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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 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, as well as by possible political requirements to address widespread perceptions of causes. If 9/11 was caused by Islamic radicalism, the near-term response must be to ensure the terrorists are defeated and pose no further danger. In the longer term, education is critical. If the attacks were caused by US Middle East policies, the response should involve a review of those policies. This may or may not result in changes to policy, public diplomacy, etc. If the attacks were a backlash against globalization, the response must address the realities underlying anti-globalization sentiments. Addressing causes (real and perceived) will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes can be counterproductive. Actions to reduce those conditions that create support for terrorism and aid its recruitment effort are critical to any counterterrorism strategy. For this reason alone, we must do everything possible to understand the reasons terrorism may be undertaken, including 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 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

¹ The views expressed are those of the author, and not of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the National Nuclear Security Administration or the Department of Energy.

terrorism will be affected by our understanding of their causes, as well as by possible political requirements to address widespread perceptions of causes. Addressing causes (real or perceived) will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes can be counterproductive. Actions to reduce those conditions that create support for terrorism and aid its recruitment are critical to any counterterrorism strategy. For this reason alone, we must do everything possible to understand the reasons terrorism may be undertaken, including 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.

Assessing 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, at least in part, on the United States and its policies. The US news media questioned, somewhat naively: "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, and continuing debate on, causes, terrorism is a tactic or instrument that appears to a significant extent to be independent of causes. It can, in principle, be used to promote virtually any cause. We have seen terrorism undertaken under the banners of nationalism, ethnicity, left- and right-wing ideologies, religion and single issues such as abortion and animal rights. Most recently, the causes, or objectives, put forward by terrorists (when they choose to do so at all) appear vaguer than in earlier decades, and may involve punishment or revenge.

Possible causes or objectives of terrorism depend on the definition of terrorism; a common definition has proven elusive, as the phrase "one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter" suggests.² 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.³

² The concept and definition of terrorism raise problems. There is no agreed general definition, and the term is laden with ideological, political and moral baggage. The use of the term to describe behaviour is to stigmatise that behaviour. There has been some convergence on this matter in recent years, especially since 9/11.

³ 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.

If anything can potentially cause terrorism, can one identify its real causes? Is it even relevant to seek its causes? Behind these questions 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 or rationale for terrorism. A prominent terrorist once declared publicly that no one who stood for a “just cause” is a terrorist. But no cause can justify an act of terrorism, and removing causes will not eliminate terrorism. Nonetheless, the quest for the causes is important at multiple levels and no doubt will be pursued by political leaders, pundits and publics. In some cases, there may be a political requirement for the United States to demonstrate a concern for getting at the roots of terrorism and addressing widely held perceptions of causes, for example, in pursuit of long-term policy goals or to maintain the counterterrorist coalition.

Empirical studies have not been able to link terrorism to poverty or any other social, economic, political or psychological factor that may be construed as a cause.⁴ It appears terrorism is too complex to be explained on the basis of a single cause or set of causes. Terrorism occurs in diverse and divergent social, political and economic conditions. Terrorist acts and motivations differ among groups and individuals, within and across nations and regions as well as religions. We frequently do not understand the motives of terrorists, and there is no evidence of a terrorist mind or personality, or of any psychological factors that give rise to terrorism. The *causes* to which terrorists appeal are often but not always known in specific cases. But these may or may not be the *cause* of their acts.

To advance the debate, it is useful to distinguish between the causes of terrorism and the conditions that may make terrorism more appealing to a broader group of people. But this is difficult in practice. As noted, there is no clear causal link between terrorism and poverty or any other factor. However, certain indicators or correlates of, or conditions conducive to, political violence and terrorism are perhaps identifiable. For example, a recent US study noted: “States with poor governance; ethnic, cultural, or religious tensions; weak economies; and porous borders will be prime breeding ground for terrorism.”⁵ But how useful are such indicators? If they are evident in a society or region, terrorists may or may not appear. In areas where these conditions do not exist, again terrorism may or may not appear.

Even with these limitations, looking to ameliorate the conditions in which terrorism thrives is an important goal. But it still begs the question of what are the conditions that foster terrorism. If one believes that terrorism has political roots, that it emerges in certain

⁴ See, for example, *ibid*. See also Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” in *The New Global Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls*, ed. by Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 92-105.

⁵ *Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About The Future With Nongovernment Experts*, NIC 2002-02, December 2000, p. 33.

political conditions such as ethnic or nationalistic conflict, to combat it requires changing the 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 terrorism thrives amid poverty, economic growth and development is central to a solution. Such reasoning applies to all putative causes.

As noted, these arguments are 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. Or they prove the validity of the notion of a clash of civilizations. Or they demonstrate that “McWorld” is besieged by the forces of “Jihad.” Such views shine little light on the issues surrounding causes. More to the point are the efforts to link the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to religious extremism, to US policies in the Middle East, to poverty, to ignorance, to evil, etc. Let us consider some representative views.

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.”⁶ 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.”⁷

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?”⁸ 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.”⁹

According to Lakshman Kadirgamar, Sri Lanka’s Minister of Foreign Affairs: “If the world has become a village surely we must take care to ensure that villagers living down

⁶ “Focus on the Political Roots of September 11,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2002.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001.

⁹ *Ibid.*

one road in the village are not given cause to become resentful and angry at the opulence enjoyed by other villagers living down another road, only a stone's throw away.”¹⁰ In search for causes, he noted the need to “revisit and readdress the old questions that have haunted the United Nations ever since it was born—the questions of poverty, hunger, disease, ignorance, injustice.”¹¹ Yet, his focus is on poverty. He states: “neither we in the developing world nor those in the developed world can allow abject, desperate poverty, without any hope of a better future, to become a fertile field for those who wish to fan the flames of discord and hate and make it their business to wreak death and destruction and terror and mayhem.”¹²

Richard Dawkins placed the blame for 9/11 squarely on religion. He declared that the terrorists of September 11th were driven by an “insane courage” that arose from religion. He continued:

Religion is also, of course, the underlying source of the divisiveness in the Middle East which motivated the use of this deadly weapon in the first place. But that is another story and not my concern here. My concern here is with the weapon itself. To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind, is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised if they are used.¹³

Elie Wiesel sees the causes of terrorism in fanaticism. For Wiesel, the fanatic is stubborn, obstinate, dogmatic: Everything for him is black or white, curse or blessing, friend or foe—and nothing in between... Driven by irrational impulses, he wants everything to be visible and necessarily clear... The fanatic derides and hates tolerance, which he perceives as weakness, resignation or submission. ...The fanatic's only interest is domination by fear and terror. Violence is his favorite language...

He has a goal and is ready to pay any price to achieve it. Or more precisely: He is ready to make *others* pay any price in order to achieve it.

The fanatic feels important, for he presumes being capable of altering—and dominating—the course of history. Using the obscure power of hatred, he feels he can—and must—take charge of man's fate. Working in the dark, forever involved in plots and counterplots, he thinks his mission is to abolish the present state of affairs ad replace it with his own system. No wonder that he, the human failure, now feels proud and superior.¹⁴

These and other explanations are clearly insufficient analytically. For example, poverty is not one of the grievances emphasized by Usama bin Laden, and the terrorists of 9/11

¹⁰ Address by Honourable Lakshman Kadirgamar, PC Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the Delegation of Sri Lanka at the Fifty-Sixth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, Tuesday, November 13, 2001.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Guardian*, September 15, 2001.

¹⁴ “How Can We Understand Their Hatred?” *Parade Magazine*, April 7, 2002, p. 5.

were not poor. But, in this case and others, such explanations probably reveal elements of the truth (in some cases a profound insight) and the issues raised are real.

Among such efforts to uncover the causes of 9/11, the role of radical Islam, the political grievances expressed by Usama bin Laden and al Qaeda and the notion of 9/11 as a backlash against globalization have all received considerable attention and cannot be dismissed. Yet there are problems with each explanation.

Was Islamic radicalism the cause of 9/11? It must be stated at the outset that Islam, which is a religion of peace and tolerance, was not the cause. But the terrorists' rhetoric expressed a violent brand of Islamic extremism. In particular, they declared they were acting in the name of God. They decreed the desecration of Islam and its holiest sites by the influence and presence of "Jews" and "Crusaders." They had a dream of a new Caliphate, a fundamentalist Islamic political entity of uncertain geographic scope.

Acting in the name of religion or God—as a rationale—is one thing. But this does not warrant a simplistic assumption of 9/11's religious causes. The terrorists may have believed in their variant of Islam, but their supposed religious motivation appears to be political at root. This is clear in terms of the religious expression of both political grievances and of political objectives.

If radical Islam is not *the* cause of the attacks, and this motivation is inextricably tied up with politics, what of the political agenda of the terrorists? Does *it* explain 9/11? Usama bin Laden and al Qaeda criticized US policy in the aftermath of the Gulf War, opposing deployed forces in Saudi Arabia and sanctions on Iraq. US support for Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also attacked.¹⁵ Moreover, the terrorists opposed 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.

These issues are 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). Many in the Islamic world responded positively to this reasoning, if not also to the attacks. However, world leaders, including those from Islamic states, have rejected this rationale. Moreover, 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 appears hardly credible. 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

¹⁵"Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders," *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, London, February 23, 1998.

others. Punishment or revenge for these grievances is a more credible rationale, but the hatred of the United States goes well beyond specific criticism of policies. In the end, it is not particularly useful to ascribe the brutal attacks of September 11th exclusively, or primarily, to the terrorists' opposition to US Middle East policy.

Are the attacks then a backlash to globalization? They may appear to be a reflection of resentment toward what Edward Said called "bewildering interdependence." In this light, the terrorists reject the complex, multidimensional social, political, economic and cultural realities of a globalized world from which they seek to retreat but cannot. As 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.¹⁶

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 a 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*.

With all its complex roots and dimensions, 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.

The arguments for considering 9/11 as a direct attack on the forces of globalization are sound. But, as some critics of this view note, rather than an attack on globalization, 9/11 was an attack on the United States as a consequence of its policies, power and opulence. The critics may even admit that it was an assault on modernity by traditional forces, but that globalization and Western "contamination" were of secondary importance in their

¹⁶ "Fighting the Forces of Invisibility," *New York Times*, October 20, 2001.

thinking. These arguments have a point, but they are overdrawn. The United States was indeed attacked, but there were reported plans to attack other targets, some not directly related to the United States. 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 by the terrorists as the primary "crusader" and the "crusade" is driven by globalization. The United States is seen to be the principal force behind, and beneficiary of, globalization. Globalization is to some degree Americanization, and the World Trade Center is a symbol of globalization (as Usama bin Laden admitted and nearly all believe).

All in all, these interpretations of 9/11 may be seen as competing hypotheses. Or they may be viewed as parts of a more complex reality. In either context, it is important to understand that not all contribute equally to revealing the causes of terrorism. The view that 9/11 was a reaction to globalization appears to offer a more comprehensive and compelling interpretation than alternative perspectives.

Responding to 9/11

Differences over such interpretations 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. It has also been viewed 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.

What are we engaged in, and how does it relate to our understanding of causes? The war on terrorism is being undertaken as a response to the attacks, and the military actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere as well as other elements of the near-term response would be necessary whatever the causes of the action. As the terrorist attack of September 11th involved asymmetric warfare against the United States, it was necessary to defend the country. Without a forceful response, including military action, the United States would have increased its vulnerability. Beyond initial US actions, an understanding of causes matters, especially in the long term, to guide a strategy (military and non-military) that responds in a manner that dissuades, deters and defeats this form of warfare.

Causes are critical. If one believes terrorism is a manifestation of religious hatred or rage, education may be a long-term solution. But, in the near term, terrorists believed to be driven by religious extremism must be defeated.

If 9/11 was caused by US Middle East policies, the response should involve a review of those policies as well as of public diplomacy. In any event, widespread perceptions that this is the case will need to be addressed. US policies have been examined and debated since 9/11. However, it is not possible to see fundamental changes of the kind implied by bin Laden's rhetoric. Moreover, if some modest changes do occur, they could be seen as

a victory for al Qaeda, which is potentially counterproductive. This possibility must be addressed in any serious policy review.

What if 9/11 was a backlash to globalization? It will be important in this case 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 1990s—the West's decade of peace and prosperity driven by globalization—many developing states experienced declining socio-economic conditions 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, it is widely believed those promoting globalization did not do enough 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 new precepts of international order in the aftermath of the September attacks and the responsive actions 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 argued:

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.¹⁷

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 development, debt relief, trade and immigration policies, etc. All of these issues have become in some ways more intractable since 9/11, and other problems and new threats will no doubt emerge from greater globalization. To pursue this agenda, we will have to think in terms that extend far beyond the

¹⁷ Henry A. Kissinger, "How Globalization Divides Developing Countries," *The Globalist*, Wednesday, November 7, 2001.

requirements of the current war on terrorism. The prospects for success are not certain—but they do exist. US post-9/11 leadership will be critical.

The Bush Administration's new national security strategy embodies elements of a broader approach to combating terrorism and other threats. Beyond its promulgation of counterterrorism, nonproliferation and counterproliferation policies, it states:

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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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, as well as by possible political requirements to address widespread perceptions of causes. Some elements of effective counterterrorist responses are not at all tied to causes, but others (especially long-term responses) depend on as clear as possible an assessment of causes. Addressing causes (real or perceived) will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes can be counterproductive. Actions to reduce those conditions that create support for terrorism and aid its recruitment are critical to any counterterrorism strategy.

¹⁸ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*