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Is Democracy the Answer to Terrorism?

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On the cover. U.S. Army soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group instruct recruits in the Afghanistan National Army on the operation of their 7.62 mm AK-47 assault rifles, during a live fire exercise held on the range near Kabul, Afghanistan, during Operation Enduring Freedom (DoD photo).



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Foreword

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) partnered with the Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Chapter of the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) in sponsoring the annual chapter essay contest. The first-place winner is recognized each year at the NDIA SO/LIC Symposium in mid-February, and the prize is \$1,000 cash. The runner-up receives \$500.

The competition is open to resident and nonresident students attending Professional Military Education (PME) institutions and has produced outstanding works on special operations issues. These essays provide current insights on what our PME students see as priority national security issues affecting special operations.

Essay contestants can choose any topic related to special operations. Submissions include hard-hitting and relevant recommendations that many Special Operations Forces commanders throughout United States Special Operations Command find very useful. Some entries submitted are a synopsis of the larger research project required for graduation or an advanced degree, while others are written specifically for the essay contest. Regardless of approach, these essays add value to the individuals' professional development, provide an outlet for expressing new ideas and points of view, and contribute to the special operations community as a whole.

JSOU is pleased to offer this selection of essays from the 2010 contest. The JSOU intent is that this compendium will benefit the reader professionally and encourage future PME students to enter the contest. Feedback is welcome, and your suggestions will be incorporated into future JSOU reports.

Kenneth H. Poole
Director, JSOU Strategic Studies Department



JSOU President Dr. Brian Maher presents plaque to essay contest first-place winner Major Joseph Long, U.S. Army.

Is Democracy the Answer to Terrorism?

Joseph E. Long

This essay examines the virtues and potential downfalls of a continued reliance on the policy of “democratization” to stop terrorism.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has struggled with an identity crisis concerning its notion of grand strategy and the future outside the familiar framework of a politically bipolar world. Following the perceived success of democracy over communism in 1989, the United States adopted the strategy of *democratization* to replace one of *containment*. This new strategy was based on the idea that the failure of the United States to spread democratic reforms to all nations “devoid of freedom . . . will continue to breed instability, cultivate terrorism, and pose a direct threat to the security of the United States.”¹ However, it remains increasingly difficult to argue that the end of the Cold War has triggered an era of increased peace in America. For example, since the fall of the Berlin Wall the United States has been involved in multiple conflicts and has witnessed the reemergence of terrorism. In terms of conflicts, America has been involved in the Gulf War in 1991, Somalia in 1993, the Balkans since 1995, Afghanistan since 2001, and Iraq since 2003.

In addition to violence from military conflicts, the end of the Cold War has been followed by several significant acts of terrorism directed against the United States. Key examples include the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, the bombing of the American embassy in Africa in 1998, the bombing of the USS *Cole* in 2000, and the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. This seems to indicate that the new U.S. strategy of democratization has backfired. Instead of two decades characterized by

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peace, the United States has been affected by five “wars” and five significant acts of terrorism that roughly averages one war or terrorist incident every 2 years. Unfortunately, the terrorist attack of 9/11 resulted in the strengthening of the democratization strategy based on “the assumption that democracy is a ‘cure’ for terrorism.”² However, the sad truth is that if America’s goal of democratization came true and every country was a democracy, the threat of terrorism may change, but is not likely to decrease. The existence of terrorism within democracies, the wide variety of democratic governments, and continued struggle over religious domination would ensure that some form of terrorism would continue in a purely democratic world.

Terrorism within Democracies

As the world’s largest liberal democracy, the United States can serve as a microcosm of what terrorism would look like in an all-democracy world. According to F. Gregory Gause, professor of political science at the University of Vermont, “most terrorist incidents occur in democracies and [that] generally both the victims and the perpetrators are citizens of democracies.”³ Therefore, it is important to understand the inherent relationship between democracy and domestic terrorism to gain insight into the potential for terrorism in a world where democracy is universal. As a federation “comprised of a number of self-governing regions,” America is composed of multiple democratic states.⁴ This means that just as domestic terrorism exists within the United States at the micro level, so too would terrorism exist in an all-democratic world at the macro level. To understand domestic terrorism requires first, understanding the definition of terrorism and second, interpreting how acts of terrorism could be useful in a democracy.

One definition of terrorism used by terrorism expert Mark Juergensmeyer aptly suits both domestic and international terrorism: “the use of covert violence by a group for political ends.”⁵ This means that terrorism can exist anywhere when one group disagrees with the political agenda of another group. This is certainly true in a democratic government since to be a democracy requires having elections, and having elections means that one group will win and another group will lose. Therefore, all democracies will have groups who fail to win the majority of the vote. This means that the potential for terrorism exists in democratic as well as autocratic governments. Consider the recent track record of democracies with terrorism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of brutal terrorist organizations arose in democratic countries: the Red Brigades in Italy, the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Ireland and the United Kingdom, the Japanese Red Army in Japan, and the Red Army Faction (or Baader-Meinhof Gang) in West Germany. The transition to democracy in Spain did not eliminate Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) Basque separatist terrorism. Turkish democracy suffered through a decade of mounting political violence that lasted until the late 1970s. The strong and admirable democratic system in Israel has produced its own terrorists, including the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. It appears that at least three of the suicide bombers in the London attacks of July were born and raised in the democratic United Kingdom. Nearly every day brings a painful reminder that real democratization in Iraq has been accompanied by serious terrorism.⁶

Even the United States suffers from incidents of domestic terrorism. For example, since the Supreme Court's ruling on the case of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, many acts of terrorism have occurred against abortion clinics in the form of arson, firebombing, and vandalism.⁷ This indicates the potential for groups within any government to use violence for political ends. Likewise, the bombing of the government building in Oklahoma City by lone terrorist Timothy McVeigh demonstrates how even one disgruntled citizen of a democracy has the potential to inflict severe damage through terrorist attacks. With this in mind, a globe composed of all democracies would have little chance in stopping neither groups nor individuals from committing acts of terrorism.

The Variation of Democracy

Along with preexisting internal terrorism, an all-democratic world will result in a wide variety of democratic governments, each with potential political grievances and terrorism continuing to be a way to achieve political results. This means that democratic elections alone do not guarantee freedom and liberty in a government. For example, many Westerners associate the word *democracy* with liberal democracy, a "political system marked not only by free and fair elections but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property."⁸ However, without the added liberal ideals of Western democracy, people of

a democratic country may only be voting for their next dictator. According to author and CNN political analyst Fareed Zakaria, “the tendency for a democratic government to believe it has absolute sovereignty (that is, power) can result in the centralization of authority, often by extra-constitutional means and with grim results.”⁹ This distinction itself can create groups both internally and externally with the potential to use terrorism to achieve political goals. This means that the same amount of terrorism occurring in the nondemocratic world of today will likely remain unchanged by the simple introduction of democratic elections.

Along with the tendency of democratic government to centralize authority, the lack of effective education systems in many countries would further lend to the opportunity for democratically elected governments to abuse their power. This means that an all-democratic world will not only share differences in their liberal ideals but will also share major differences in their educational systems. For example, nations with poor education systems and high rates of illiteracy will be free to vote, but will also lack “the skills and knowledge necessary to function effectively in, and thereby contribute to, the democratic process.”¹⁰ Therefore, as more and more democracies emerge, differing educational standards in new democracies will only produce autocratic regimes camouflaged by the electoral process and the title of democracy. This means that the political differences that contribute to both international and domestic terrorism today will therefore remain unchanged by democracy.

Just as with educational differences, economic disparity resulting from two competing social systems would also remain unchanged in an all-democratic world. This means that terrorist groups who “exist for the purpose of conducting politically motivated violence ... to influence decision making and to change behavior”

... economic disparity resulting from two competing social systems would also remain unchanged in an all-democratic world.

concerning international economics will also not go away.¹¹ According to International Relations professor and globalization expert Mosseau, this problem cannot be solved with economic equality, but rather “the social origins of terror are rooted less in poverty ... and more in the values and beliefs associated with the mixed economies of developing countries in a globalizing world.”¹² This means that recent advances in globalization have

created economic uncertainty by blurring the lines between two inherently competing economies. By projecting the Western “market-based economy” into the “clientalist economies of the developing world,”¹³ Western countries have created economic disparity and panic that has led to terrorism. Unfortunately, these economic differences are culturally based and also would not rapidly change due to the spread of democracy. In fact, if many developing countries were to attempt to transition into a democratic form of government, the future of that country’s economic prosperity would likely intensify anti-Western sentiment and therefore increase the likelihood of terrorism.

Just as with economic uncertainty, another source for terrorism in an all-democratic world comes from those who currently live under autocratic regimes. This means that potential exists for previously repressed people to use violence to influence behavior once the autocratic regime has been replaced with a democratic one. For example, if Kim Jung-il’s regime in North Korea were to be rapidly replaced with a democratically elected regime, the cultural and social shock to the North Korean people would be significant. This shock coupled with social and economic friction from a rapidly expanding view of the world would likely increase social anxiety and confusion. Just as the introduction of the market economy into a clientalist economy creates economic frustration in developing countries, so too would the implementation of democracy in an autocratic regime create similar social frustration. This sense of frustration and social uncertainty would invariably result in divisiveness and increased political grievances that frequently become causes for terrorism. For example, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the rapid transition for many East Berliners was “extremely painful on a psychological and social level.”¹⁴ One example of the problems occurring during transition was in the inability of the East German police to control crime. As the authority of the police quickly disappeared, the “confused citizenry took ‘freedom’ to mean ‘anything goes.’”¹⁵ This led to an immediate “increased level of violence . . . increases in highway accidents, weapons and currency smuggling,” and also resulted in “hostilities towards African and Asian guest workers quickly exploded[ing] into racist violence.”¹⁶ Surely, this type of chaos and violence at the global level would only encourage increased levels of both international and domestic terrorism. Thus it must be remembered that free elections and titles of democracy will not necessarily produce the desired effect of a more harmonious world. Instead, the

transition to democracy would bring greater uncertainty, confusion, and more political grievance that would only serve to feed terrorist ideologies rather than subdue them.

Religious Terrorism

Even if an all-democratic world were to forever end political grievances, the threat of religious terrorism would remain unchanged. According to David Rapoport of the UCLA Political Science Department, the threat of religious terrorism is not expected to end soon, as terrorism historically comes in waves. The cycle of terrorism in waves describes how terrorism tends to come in a “cycle of activity” that is “driven by a common predominant energy that shapes the participating groups’ characteristics and mutual relationships.”¹⁷ Therefore, fighting terrorism should be less directed toward particular governments or terrorist organizations, but more toward defeating the life cycle of the wave itself as “a wave lasts at least a generation.”¹⁸ Likewise, according to Samuel Huntington, the current wave of religious terrorism is driven less by religion and more by the inherent clash between two civilizations.¹⁹

According to Huntington, the previous system used during the Cold War to describe states as either first-, second-, or third-world countries is “no longer relevant,” neither is “political or economic systems or ... their level of economic development.”²⁰ This means that the distinction between democratic states and others will become moot concerning the frequency and causes of terrorism. According to Huntington, the current cycle of terrorism is directly related to the inevitable clash between the Western and Islamic civilizations.

In Huntington’s view, a civilization is a unifying culture at the broadest possible level. According to his article, “A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes human from other species.”²¹ A person may identify himself at many levels, but the civilization is the highest level and therefore the source of the inevitable clash. Huntington further clarifies that civilizations can manifest in the form of multiple states as with Western civilization, or may include only one nation as with Japanese civilization.

According to Huntington’s theory, the end of the Cold War saw the disintegration of the “Iron curtain of [conflicting] ideology” between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and has replaced it with the “Velvet Curtain of

culture.”²² This means that a global political realignment, when it comes to terrorism, will not have an effect on the energy driving the wave of religious terrorism. In fact, a religiously motivated terrorist living in a democracy will enjoy more freedom of movement to plan and conduct terrorist activity than if living under a totalitarian regime. Under totalitarian rule, less personal liberty among individuals means less ability to communicate, less access to resources, and increased observation and scrutiny by the government. Therefore, a transition to democracy in certain countries could potentially tap into a whole new group of newly liberated terrorists who were previously suppressed by their governments.

In contrast to Huntington’s theory about conflicting civilizations, many proponents of the policy of democratization argue that democracy will provide legitimate channels for citizens to address their political grievances. By doing so, it is argued, groups and organizations will not need to resort to terrorism to achieve their goals. However, in the case of religious terrorism, this argument is not valid. Although a democratic regime will provide a much needed voice for some oppressed or marginalized groups, increased political power for religious extremists will not have a calming effect. In fact, the voice of religious extremism would only further define the barrier of the velvet curtain and further polarize the governments of both civilizations.

By further polarizing the two competing civilizations, the motivation for “religious terrorism as theater” will also increase.²³ This means that terrorism actually serves a second purpose beyond the desire for political change. According to Juergensmeyer, terrorism serves a dual purpose of “both performance events, in that they make a symbolic statement, and performative acts, insofar as they try to change things.”²⁴ In terms of universal global democracy, only the performative aspect of terrorism would be affected by the political structure of a particular government. However, the problem on the performance side of terrorism will remain unchanged. In fact, although democracy may provide increased opportunities for groups to settle their political grievances internally, democracy will not detract from religious extremists’ desire to make symbolic statements that validate perceptions of religious superiority.

Conclusion

The national strategy of democratization born out of the end of the Cold War continues to represent a false truth regarding the future of the global

community. Based on the historical notion that two democracies never go to war with each other, many believe that democratization would potentially cure international war and likewise stop terrorism. However, if the notion about democracies and war is true, politically aggrieved individuals or groups might lose faith in their government's will to act and therefore turn to terrorism despite the existence of mutual democratic governments. In addition, because democracies come in various forms, creating a more politically homogeneous collection of world governments is less likely. Also, as previously described, political systems have little impact on the ideology of religious extremism, making the continued wave of religious terrorism certain to continue with or without democracy.

The conclusion about the future of terrorism, therefore, must not center on the magic bullet of an all-democratic world. Rather than relying on a particular type of government to prevent terrorism, the emphasis instead

should be on developing the ability of all governments in preventing grievances or religious differences from steering people to the top of Maghaddam's staircase.²⁵ Using the staircase metaphor, "As individuals climb the staircase, they see fewer

Rather than relying on a particular type of government to prevent terrorism, the emphasis instead should be on developing the ability of all governments in preventing grievances...

and fewer choices, until the only possible outcome is the destruction of others, or oneself, or both,"²⁶ the psychology of terrorism becomes the best way to both understand and prevent the continued use of terrorism. Therefore, any government, any society, or any civilization is equally capable of reducing the perceived psychological need to continue the upward climb toward terrorism.

By understanding the psychological framework that leads to terrorism, it becomes even clearer that the political solution of democratization has been unwisely prescribed as an easy fix for a complex problem. However, instead of working toward a practical solution, the false notion of the peaceful virtues of democracy has only furthered anti-Western and antidemocratic sentiment across the globe. Therefore, until all forms of government gain a better understanding of the true nature of terrorism, the hardening of Huntington's velvet curtain between the Western world and Islamic civilization remains unchecked.

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