though some in the past have disputed the true nature of this occupation, the people of Arabia in their entirety have now recognized it. There is no better proof of this than the continuing American aggression against the Iraqi people, launched from Arabia despite its rulers, who all oppose the use of their territories for this purpose but are subjugated.

Second—Despite the immense destruction inflicted on the Iraqi people at the hands of the Crusader-Jewish alliance and in spite of the appalling number of dead, exceeding a million, the Americans nevertheless, in spite of all this, are trying once more to repeat this dreadful slaughter. It seems that the long blockade following after a fierce war, the dismemberment and the destruction are not enough for them. So they come again today to destroy what remains of this people and to humiliate their Muslim neighbors.

Third—While the purposes of the Americans in these wars are religious and economic, they also serve the petty state of the Jews, to divert attention from their occupation of Jerusalem and their killing of Muslims in it.

There is no better proof of all this than their eagerness to destroy Iraq, the strongest of the neighboring Arab states, and their attempt to dismember all the states of the region, such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Sudan, into petty states, whose division and weakness would ensure the survival of Israel and the continuation of the calamitous Crusader occupation of the lands of Arabia.”