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Shibley Telhami

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# Conflicting Views of Terrorism†

Shibley Telhami††

The shift in America's mood in the months following that horrific day in September was breathtaking in its scope and unprecedented in its speed. From the strongest sense of vulnerability in recent history to the most strident self-confidence in memory after the seemingly easy success in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the journey took but a few months.

At some level this rapid journey was healing to a nation whose confidence had been painfully shaken. At another level it was troubling. Certainly America has experienced many radical swings in its foreign policy in the past. But from the isolationism that followed World War I—carried out to a disastrous extreme, as witnessed in Pearl Harbor—to the ensuing interventionism that ended with the quagmire in Vietnam, the swings were almost generational. Rarely have such extreme shifts in mood been more rapid than in the autumn of 2001—and, perhaps, rarely as consequential.

Neither extreme is justified by reality. The United States remains the most powerful nation in the world today, but it is not powerful enough to confront the new global challenges alone or to justify the overconfidence that followed the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The rapidity of these mood shifts can in part be explained by the absence of a competing superpower and by the general speed of today's world. The information revolution carried the horror to every home worldwide within hours. The technological revolution enabled a remarkable military success with minimal American casualties thousands of miles from U.S. shores.

But these very factors that have led to bolstering a unilateralist trend in America's foreign policy have also raised global concerns about America's role in the world. There has been an equally dramatic shift in the global mood from empathy with America's pain and a sense of global vulnerability immediately after the attacks on the United States in September 2001 to a widening gap between America and other states. Resentment of U.S. power has grown in much of the world, and certainly in the Middle East.

Understandably, much of the American focus has been on the attitudes of the Middle East and Muslim countries, especially on the question many Americans have instinctively asked: "Why do they hate us so much?" But before addressing this question, and whether it is indeed true at all that "they hate us so much," we must put the Middle East in a global perspec-

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†† Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, College Park, and non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

tive. Although there are some unique aspects in the Middle Eastern view of the United States, it is also important to understand that much of the reaction of Arabs and Muslims to America's war on terrorism, and to American foreign policy more broadly, has not been significantly different from the reaction of people in other regions of the world.

It is not helpful to assume that the global reaction to America's mood in its declared war on terrorism is mere whining. And it is even more dangerous to assume that the global sentiment is inconsequential in light of America's significant powerful resources. Aside from the increased motivation for other states to coalesce in order to challenge America's power if America is seen to be embarking on a unilateralist course, the nature of the threat revealed by the horror of 9/11 cannot be addressed through coercive power alone. This issue is at the heart of the conflict of views between the United States and many other states in defining the terrorist threat that the world faces today. Indeed, the evolution of the degree of empathy with the United States in the months following September 2001 has been in large part a function of the evolving American view of the war on terrorism.

### Conflicting Views of Terrorism

There are five significant differences between the views put forth by the United States and those of much of the world. In the rest of this article, I will highlight these key differences that explain the conflict between the United States and others over the most effective means to address terrorist threats.

Much of the world empathized with America's pain and supported its right of self-defense in light of the horrific attacks but did not see that right as enabling America to unilaterally define global terrorism beyond the immediate threat to its own soil.

The United States focused its effort in fighting terrorism in confronting the "supply side" of terrorism without equally addressing the "demand side," which many around the world see as critical.

The Bush administration defined terrorism as if it were an ideology, a political coalition, when in fact most around the world understand it to be an immoral means employed by diverse groups for different ends.

In the U.S. view the central terrorist threat resides in "terrorist states," and some U.S. officials talk as if confronting those states could result in the defeat of the terror phenomenon. However, most around the world view terrorism as the antistate, as an increasingly threatening phenomenon in part because of the relative weakening of the state in an era of globalization.

The public discourse in America has associated terrorism in the Middle East, especially the suicide bombings, with aspects of the Islamic religion, even as President Bush has been careful to reject this notion, whereas many around the world see both the motives and the means of Middle Eastern terrorism to be less about Islam than about politics.

### 1. The Two Separate Missions

In the weeks following the events of 9/11, expressions of empathy with the United States pervaded the international community, including the Middle East. Even countries with whom the United States has had tense and often confrontational relationships, such as Iran, which remains on the State Department's list of "terrorist states," expressed unusual sympathy with America's pain. Iranian President Mohammad Khatami immediately issued a condemnation of "the terrorist attacks" and expressed "deep sorrow and sympathy" for the victims. Syria's young President Bashar Assad sent a letter of condolence to President Bush strongly condemning the terror attacks. In general, most leaders and governments recognized that the United States had a right to respond to the terror on its soil once the culprits were identified. But it is important to understand the sources of the early global support for America and why much of this support turned to resentment as the United States moved to define and wage its global war on terrorism.

Undoubtedly much of the sympathetic reaction was genuine, even as some harbored a wicked sense of satisfaction that America was now tasting what many around the world have suffered for too long. The magnitude of the human tragedy was inescapable given that the horror was transmitted almost live on television screens in much of the world. But the response was more than mere humanitarian reflex. America's vulnerability was in some ways the world's vulnerability. If such horror could befall the sole remaining superpower, then no one is immune. If the anchor of the international system is shaken, so is the entire global system. Even in the Middle East, where many already resented America and in some instances found pleasure in its pain, other voices saw the threat to the United States as a threat to them as well, not merely because America was seen as the anchor of the global system but also because it represented a dream to which many aspired. Though U.S. policy continued to receive criticism on the pages of newspapers in the Middle East, a columnist of the influential Arabic daily *al-Hayat*, for example, expressed his emotions this way on September 19, 2001: "The destruction of America is the destruction of the human dream across the world." In the Middle East, as in much of the world, there was, at least for a moment, a widespread sense eloquently expressed by one Frenchwoman that "today, we are all American."

Above all, it was clear that most governments around the world recognized America's right to respond with force. No state, let alone a superpower, could allow an attack of this magnitude to remain unanswered. No one could deny America's fundamental right of self-defense, regardless of how they viewed or defined terrorism.

This is not to say that most around the world felt that America should have a free hand in waging a global war on terrorism. Indeed, much of the early public reaction in the Middle East, as the United States geared up for its war on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, was predicated on the assumption that the United States had presented insufficient evidence to prove responsibility, even though the Taliban regime had been highly

unpopular in the broader Arab and Muslim worlds. Though many *governments* in the Middle East supported the U.S. campaign, their *public* remained unpersuaded.

In the end, despite *public* distrust of America's intentions, at least in the Middle East, America's right to respond to the horror was strong enough to attract significant support from *states* for the campaign to overturn the Taliban regime and destroy Usama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Even such states as Iran offered support for these operations, together with dozens of nations across the globe, especially in the Middle East, which participated in intelligence gathering, financial coordination, or providing help for the actual conduct of operations. Certainly, part of this governmental support was provided to avoid being targeted by a wounded and angry America. But few governments around the world seriously challenged the legitimacy of the first mission of responding to the attack by destroying al-Qaeda.

The White House defined another mission as an integral part of the global war on terrorism. In principle, this mission too received universal support, as shown by the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1373 on September 28, 2001, obligating states to fight terrorism. But such a resolution was possible only because member states did not have to tackle the issue of defining terrorism. One thing was clear: Many states among those voting for the resolution did not see eye to eye with the United States on such a definition. Many feared that "terrorism" would become a convenient shorthand for the United States and other nations to label their enemies.

The United States commanded international moral authority after the September attacks to begin to find common ground in defining terrorism, even though there was no agreement about how to identify "terrorist groups." The administration needed to decide which of the thousands of terrorist groups around the world it would define as enemies. President Bush refined this second mission by concentrating on terrorist groups with "global reach." But a central issue remained: which organizations to target. States differ widely on what they consider a "terrorist" group. Some governments classify mere opposition groups as terrorist. Others have refused to accept the U.S. classification scheme. The United States faced the problem of how to classify some of the Iraqi opposition groups that it supports, or the Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah, that it opposes. Most in the Middle East deny that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization because its primary targets have been Israeli soldiers on Lebanese soil. America can disregard the arguments of other states and target whichever terrorist enterprise it wants, but it would increasingly find itself alone in the pursuit of terrorists, an opening that such groups would exploit.

By focusing its efforts on identifying "terrorist groups," the United States may have missed an opportunity to rally members of the UN Security Council behind a clearer definition of "terrorism" as an instrument. A good example is the Hezbollah organization in Lebanon. If the United States seeks to mobilize other states and to demand that they end their

support for Hezbollah because the United States defines it as a “terrorist organization,” the strategy is unlikely to work. Regardless of the methods that Hezbollah employs, states such as Iran are unlikely to sever their relations with the group or to seek its destruction. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is a political party with significant support and several members in the parliament. It is also a religious movement with deep religious links with Iran. Its stated objectives of forcing Israel out of the occupied Arab territories are accepted and applauded in much of the Middle East beyond Iran, and many in the region consider its methods, which have largely focused on attacking Israeli soldiers on Lebanese soil, not to be “terrorism.” Hence it is difficult, if not impossible, to envision full regional cooperation if the American aim is to confront the group and eliminate all support for it. On the other hand, if American efforts focus on defeating “terrorist means” defined as the deliberate targeting of civilians, the United States would have a better chance of succeeding. If the United States rallies the international community to apply the principle universally, it stands a good chance of persuading other states to pressure Hezbollah and dissuade it from using terrorist instruments and to delegitimize those instruments even inside Lebanon.

The United States had alternatives: first, to work with the United Nations and other international and regional organizations to pass resolutions prohibiting the targeting of civilians and strengthening existing norms that hold a state accountable for criminal acts committed by terrorists operating from its territory. Second, it could build on the antiterrorist coalition it had rallied to create a comprehensive new treaty regime—going beyond the existing patchwork of agreements that require individual states to either prosecute or extradite terrorists by mandating a strong collective response to attacks on civilians. Such a response targeting both the perpetrators and the states that support them could take various forms, including intelligence sharing, asset freezes, economic sanctions, expulsion from international organizations, and criminal prosecution. In this way a deliberate attack on civilian targets in one state would become an attack on all. States outside the coalition could ratify the treaty.

Such a treaty would not take away a state’s right to self-defense when attacked but would add an obligation to take collective action. The difference is this: When you attack a state, you are at war with that state and its allies; when you deliberately attack civilians, you are at war with the entire international community and deserve an automatic international response. While there will always be ambiguities, the deterrent power of a mandatory collective response should be considerably stronger than the threat of unilateral action by a nation attacked by terrorists. More important, by moving in this direction, the international community would go a long way toward delegitimizing the deliberate targeting of civilians by terrorists. And by focusing on targeting civilians, rather than on the identity or motivations of the perpetrators, we could avoid the difficult and divisive debates about what constitutes terrorism and about which groups are terrorist and which “freedom fighters.”

It was clear that the disadvantage of a multilateral approach would be that it would constrain the American ability to identify terrorist groups and to prioritize which should be confronted first. This process was in part a function of the blurring of difference between “terrorists” and “enemies.” It was as if when a group or a state were not identified as terrorist, the United States would lose its right to treat it as a hostile enemy. Certainly, whether or not Iran or Iraq are labeled as “terrorist states,” the United States has a right to regard them as enemies and to construct its policy toward them accordingly. The United States also has a right to treat Hezbollah, which has killed Americans, as an enemy—regardless of how others view this organization.

The unilateral U.S. approach to identifying terrorist groups beyond al-Qaeda was bolstered by the early success in destroying the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The surprisingly easy achievement seemed to confirm the view that America can go it alone in the era of the single superpower. The impressive performance by high-tech weapons enabled the speedy conduct of a war in a remote and difficult land that had defeated even the mighty Soviet army next door. The awareness that the collapse of the Soviet Union has only widened the gap in military technology between the United States and the rest of the world emboldened those who believe that America can afford to act alone. Nowhere has this attitude been more clearly visible than in the U.S. debate about the policy toward Iraq, where the White House and Pentagon instinct is to prepare for a war to topple the government of Saddam Hussein even as most states around the world rejected the idea. The unilateralists have a ready argument: Because America is so powerful, few will oppose it if it decides to act even if they do not like its actions. No one can afford to be on the losing side, and America is ultimately assured of winning. Regardless of the actual merits of this argument, it is not hard to see that such an approach would engender anything but significant international resentment.

## 2. The Supply-and-Demand Sides of Terrorism

A second reason for the gap between the United States and much of the rest of the world is in the way the United States approached the terrorism phenomenon. By regarding terrorism as the product of organized groups that could be confronted and destroyed, without regard to their aims or to the reasons that they succeed in recruiting many willing members, the United States pursued a “supply-side”-only approach.

It is clear that the White House view of terrorism was colored by the 9/11 attacks. It was hard, in the state in which Americans found themselves, to contemplate the thought that the horror could be rationally explained. It is often feared that to explain is to justify. It is an understandable fear that is also ultimately self-defeating. In explaining such actions, one hopes to reduce the chance of more horror.

It is certainly the case that Usama bin-Laden’s al-Qaeda, even aside from its tactics of violent terror, has objectives that are irreconcilable not

only with what America stands for but also with the state system as it now exists in the Middle East. It seeks to destabilize the system, to overthrow governments in the region, to fashion an Islamist political order to its liking. It is hard to see how one can reduce the threat of this organization without seeking its disruption. It is a supplier of terror that must be directly confronted.

But aside from the aims of bin-Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders, there is a "demand side" to terrorism. To succeed, terror organizers, regardless of their aims, need to recruit willing members, raise funds, and appeal to public opinion in pursuit of their political objectives. Public despair and humiliation are often fertile ground for terror organizers to exploit. If this demand side persists, the terrorism phenomenon is unlikely to be contained. For every terror organization that is destroyed, other suppliers will arise to exploit the persistent demand.

It is important to note that there need not be harmony between the real aims of terror organizers and the causes of despair and humiliation that give rise to the demand side. Usama bin-Laden's aims, for example, were fundamentally focused on expelling foreign forces from Saudi Arabia and creating an Islamic political order across the Muslim world. But once Usama bin-Laden needed to rally public opinion in the region in the aftermath of 9/11, he did not employ his grand objectives as the primary arguments for mobilizing support. Instead, he highlighted issues that resonate with the public and that explain more fully the sense of despair and humiliation among Arabs and Muslims: the Arab-Israeli issue and sanctions against Iraq. Put differently, it is difficult to envision how one can address the terrorism phenomenon without addressing the central issues that create the fertile grounds for breeding terrorism and are exploited by organizers who may have ambitions of their own. Much of the world sees the U.S. war on terrorism as being limited to a military campaign against suppliers without investing in the necessary political and economic instruments to reduce the central demand side.

### 3. Terrorism as an Instrument Versus Terrorism as an Ideology

President Bush's speech to the American people a few days after the attacks, on September 20, 2001, was forceful and inspiring. It helped Americans begin dealing with their pain and fear. But in rallying the public for the declared war on terrorism and preparing it for the required cost, the speech spoke eloquently of terrorism as another "ism" of history and of terrorists as ideologues: "They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century. . . they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends: in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies." Although this approach succeeded in mobilizing public support in America, it soon became clear that others around the world see the terrorism phenomenon differently. The differences are especially consequential for policy.



In the ensuing months, the Bush administration has been waging the global war on terrorism as if terrorism is a movement, an ideology, or a political coalition, with little differentiation between cases. This approach has distorted our moral view of the world and enabled even Slobodan Milosevic, the former Yugoslav president, as he faced international justice, to justify his horrific policies of death and ethnic cleansing as a war on terrorism.

Much of the world sees terrorism differently: as an instrument, not a movement; as an immoral means employed by groups, some of which have just causes, some of which don't.

To reduce its occurrence, according to this approach, terrorism must be internationally delegitimized and the conditions under which it thrives minimized. By definition, legitimacy and illegitimacy cannot be unilaterally decided; when the United States appears to go against the rest of the world, it is its actions that appear illegitimate.

The argument against terrorism is essentially moral: To dissuade others from using such tactics, one has to speak with moral authority. Those with legitimate causes who condone terrorism as a method to serve their ends see terrorism as a weapon of the weak and helpless facing a far stronger enemy. Certainly, those in the Middle East who have often supported operations by Palestinian groups against Israelis, including attacks against civilians, regard those operations not as terrorism but as acts of national liberation. This perspective has been a central point of contention between the United States and many individuals and entities in the region, including governments. Many in the Middle East as well as in other parts of the world make the point that the definition of terrorism cannot be fully divorced from the degree to which the aim of the group is legitimate, and from the degree to which the power of the enemy it faces is overwhelmingly superior. Terrorism is seen as the weapon of the desperate and weak.

This notion should be challenged, as the United States has been trying to do: Terrorist means must be rejected regardless of their aims. But any successful effort to reduce the appeal of terrorism must also persuade people and groups not of the illegitimacy of their cause but of the illegitimacy of their means. The argument is moral: The ends, no matter how worthy, cannot justify the means. In particular, the argument boils down to the notion that the deliberate attack on civilian targets is unacceptable under any circumstances.

But to persuade others of this worthy notion, those who make the argument must speak with moral authority. And for the argument to be more persuasive, others with moral authority must also use it. This tactic requires an appeal to societies, and it requires multilateral efforts to establish the notion of the illegitimacy of terrorist means. But the understandable focus on destroying al-Qaeda, and the focus on terrorists as a breed that can be separated from society, has undermined the American ability to delegitimize terrorism. One of the unfortunate products of what transpired in the months after 9/11 is that whereas terrorist organizations, especially

al-Qaeda, have been disrupted, terrorist means are increasingly legitimate in the eyes of more people in the Middle East.

A good case in point occurred as the United States was attempting to encourage Arab governments to speak against terrorism carried out by Palestinian groups in Israel following a spate of horrific suicide bombings that killed many in the spring of 2002. This was an important and worthy American effort consistent with the moral notion that the ends cannot justify such horrible means. The U.S. efforts intensified after major Israeli incursions into Palestinian cities in the West Bank that led to dozens of civilian casualties and much destruction of property. Both the suicide bombings and the Israeli operations were universally criticized, especially by human rights groups that saw severe violations of international law and norms that killed and injured many civilians. The Bush administration's focus only on the need to respond to terrorist attacks hindered its ability to emphasize the moral limits that must also be imposed on the response. The American obligation to project empathy with the innocent casualties on the Palestinian side was forgotten. As a result, the ability of the United States to persuade peoples and governments in the Middle East to effectively reject terrorism was significantly undermined.

In justifying the American demand that Israel should withdraw from Palestinian cities without delay, President Bush spoke only of possible "consequences" of continued Israeli operations but not of the moral wrong of the unjustified scale and scope of Israeli operations and the means Israel had used. In asking Israel to withdraw after a week of its military campaign in the West Bank, the president argued on April 4, 2002, that the situation in which Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat found himself "is largely of his own making." He put his request this way: "Israel is facing a terrible and serious challenge. For seven days, it has acted to root out terrorist nests. America recognizes Israel's right to defend itself from terror. Yet, to lay the foundations of future peace, I ask Israel to halt incursions into Palestinian-controlled areas and begin the withdrawal from those cities it has recently occupied."

In our approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, we have taken a clear moral position toward Palestinian terrorism that goes like this: The Palestinians must be restrained in their response to the hardship that they endure daily after thirty-five years of occupation and to the humiliation that an entire generation experiences today. Although they have a right to seek freedom, they have no right to use terrorist tactics that inflict so much horror on many innocent people. The ends can never justify the means. This is a worthy moral position.

Then we turn to the Israelis as we watch the horror that they endure in the face of suicide bombings. We understand that they must respond in some way, but we act as if they can respond in any way they choose. We do not impose the moral limitations of demanding such actions must not be sweeping, that they must be less hurtful to the hundreds of thousands of innocent Palestinians who suffer the consequences. In fact, we take no

moral position and appear to give a blank check. Our global moral authority is undermined as a result.

In the process, the ability of regional governments to help delegitimize terrorism is also undermined. During the same bloody events in April 2002, for example, the president asked Arab leaders to speak out against terrorism. He dispatched Secretary of State Colin Powell to visit friendly Arab states, including Jordan and Egypt, with the hope that they would issue such statements in Powell's presence. The trouble was that television stations in the region, over which these governments often have little control, were broadcasting live the destruction in West Bank cities, tanks rolling over houses, and heartbreaking reports of dozens of civilian casualties—even as television reports in Israel focused on the innocent victims of terrorist bombings. Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in the Arab world, including one million in Morocco. Callers and commentators on television shows blamed America for its inability to stop the campaign and for not displaying sympathy with Arab pain. They labeled Arab leaders friendly to the United States, such as President Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan, as “servants of America.” Regardless of the merits of these feelings and perceptions, when Arab leaders criticized Palestinian terrorism in that environment in response to public American pressure, they further delegitimized themselves rather than terrorism.

Whereas we ignored the moral dimension of Israeli actions, we chose to evaluate Palestinian behavior *only* in that dimension. This bias has handicapped our ability to perceive the need to put forth serious political alternatives to violence even as we rightly demand that terrorism must stop. Terrorism cannot be justified under any circumstances, but it is more likely to take root when peaceful alternatives to alleviating hardship are not readily available. Any successful strategy to minimize terrorism must include putting forth a positive alternative. To pretend that the issue of terrorism is simply a choice between good and evil is to know nothing of human psychology. In 2002, nearly half of Israelis supported the immoral notion of expelling all Palestinians from their homes as a way of stopping the unbearable horror of suicide terror because they saw no peaceful solution on the horizon, and many Palestinians supported terror as a way of ridding themselves of the unbearable pain of occupation. This was not the case before the collapse of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in the summer of 2000. Evidence suggests that providing hope for an alternative means is a factor in reducing terrorism: Despite the reservations that both sides had about the peace process in the Palestinian-Israeli arena and the continuation of violence even then, the number of terrorist incidents in the Middle East declined every year during the second half of the 1990s, reaching its lowest point in the promising years of 1999-2000.

#### 4. Role of States Versus Nonstate Actors

While the threat posed by bin Laden was in part dependent on a sponsoring state, Afghanistan under the Taliban government, it is also clear that al-Qaeda is a nonstate organization that operates even in nations where it does not receive official support. The U.S. State Department typically issues lists of terrorist groups and also of "terrorist states," but the American focus has increasingly shifted to the role of states. This shift was shown by President Bush's designation of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as "an axis of evil" in his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, and by the focus on the need to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq as a cornerstone of American antiterrorism policy.

This focus on confronting hostile states as a priority of the war on terrorism has not been equally shared in the broader international community because the attacks of 9/11 highlighted the vulnerability of states to nonstate terrorism in the era of globalization. This is not to say that states do not remain the most powerful players in international politics in most areas. However, the technological revolution, especially the information revolution, which has empowered individuals and substate groups in new ways, has made terrorism more likely and potentially much more lethal. It is much easier to deter states, even ambitious ones such as Iraq, than it is to deter shadowy groups or individuals. Even the Stalinist Soviet Union was deterred by American power and resolve because states ultimately are sensitive to punishment, and punishment is easier to specify when one knows who the actor is.

Terrorism thrives in anarchy: the weaker the central authority, the more numerous the militant groups and the more difficult it is to deter such groups, as one does not know whom to punish. Witness, for example, the contrast between Syria and Lebanon: Syria is a militarily powerful state with an authoritarian government that keeps tight control over the country; Lebanon is small, militarily weak, and ethnically divided, with a government that has only loose control over parts of the state. Despite the professed hostility between Syria and Israel, which was far greater than the professed hostility between the Lebanese government and Israel, there have been practically no terrorist attacks across the Syrian-Israeli border but dozens of such attacks across the Lebanese-Israeli border. Despite its significant and overwhelming power, Israel was unable to end these attacks even after it invaded Lebanon in 1982 and occupied that country for nearly two decades. However, Israeli power has succeeded in deterring direct attacks emanating from Syria.

This is not to say that states have no role in supporting violent groups outside their own borders, but violence, including terrorism, is more likely to emanate from weakened states, even without support from outside powers. Afghanistan provides a good example. During the days of Soviet occupation, the communist government in Afghanistan was less likely to export terrorism than Afghanistan was in the years that followed the disintegration of that state and the emergence of the Taliban regime. Violence is

easier to deter when it emanates from states that maintain strong domestic control than when it is nurtured in weak or collapsing states.

This contrast suggests important aspects of a strategy intended to reduce terrorism. The first is that when confronting hostile states, such as Iraq, any strategy must assure an outcome that does not produce the sort of instability that is hospitable to terrorism. Second, it is not enough to limit the opportunities available to potential terrorist groups—the issue of motivation is also central. Even if opportunities for terrorism become limited through effective military means, the degree to which people are driven to extremes affects the likelihood that they will succeed. When there is a will, there is a way.

## 5. Gap in Understanding Middle Eastern Terror

### The Role of Religion.

Understandably, the attacks of September 11 have raised many questions about the motivation of those willing to commit such atrocities against the United States. Inevitably, a debate ensued about the relationship between Islam as a religion and culture and the propensity to commit terror. After all, those who carried out the attacks and their sponsors professed to be fulfilling a religious mission.

One of the most important positions taken by President Bush in the early days following the horror was his attempt to set the record straight, to differentiate between those few terrorists and Muslims broadly. This important position helped not only in enabling cooperation between the United States and Muslim countries that were equally frightened by al-Qaeda but also to reduce the backlash in America against Muslim and Arab Americans.

However, despite these attempts, the discourse in America quickly blurred the distinction. When the question of “why they hate us so much” was raised, “they” increasingly meant Arabs and Muslims, not merely those individuals who carried out the attack. In some quarters the mood was even more dramatic: The editor of the influential conservative *National Review*, Rich Lowry, openly discussed the option of “nuking Mecca” if there is another large terrorist attack on the United States, though he also acknowledged that such an attack “seems extreme.” The prominent commentator Fred Ikle, a former undersecretary of Defense, concluded an op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal* (June 2, 2002) this way: “A nuclear war stirred up against the ‘infidels’ might end up displacing Mecca and Medina with two large radioactive craters.” Although these writings were by no means the norm in America, they were highlighted in the Muslim and Arab worlds as if they were American policy, thus generating more resentment toward the United States. In the logic of these writers, the issue was how to deter future attacks and the right of the United States to retaliate in case of such attacks; from the point of view of Muslims worldwide, such writings confused the actions of a few radical Muslims with the Muslim faith and conceived of Islam, not the terrorists, as America’s enemy.

At the heart of this analytical confusion is a genuine fear that followed the nightmare of watching the horrific attacks as they occurred. It was hard to explain how anyone could be ruthless enough to design and carry out such horror, but the revelations about the perpetrators made the situation even more terrifying: They were willing to die for the cause and thus were seemingly insensitive to punishment and reward; many were apparently normal men who were relatively well educated and came from middle-class families; and they had undertaken their mission in the name of Islam, a religion most Americans knew little about. It is frightening to contemplate confronting ruthless people, but it is even more terrifying to envision them as mysterious and irrational. This seeming mystery of their behavior was easy to account for psychologically by references to blind religious faith, especially when it happens that many of those carrying out terrorist acts in the Middle East, not just al-Qaeda, are doing so in the name of Islam.

But an analytical view of the behavior of groups that carry out terror, especially in historical perspective, clearly indicates that Islam as such is not at the heart of the propensity to commit such acts. Even the seemingly incomprehensible phenomenon of using suicide as an instrument of violence can be accounted for without reference to religion. This is not to say that religion plays no role, or that many Islamist groups are not dangerous or hostile, but only that religion's role is not the central issue in understanding the terror phenomenon. What makes these groups dangerous is not their Islamic character but their violent means and intolerant ends. In contrast, most religious organizations, including political ones in the Middle East, are not violent. There is nothing wrong with religious fundamentalism (whatever the religion); what's wrong is when a group, religious or otherwise, seeks to impose its will on others through violence.

One of the most radical Palestinian groups in the Middle East in the late 1960s was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a secular organization founded by a Christian physician, George Habash. The PFLP, which engaged in a series of highly publicized airline hijackings, attracted many well-educated members. The secularism of this group should be a reminder of the mistaken assumptions many make about the relationship between the Islamic religion and violence. It is true that religious groups employing violence find some theological justification for it, just as their opponents find support for their positions in religious materials. But "theological justification" is not the same thing as "religiously caused." The Jonestown cult did not represent Christianity any more than Baruch Goldstein and his supporters represent Judaism. It is telling that when the violence in the Middle East was carried out by secular nationalists in the 1950s and 1960s, both the West and intellectuals in the region saw Islam as a passive religion, an "opiate of the masses" that accepted the status quo and bolstered stability. The prevalent interpretation was that a Muslim simply accepted God's will and did not seek to change it, repeating the phrase "al-Hamdulillah" (Praise be to God) even in the face of great hardship.

During that period the United States and the West viewed secular national movements in the Middle East as the primary destabilizing political force in the region and viewed Islamic groups, especially those supported by friendly governments, as more desirable and more stabilizing. The Israelis held a similar view after they occupied the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 war. They perceived the secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the primary threat to Israel, so they sought to erode its influence in the West Bank and Gaza and consequently encouraged traditional Islamic groups that were competing with the PLO. Those same Islamic groups ultimately gave birth to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, two militant movements that were even more ruthless in their use of violence than the PLO.

Similarly, it is important to keep in mind Usama bin Laden's political roots. In the 1980s, when the fear of communism and the Soviet Union still superseded all other perceived threats, the mission of overthrowing the Soviet-backed communist regime in Afghanistan propelled the United States to cultivate Islamic groups across the world to fight the regime in Afghanistan. The United States encouraged these efforts in the name of jihad, or Islamic struggle, in order to persuade Muslim fighters in places as far away as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Sudan to join in this global struggle against the infidel communists. Indeed, the Saudi government was encouraged to help locate fanatically religious people like Usama bin Laden, especially wealthy ones. The recruitment of global adherents of Islam to fight what these believers defined as holy wars, a phenomenon that obviously had unintended horrific consequences, was thus born of a different interpretation of Islam. The role that many Arab governments played in mobilizing Islamists, for which they are now criticized, was born in part out of this collaborative effort with the United States. It is thus not surprising that most of those who have carried out attacks against the United States have been citizens of friendly states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt rather than hostile states such as Iran or Iraq.

Outside the al-Qaeda phenomenon, it is important to note that Middle Eastern terrorism and the resentment of the United States, unacceptable as they remain, are not unique if examined in global perspective. If one sets aside al-Qaeda as a horrific special case, one will find the global trends in terrorism to be surprising. According to State Department reports, and contrary to conventional wisdom, the Middle East was not the leading region in the number of terrorist incidents (as defined and identified by the State Department) throughout the 1990s. Nor has it been the leading area in the number of attacks against American targets. In fact, in the five years prior to the horror of 9/11 incidents of Middle Eastern terrorism declined every year, and by 2000 the Middle East had become the region with the fewest terrorist attacks of any around the globe except North America. In countering the tendency to associate Islam with terror, one must keep this global trend in mind.

### Religion and Suicide Terrorism.

The mystery of suicide attacks was compounded by the discovery that many of the al-Qaeda attackers were well educated and from middle-class families. This information seemed to go against the popular notion that participants in political violence come from the uneducated and economically destitute classes. There is actually little evidence that poverty or lack of education are major elements in political violence, although they can be factors in extreme cases. The more central reasons motivating people to act, and to be recruited by violent groups, are hopelessness and humiliation, which have to do with expectations and interpretations of social and political relations. These factors are essential in defining the “demand side” of terrorism.

Historically, those who have employed violence for political ends have come from the educated and middle classes—whether in the Middle East or elsewhere. Often seeing themselves as revolutionaries, as in the case of Marxists such as Che Guevara in Latin America, or George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the more educated segments of the public are generally less accepting of an inferior position in politics and society and are also more aware of their capacity to effect change. They are thus more likely to act on their beliefs, although most use nonviolent means.

One of the seemingly most puzzling aspects of the terrorist attacks on the United States was the use of suicide. It is easy, in this case, to escape the need to explain such apparently irrational behavior by focusing on Islamic theology—but there are rational explanations. First, theology cannot explain suicide as a method of terrorism, though the perpetrators and their supporters may have twisted religion to suit their ends and to brush aside the basic Islamic doctrine prohibiting suicide. One could just as easily create twisted biblical interpretations to justify the creation of a Christian or Jewish cult that exploits the biblical story of Samson’s death.

Second, if it is assumed that Muslims do not fear death because they believe they will be rewarded in heaven and therefore are more likely than others to accept dying, we need look no further than our television screens in the lead-up to the American military operations in Afghanistan: Hundreds of thousands of faithful Muslims were trying to flee Afghanistan in fear for their lives. Bin Laden’s own recruitment tapes that he distributes in the Arab world show that his primary means of motivating his supporters is to show pictures of dead Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, and Chechnya to move his audience into action.

Third, suicide bombings have not been unique to Islamic groups, either historically or recently. Certainly the suicide bombers in the Middle East in recent years have come from Islamist groups, and they do employ the concept of martyrdom to explain and justify their actions. But it is often forgotten that the PFLP and other militant secular Palestinian groups (which included Christians) in the 1950s and 1960s were called *fedayeen*, or those who sacrifice their lives. Historically, other groups and people have employed suicide, such as the Japanese in World War II. Although the



focus on the Middle East is understandable, what's overlooked is that the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, who are neither Arab nor Muslim, and who describe themselves as "a national liberation organization. . . [who] are not [so] mentally demented as to commit blind acts of violence impelled by racist and religious fanaticism" have employed suicide bombings as an instrument of violence more than any other group in the world, including in the Middle East.

Ultimately, suicide bombings are employed by violent groups for two reasons: They are *effective*, and they are *empowering*. From the perspective of individual actors, suicide as a method is strictly irrational; from the point of view of a ruthless group, it is terrifyingly efficient. Bin Laden's organization must be seen as a cult because its method of persuasion is akin to brainwashing, although any person willing to die has individual reasons, and some, including secularists, as has been documented in the Palestinian case, actively seek organizations to help them carry out suicide attacks. When a group is willing to employ ruthless methods and to kill on a large scale, the sacrifice of group members is a horrifyingly effective tactic because it is very difficult to defend against. It is difficult to deter or punish individuals who are willing to die, and it is nearly impossible to stop episodes of terrorism if individuals are willing to use their bodies as weapons. In that sense, the seeming irrationality of suicide violence (i.e., its seeming insensitivity to punishment and reward) renders it a rational strategy from the point of view of those already willing to commit ruthless acts of violence. Even from the point of view of total casualties, the group will lose fewer fighters and inflict more casualties on its enemies than if it used means such as guerrilla warfare.

The horrific effectiveness of suicide bombings, especially against superior enemies, becomes a central factor in attracting new recruits. In the Palestinian arena in the West Bank and Gaza, the suicide-bombing method began with Islamist groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. By the spring of 2002, and in the absence of a hopeful political process to alleviate public despair over the conditions of occupation, secularist groups were having more difficulty competing with Islamist groups in the recruitment of members. Thus, they began emulating the suicide method as the PFLP and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade—two secular organizations—began to employ this method, even dispatching women bombers, a practice the Islamist groups were reluctant to accept. The suicide-bombing phenomenon has thus become secularized.

It is necessary to understand that suicide bombings, offensive though they are and ultimately threatening to the very societies that legitimize them, are also inspiring to many. The true horror of suicide bombings is that they are immensely empowering to many people who no longer believe that their governments can do anything to relieve their humiliation and improve their conditions. The fact that more groups, including secular ones, now employ this strategy is the result, not the cause, of popular support for a method first embraced by Islamist groups.

This message of empowerment is well understood by organizations that employ suicide bombings. When a teenaged Palestinian girl suicide bomber left a taped message in March 2002 speaking of “sleeping Arab armies” and ineffective governments allowing girls to do the fighting, her handlers knew well how the recording would play among the masses. The most pervasive psychology in the Arab world today is collective rage and feelings of helplessness—and the focus of this psychology is the continued bloodshed in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In this climate, suicide bombings take root because they free the desperate from the need to rely on governments. Rather than being sponsored by states, this form of violence challenges states. Whatever the aims of the attacks on the United States, they succeeded in sending an empowering message to those in the Middle East who are frustrated but are seemingly resigned to their fate because of the superior strength of their enemies and their apparent helplessness. Though there were many in that region, especially among governments and elites, who were threatened by bin Laden and by the phenomenon that he represented, many among the public were inspired by what was accomplished: A few men with nothing but box cutters had succeeded in inflicting so much pain on the sole remaining superpower and in shaking the international order. In so doing, they were also bound to create change in the Middle East, even if the nature of that change remained unpredictable. Even if al-Qaeda itself is ultimately defeated, others are likely to emulate its methods.

In the end, it should be clear that the issues of political violence broadly and terrorism specifically are not about religion and theology. But it is undeniable that much of the politically militant action today is carried out by Islamist groups in the name of Islam and that these groups are on the ascent, even as nonreligious groups also continue to employ violent means. The question is why? The answer is hardly mysterious: In the absence of democracy and legitimate means for organizing political opposition, people turn to social organizations that are not fully under governmental control, and the mosque is one of the few available vehicles for mass political mobilization. This point highlights a key dilemma in the effort to reduce terror: On one extreme, very weak central authority allows militant organizations to proliferate and be less sensitive to deterrence; on the other extreme, significant repression increases the motives of individuals and groups to use violence and to take greater risks. Repression alone cannot eliminate terrorism and may even help cultivate it. This has been the experience of many Middle Eastern states, especially for Israel in its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Any successful counterterrorism strategy must thus address both the opportunities available to militants and the level of their motivation.

Besides limiting the opportunities open to organizers, any effective strategy must also include two essential components: (1) working with the international community, especially through international treaties, to delegitimize attacks on civilians as a political instrument and suicide attacks as something to be celebrated; and (2) addressing the demand side,

the legitimate anger and genuine political despair in the Middle East today that provide fertile ground for terrorists to exploit. As in the 1990s, when the United States worked with the regional players to begin a credible process of resolving regional conflict through negotiations and put forth ideas for economic development and political change, a new process that inspires hope must be part of any new strategy. Unless we address the roots of this anger and despair, new terrorists taking advantage of public hopelessness could replace the ones we destroy.

There are profound reasons, with regard both to domestic policy and to foreign policy issues, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict, for people in the Middle East to be motivated to oppose the existing order. Despair and humiliation are widespread in the region. People turn to available vehicles of political organization, sometimes conveniently, sometimes instinctively. Such despair is the demand side of terrorism: Terrorists who have their own aims, including personal ambition or greed, can exploit this mood to recruit members, gain financial support, and show a public that may be resigned to its condition that change is possible. Understanding the issues that drive the demand side of terrorism is obviously important, but it is beyond the scope of this article.