

TERROR, ISLAM, AND DEMOCRACY

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“Why?” That is the question that people in the West have been asking ever since the terrible events of September 11. What are the attitudes, beliefs, and motives of the terrorists and the movement from which they sprang? What makes young men from Muslim countries willing, even eager, to turn themselves into suicide bombers? How did these men come to harbor such violent hatred of the West, and especially of the United States? What are the roots—moral, intellectual, political, and spiritual—of the murderous fanaticism we witnessed that day?

As Western experts and commentators have wrestled with these questions, their intellectual disarray and bafflement in the face of radical Islamist (notice we do not say “Islamic”) terrorism have become painfully clear. This is worrisome, for however necessary an armed response might seem in the near term, it is undeniable that a successful long-term strategy for battling Islamism and its terrorists will require a clearer understanding of who these foes are, what they think, and how they understand their own motives. For terrorism is first and foremost an ideological and moral challenge to liberal democracy. The sooner the defenders of democracy realize this and grasp its implications, the sooner democracy can prepare itself to win the long-simmering war of ideas and values that exploded into full fury last September 11.

The puzzlement of liberal democracies in the face of Islamist terror-

ism seems odd. After all, since 1793, when the word “terror” first came into use in its modern political sense with the so-called Terror of the French Revolution, nearly every country in the West has had some experience with a terrorist movement or regime. Why then does such a phenomenon, which no less than liberal democracy itself is a product of the modern age, appear in this instance so opaque to Western analysts?

Islamist terror first burst onto the world scene with the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November of that year. Since then, Islamism has spread, and the ideological and political tools that have helped to curb terrorism throughout much of the West have proven mostly ineffective at stopping it. Its presence is global, and its influence is felt not only in the lands of the vast Islamic crescent that extends from Morocco and Nigeria in the west to Malaysia and Mindanao in the east but also in many corners of Europe, India, the former Soviet world, the Americas, and even parts of western China.

Before the Iranian Revolution, terrorism was typically seen as a straightforward outgrowth of modern ideologies. Islamist terrorists, however, claim to fight on theological grounds: A few verses from the Koran and a few references to the *sunna* (“deeds of the Prophet”) put an Islamic seal on each operation. The whole ideological fabric appears to be woven from appeals to tradition, ethnicity, and historical grievances both old and new, along with a powerful set of religious-sounding references to “infidels,” “idolaters,” “crusaders,” “martyrs,” “holy wars,” “sacred soil,” “enemies of Islam,” “the party of God,” and “the great Satan.”

But this religious vocabulary hides violent Islamism’s true nature as a modern totalitarian challenge to both traditional Islam and modern democracy. If terrorism is truly as close to the core of Islamic belief as both the Islamists and many of their enemies claim, why does international Islamist terrorism date only to 1979? This question finds a powerful echo in the statements of the many eminent Islamic scholars and theologians who have consistently condemned the actions of the Islamist networks.

This is not to say that Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy propound a democratic vision of society or easily accommodate the principles of democracy and human rights. But it does expose the fraudulence of the terrorists’ references to Islamic precepts. There is in the history of Islam no precedent for the utterly unrestrained violence of al-Qaeda or the Hezbollah. Even the Shi’ite Ismaili sect known as the Assassins, though it used men who were ready to die to murder its enemies, never descended to anything like the random mass slaughter in which the Hezbollah, Osama bin Laden, and his minions glory.¹ To kill oneself while wantonly murdering women, children, and people of all religions and descriptions—let us not forget that Muslims too worked at the World Trade Center—has nothing to do with Islam, and one does not have to be a learned theologian to see this. The truth is that contemporary Islamist terror is an eminently modern practice thoroughly at odds with Islamic traditions and ethics.²

A striking illustration of the tension between Islam and terrorism was offered by an exchange that took place between two Muslims in the French courtroom where Fouad Ali Saleh was being tried for his role in a wave of bombings that shook Paris in 1985–86. One of his victims, a man badly burned in one of these attacks, said to Saleh: “I am a practicing Muslim. . . . Did God tell you to bomb babies and pregnant women?” Saleh responded, “You are an Algerian. Remember what [the French] did to your fathers.”³ Challenged regarding the religious grounds of his actions, the terrorist replied not with Koranic verses but with secular nationalist grievances.

The record of Saleh’s trial makes fascinating reading. He was a Sunni Muslim, originally from Tunisia, who spent the early 1980s “studying” at Qom, the Shi’ite theological center in Iran. He received weapons training in Libya and Algeria, and got his explosives from the pro-Iranian militants of Hezbollah. In his defense, he invoked not only the Koran and the Ayatollah Khomeini but also Joan of Arc—who is, among other things, a heroine of the French far right—as an example of someone who “defended her country against the aggressor.” After this he read out long passages from *Revolt Against the Modern World* by Julius Evola (1898–1974), an Italian author often cited by European extreme rightists. This strange ideological brew suggests the importance of exploring the intellectual roots of Islamist terrorism.⁴

The Genealogy of Islamism

The idea of a “pan-Islamic”⁵ movement appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries concomitantly with the rapid transformation of traditional Muslim polities into nation-states. The man who did more than any other to lend an Islamic cast to totalitarian ideology was an Egyptian schoolteacher named Hassan al-Banna (1906–49). Banna was not a theologian by training. Deeply influenced by Egyptian nationalism, he founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 with the express goal of counteracting Western influences.⁶

By the late 1930s, Nazi Germany had established contacts with revolutionary junior officers in the Egyptian army, including many who were close to the Muslim Brothers. Before long the Brothers, who had begun by pursuing charitable, associational, and cultural activities, also had a youth wing, a creed of unconditional loyalty to the leader, and a paramilitary organization whose slogan “action, obedience, silence” echoed the “believe, obey, fight” motto of the Italian Fascists. Banna’s ideas were at odds with those of the traditional *ulema* (theologians), and he warned his followers as early as 1943 to expect “the severest opposition” from the traditional religious establishment.⁷

From the Fascists—and behind them, from the European tradition of putatively “transformative” or “purifying” revolutionary violence that began with the Jacobins—Banna also borrowed the idea of heroic death

as a political art form. Although few in the West may remember it today, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which the aestheticization of death, the glorification of armed force, the worship of martyrdom, and faith in “the propaganda of the deed” shaped the antiliberal ethos of both the far right and elements of the far left earlier in the twentieth century. Following Banna, today’s Islamist militants embrace a terrorist cult of martyrdom that has more to do with Georges Sorel’s *Réflexions sur la violence* than with anything in either Sunni or Shi’ite Islam.⁸

After the Allied victory in World War II, Banna’s assassination in early 1949, and the Egyptian Revolution of 1952–54, the Muslim Brothers found themselves facing the hostility of a secularizing military government and sharp ideological competition from Egyptian communists. Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), the Brothers’ chief spokesman and also their liaison with the communists, framed an ideological response that would lay the groundwork for the Islamism of today.

Qutb was a follower not only of Banna but of the Pakistani writer and activist Sayyid Abu’l-A’la Mawdudi (1903–79), who in 1941 founded the Jamaat-e-Islami-e-Pakistan (Pakistan Islamic Assembly), which remains an important political force in Pakistan, though it cannot claim notable electoral support.⁹ Mawdudi’s rejection of nationalism, which he had earlier embraced, led to his interest in the political role of Islam. He denounced all nationalism, labeling it as *kufir* (unbelief). Using Marxist terminology, he advocated a struggle by an Islamic “revolutionary vanguard” against both the West and traditional Islam, attaching the adjectives “Islamic” to such distinctively Western terms as “revolution,” “state,” and “ideology.” Though strongly opposed by the Muslim religious authorities, his ideas influenced a whole generation of “modern” Islamists.

Like both of his preceptors, Qutb lacked traditional theological training. A graduate of the state teacher’s college, in 1948 he went to study education in the United States. Once an Egyptian nationalist, he joined the Muslim Brothers soon after returning home in 1950. Qutb’s brand of Islamism was informed by his knowledge of both the Marxist and fascist critiques of modern capitalism and representative democracy.¹⁰ He called for a monolithic state ruled by a single party of Islamic rebirth. Like Mawdudi and various Western totalitarians, he identified his own society (in his case, contemporary Muslim polities) as among the enemies that a virtuous, ideologically self-conscious, vanguard minority would have to fight by any means necessary, including violent revolution, so that a new and perfectly just society might arise. His ideal society was a classless one where the “selfish individual” of liberal democracies would be banished and the “exploitation of man by man” would be abolished. God alone would govern it through the implementation of Islamic law (*shari’a*). This was Leninism in Islamist dress.

When the authoritarian regime of President Gamel Abdel Nasser suppressed the Muslim Brothers in 1954 (it would eventually get around to

hanging Qutb in 1966), many went into exile in Algeria, Saudi Arabia,¹¹ Iraq, Syria, and Morocco. From there, they spread their revolutionary Islamist ideas—including the organizational and ideological tools borrowed from European totalitarianism—by means of a network that reached into numerous religious schools and universities. Most young Islamist cadres today are the direct intellectual and spiritual heirs of the Qutbist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Iranian Connection

Banna and the Brotherhood advocated the creation of a solidarity network that would reach across the various schools of Islam.¹² Perhaps in part because of this ecumenism, we can detect the Brothers' influence as early as 1945 in Iran, the homeland of most of the world's Shi'ites.

Returning home from Iraq that year, a young Iranian cleric named Navab Safavi started a terrorist group that assassinated a number of secular Iranian intellectuals and politicians. In 1953, Safavi visited Egypt at the Brothers' invitation and presumably met with Qutb. Although Safavi's group was crushed and he was executed after a failed attempt on the life of the prime minister in 1955, several of its former members would become prominent among those who lined up with the Ayatollah Khomeini (1900–89) to mastermind the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Khomeini himself first took a political stand in 1962, joining other ayatollahs to oppose the shah's plans for land reform and female suffrage. At this point, Khomeini was not a revolutionary but a traditionalist alarmed by modernization and anxious to defend the privileges of his clerical caste. When his followers staged an urban uprising in June 1963, he was arrested and subsequently exiled, first to Turkey, then to Iraq. The turning point came in 1970, when Khomeini, still in Iraq, became one of the very few Shi'ite religious authorities to switch from traditionalism to totalitarianism. Much like Mawdudi,¹³ he called for a revolution to create an Islamic state, and inspired by Qutb, he condemned all non-theocratic regimes as idolatrous. His followers in Iran were active in Islamist cultural associations that spread, among others, the ideas of Qutb and Mawdudi. Qutb's ideology was used by Khomeini's students to recapture for the Islamist movement a whole generation influenced by the world's predominant revolutionary culture—Marxism-Leninism.

Khomeini became a major figure in the history of Islamist terrorism because he was the first truly eminent religious figure to lend it his authority. For despite all its influence on the young, Islamism before the Iranian Revolution was a marginal heterodoxy. Qutb and Mawdudi were theological dabblers whom Sunni scholars had refuted and dismissed. Even the Muslim Brothers had officially rejected Qutb's ideas. As an established clerical scholar, Khomeini gave modern Islamist totalitarianism a religious respectability that it had sorely lacked.

Once in power, the onetime opponent of land reform and women's suffrage became a "progressivist," launching a massive program of nationalization and expropriation and recruiting women for campaigns of revolutionary propaganda and mobilization. The Leninist characteristics of his rule—his policy of terror, his revolutionary tribunals and militias, his administrative purges, his cultural revolution, and his accommodating attitude toward the USSR—alienated the majority of his fellow clerics but also gained him the active support of the Moscow-aligned Iranian Communist Party, which from 1979 to 1983 put itself at the service of the new theocracy.

Khomeini's revolution was not an exclusively Shi'ite phenomenon. Not accidentally, one of the first foreign visitors who showed up to congratulate him was the Sunni Islamist Mawdudi; before long, Qutb's face was on an Iranian postage stamp. Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, translated Qutb into Persian.¹⁴ Khomeini's own interest in creating an "Islamist International"—it would later be known by the hijacked Koranic term Hezbollah ("party of God")—was apparent as early as August 1979.

The Islamist "Comintern"

As these ties suggest, Islamism is a self-consciously pan-Muslim phenomenon. It is a waste of time and effort to try to distinguish Islamist terror groups from one another according to their alleged differences along a series of traditional religious, ethnic, or political divides (Shi'ite versus Sunni, Persian versus Arab, and so on). The reason is simple: *In the eyes of the Islamist groups themselves, their common effort to strike at the West while seizing control of the Muslim world is immeasurably more important than whatever might be seen as "dividing" them from one another.*

The Lebanese-based, Iranian-supported Hezbollah is a case in point. Its Iranian founder was a hardcore Khomeini aide who drew his inspiration from a young Egyptian Islamist—an engineer by training, not a theologian—who was the first to politicize what had been a purely religious term. A closer look at the organization reveals the strong influence of Marxism-Leninism on the ideology of its founders and leadership. The group's current leader, Mohammad Hosein Fadlallah, influenced by Marx's and Nietzsche's theories on violence,¹⁵ has openly advocated terrorist methods and tactical alliances with leftist organizations.¹⁶ Hezbollah is a successful creation of the Islamist "Comintern." "We must," says Sheikh Fadlallah, "swear allegiance to the leader of the [Iranian] revolution and to the revolutionaries as to God himself," because "this revolution is the will of God."¹⁷ One indication of the extent of this allegiance is the fact that all the negotiations over the fate of the hostages held in Lebanon ended up being carried out by Tehran. Similarly, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards boasted about having sponsored the attack against French and American peacekeeping forces in Lebanon.¹⁸ Hezbollah's chief mili-

tary planner, Imad Mughaniyyah, is an Arab who operates from Iran. Western intelligence agencies suspect that Hezbollah has been working with bin Laden on international operations since the early 1990s.¹⁹ Hezbollah's terrorist network in Lebanon contains both Shi'ite and Sunni groups, and there is also a Saudi Arabian wing that was involved in the Khobar Towers bombing, which killed 19 U.S. troops in 1996.

Also inspired by the Iranian Revolution was the independent Sunni terrorist network that later became the basis of al-Qaeda. The Tehran regime began forming propaganda organs to sway opinion among Sunni religious authorities as early as 1982.²⁰ Among the supranational institutions created was the World Congress of Friday Sermons Imams, which at one time had a presence in no fewer than 40 countries. The overarching goal of these efforts has been to mobilize the "Islam of the people" against the "reactionary Islam of the establishment."²¹ For a variety of reasons this network has remained loosely organized, but all of its branches spring from and are fed by the same ideological taproot.

The influence of Iran's Islamist revolution was also cited by the members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad who gunned down President Anwar Sadat in October 1981. Their theoretician was an engineer, Abdessalam Faraj, who was also fond of quoting Qutb to justify terror.²² The conspirators—including the junior army officers who did the actual shooting—were inspired by the Iranian model, and expected the death of Sadat to trigger a mass uprising that would replay in Cairo the same sort of events which had taken place two years earlier in Tehran²³ (where the Iranian authorities would subsequently name a street after Sadat's killer). Among those imprisoned in connection with the plot was a Cairo physician named Ayman al-Zawahiri. He became Egyptian Islamic Jihad's leader after serving his three-year prison term, met bin Laden in 1985, and then joined him in Sudan in the early 1990s. Zawahiri, who would become al-Qaeda's top operational planner, is reported to have said publicly that Osama is "the new Che Guevara."²⁴

The Islamization of the Palestinian question is also partly due to Khomeini's influence on the Palestinian branch of Islamic Jihad. Its founder was another physician, this one named Fathi Shqaqi. His 1979 encomium *Khomeini: The Islamic Alternative* was dedicated to both the Iranian ruler and Hassan al-Banna ("the two men of this century"). The first press run of 10,000 sold out in a few days.²⁵ Shqaqi, who was of course a Sunni, had nonetheless traveled to Tehran to share the Friday sermon podium with Ali Khomeini, denouncing the Mideast peace process and accusing Yasser Arafat of treason.²⁶

Distorting Islam's History and Teachings

As these examples show, such distinctions as may exist among these terrorist groups are overshadowed by their readiness to coalesce and collaborate according to a common set of ideological beliefs. These

beliefs are properly called “Islamist” rather than “Islamic” because they are actually in conflict with Islam—a conflict that we must not allow to be obscured by the terrorists’ habit of commandeering Islamic religious terminology and injecting it with their own distorted content. One illustration is the Islamists’ interpretation of the *hijra*—Mohammed’s journey, in September 622 C.E., from Mecca to Medina to found the first fully realized and autonomous Islamic community (*umma*). Despite a wealth of historical and doctrinal evidence to the contrary, half-educated Islamists insist on portraying this journey as a revolutionary rupture with existing society that licenses their desire to excommunicate contemporary Muslim societies in favor of their own radically utopian vision.

The Islamic Republic of Iran also rests on heterodoxy, in this case Khomeini’s novel and even idiosyncratic theory of the absolute power of the single, supreme Islamic jurispudent (*faqih*). It was not a coincidence that one of the first uprisings against Khomeini’s regime took place under the inspiration of a leading ayatollah, Shariat Madari.²⁷ Officials of the regime have admitted that most Iranian clerics have always taken a wary view of Khomeinism. It is important to realize that the religious references which Khomeini used to justify his rule were literally the same as those invoked a century earlier by an eminent ayatollah who was arguing for the legitimacy of parliamentarism and popular sovereignty on Islamic grounds.²⁸ Koranic verses lend themselves to many different and even contradictory interpretations. It is thus to something other than Islamic religious sources that we must look if we want to understand Islamism and the war that it wages on its own society, a war in which international terrorism is only one front.

In a brief article on bin Laden’s 1998 declaration of *jihad* against the United States, Bernard Lewis showed brilliantly how bin Laden travestied matters not only of fact (for instance, by labeling the invited U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia a “crusader” invasion) but also of Islamic doctrine, by calling for the indiscriminate butchery of any and all U.S. citizens, wherever they can be found in the world. Reminding his readers that Islamic law (*shari’a*) holds *jihad* to be nothing but a regular war and subject to the rules that limit such conflicts, Lewis concluded, “At no point do the basic texts of Islam enjoin terrorism and murder. At no point do they even consider the random slaughter of uninvolved bystanders.”²⁹

What gives force to the terrorist notion of *jihad* invented by the Iranians and later embraced by bin Laden is not its Koranic roots—there are none—but rather the brute success of terrorist acts. Bin Laden has spoken with particular admiration of the Iranian-sponsored suicide truck bombing that killed 241 U.S. Marines and others in Beirut on 23 October 1983, precipitating the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon.³⁰ Bin Laden was also not the first to think of setting up training camps for international terrorists—the Tehran authorities were there before him.³¹

A Friday sermon given in 1989 by one of these authorities, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then president of the Islamic Parliament, reveals better than any other the logic of Islamist terrorism. Attacking the existence of Israel as another front in the pervasive war of unbelief (*kufir*) against Islam, Rafsanjani added:

If for each Palestinian killed today in Palestine five Americans, English, or French were executed, they would not commit such acts anymore. . . . [T]here are Americans everywhere in the world. . . . [They] protect Israel. Does their blood have any value? Scare them outside Palestine, so that they don't feel safe. . . . There are a hundred thousand Palestinians in a country. They are educated, and they work. . . . [T]he factories that serve the enemies of Palestine function thanks to the work of the Palestinians. Blow up the factory. Where you work, you can take action. . . . Let them call you terrorists. . . . They [the "imperialism of information and propaganda"] commit crimes and call it human rights. We call it the defense of rights and of an oppressed people. . . . They will say the president of the Parliament officially incites to terror. . . . [L]et them say it.³²

There is no reference here to religion; Rafsanjani's appeal is purely political. The West's offense he calls human rights; against it he urges Muslims to wield terror as the best weapon for defending the rights of an oppressed people. Rafsanjani, moreover, proudly commends "terror" by name, using the English word and not a Persian or Arabic equivalent. Thus he employs the very term that Lenin had borrowed from *la Terreur* of the French Revolution. The line from the guillotine and the Cheka to the suicide bomber is clear.

With this in mind, let us look for a moment at the French Revolution, where the modern concept of political terror was invented, to find the explanation that the Islamic tradition cannot give. When it announced its policy of terror in September 1793, the "virtuous minority" which then ran the revolutionary government of France was declaring war on its own society. At the heart of this war was a clash between two understandings of "the people" in whose name this government claimed to rule. One was a group of 25 million actually existing individuals, each endowed with inherent rights. The other was an essentially ideological construct, an abstraction, an indivisible and mystical body, its power absolute. The Terror of the French Revolution was neither a mistake nor an unfortunate accident; it was meant to purify this mystical body of what the terrorist elite regarded as corrupting influences, among which they numbered the notion that individual human beings had unalienable rights.³³

The spokesmen of the Islamist revolution echo the terrorists of Jacobin France. The denigration of human rights marks the spot where the internal war on Muslim society meets the terrorist war against the West. Suffice it to hear bin Laden's comments on the destruction of the World Trade Center: "Those awesome symbolic towers that speak of liberty, human rights, and humanity have been destroyed. They have gone up in

smoke.”³⁴ Every Islamist terror campaign against Westerners during the last 20 years has had as its cognate an Islamist effort to tyrannize over a Muslim population somewhere in the world. Think of the ordeal to which the Taliban and al-Qaeda subjected the people of Afghanistan, or of what ordinary Algerians suffered during the savage Islamist civil wars of the 1990s. Or think of the state terror that daily labors to strangle any hope for recognition of human rights in Iran. To explore fully this correlation between terror against the West and tyranny against Muslims would take a separate essay. Yet we can get an idea of its nature by considering the first instance of Islamist terrorism against the United States, the 1979 hostage-taking in Tehran.

Holding Democracy Hostage to Terror

As they released the hostages in January 1981, the Tehran authorities crowed over their victory, which Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Rajai called “the greatest political gain in the social history of the world” and an act that “had forced the greatest satanic power to its knees.” At first glance this claim might seem foolish, for the United States had said no to the revolutionary government’s demands to hand over the shah and unfreeze Iranian assets. But a closer look shows that the Iranian Islamists had in fact scored a big political and ideological victory over both the United States and their domestic opponents, and thus had ample cause for jubilation.

The seizure of the U.S. embassy took place at a time when Khomeini and his allies had not yet consolidated their tyrannical regime. An Assembly of Experts was drafting the constitution of the Islamic Republic. Opposition was gaining strength daily in religious as well as in moderate secular circles. The Marxist-Leninist left, angered by a ban on its press, was growing restive. Open rebellions were breaking out in sensitive border regions populated by ethnic Kurds and Azeris. By sending in its cadres of radical students to take over the U.S. embassy and hold its staff hostage, the regime cut through the Gordian knot of these challenges at a single blow and even put itself in a position to ram through its widely criticized Constitution. Rafsanjani’s assessment of what the act meant is instructive:

In the first months of the revolution, the Washington White House decided in favor of a coup d’état in Iran. The idea was to infiltrate Iranian groups and launch a movement to annihilate the revolution. But the occupation of the embassy and the people’s assault against the U.S.A. neutralized this plan, pushing the U.S. into a defensive stand.³⁵

One could describe this version of the facts as a parody: The U.S. government in 1979 clearly had neither the will nor the ability to stage a coup against the Islamic Republic. But totalitarians typically speak an

esoteric language of their own devising. Those who administered the Terror in revolutionary France painted some of their country's best-known republicans with the label "monarchist" before sending them off to be guillotined. The Bolsheviks called striking workers and the sailors of Kronstadt "bandits" and "counterrevolutionaries" before slaughtering them. In 1979, promoting human rights was a prominent aspect of how the United States described its foreign policy. By Rafsanjani's logic, therefore, any Iranian group that spoke of human rights was thereby revealing itself as a tool of the United States.

And indeed, as muddled negotiations over the hostages dragged on, the administration of President Jimmy Carter dropped any talk of supporting democracy in Iran³⁶—the very cause for which Carter had taken the risk of ending U.S. support for the shah. Meanwhile, the revolutionary regime began using the Stalinist tactic of claiming that anyone who spoke in favor of a more representative government was really a U.S. agent.³⁷ With the hostage crisis, the Islamist regime was able to make anti-Americanism such a leading theme that Iranian Marxists rallied to its support, while Moscow extended its tacit protection to the new theocracy.

After the failure of the U.S. military's "Desert One" rescue attempt on 25 April 1980 and eight more months of negotiations, the United States at last succeeded in obtaining the release of the hostages. To do so, it had to agree to recognize the legitimacy of the Iranian revolutionary regime, and it had to promise not to file any complaints against Iran before international authorities, despite the gross violations of human rights and international law that had occurred. Though these concessions may have appeared necessary at the time, in retrospect we can see that they emboldened the Islamists to sink to new levels of hatred and contempt for the West and its talk of human rights. For had not the revolutionary students and clerics in Tehran forced the Great Satan to abandon its principles and brought it to its knees?

The terrorists accurately assessed the extent of their victory and drew conclusions from it. They used terror to achieve their goal, and upon the continued use of terror their survival depends. "[America] is on the defensive. If tomorrow it feels safe, then it will think to implement its imperialistic projects."³⁸ Among these projects are human rights, which a representative of the Islamic Republic denounced before the UN Human Rights Committee as an "imperialist myth."³⁹

From the taking of the hostages in Tehran in 1979 until the terrorist attacks of last September, Western policy makers too often implicitly downgraded the claims of justice and shirked their duty both to their own citizens and to the cause of human rights by refusing to pursue the terrorists with any real determination. Considerations of "pragmatism" and "prudence" were put forward to justify a sellout of justice which, in one of the cruelest ironies revealed by the harsh light of September 11, proved not to have been prudent at all.

Since the impunity granted to the hostage-takers of Tehran, terrorist outrages have increased both in frequency and in scale. In addition to all the questions raised about security measures, intelligence failures, accountability in foreign-policy decision making, and the like, the atrocity of September 11 also forces citizens of democratic countries to ask themselves how strongly they are committed to democratic values. Their enemies may believe in a chimera, but it is one for which they have shown themselves all too ready to die. In the mirror of the terrorists' sacrifice, the citizens of the free world are called to examine their consciences; they must reevaluate the nature of their loyalty to fragile and imperfect democracy. In particular, the strongly solidaristic networks that the Islamist totalitarians have created should make citizens in democratic societies ask how much they and their governments have done to help prodemocracy activists who have been persecuted for years in Iran, in Algeria, in Afghanistan, in Sudan, and elsewhere. Unarmed, they stand on the front lines of the struggle against terror and tyranny, and they deserve support. Here is a moral, political, and even philosophical challenge upon which the minds and hearts of the West should focus.

Whither the Muslim World?

Islamist terror poses a different but no less grave problem for those of us (including the authors of this essay) who come from Islamic countries, and it carries a special challenge for Muslim intellectuals. Public opinion in the Muslim world has largely—if perhaps too quietly—condemned the massacres of September 11. In Iran, young people poured spontaneously into the streets, braving arrest and police violence in order to hold candlelight vigils for the victims. But there were also outbursts of celebration in some Muslim countries, and sizeable anti-American demonstrations in Pakistan. Perhaps more disturbing still have been the persistent and widespread rumors going around Muslim societies that somehow an Israeli conspiracy was behind the attack. The force and pervasiveness of this rumor are symptoms of a collective flight from an uncontrollable reality. It is true that the Palestinian question is a painful and complicated one that requires an equitable solution. But it is equally true that reaching for foreign conspiracies has become an easy way of evading responsibility for too many of us from Muslim countries.

For the last several centuries, the Islamic world has been undergoing a traumatizing encounter with the West. Since this encounter began, our history has been a story of irreversible modernization, but also of utter domination on the one side, and humiliation and resentment on the other. To Muslim minds the West and its ways have become a powerful myth—evil, impenetrable, and incomprehensible. Whatever the Western world's unfairness toward Muslims, it remains true that Western scholars have at least made the effort to learn about and understand the Islamic world.

But sadly, the great and brilliant works of the West's "Orientalists" have found no echo in a Muslim school of "Occidentalism."

We have been lacking the ability or the will to open up to others. We have opted for an easy solution, that of disguising in the clothes of Islam imported Western intellectual categories and concepts. In doing so we have not only failed to grasp the opportunity to understand the West, we have also lost the keys to our own culture. Otherwise, how could a degenerate Leninism aspire today to pass itself off as the true expression of a great monotheistic religion? The Islamists see themselves as bold warriors against modernity and the West, but in fact it is they who have imported and then dressed up in Islamic-sounding verbiage some of the most dubious ideas that ever came out of the modern West, ideas which now—after much death and suffering—the West itself has generally rejected. Had we not become so alien to our own cultural heritage, our theologians and intellectuals might have done a better job of exposing the antinomy between what the Islamists say and what Islam actually teaches. They might have more effectively undercut the terrorists' claim to be the exclusive and immediate representatives of God on earth, even while they preach a doctrine that does nothing but restore human sacrifice, as if God had never sent the angel to stop Abraham from slaying his son.

Our incapacity to apprehend reality lies at the root of our paranoia. If we were to take a clear and careful look at the West, we would see that it draws its strength from its capacity for introspection and its intransigent self-criticism. We would know that Western culture has never stopped calling on us, on the figure of the stranger, to help it understand itself and fight its vices. When it could not find the other, it invented it: Thomas More imagined a faraway island called Utopia to mirror the social problems of his time; Michel de Montaigne couched his criticisms of French politics in the form of a conversation with an Indian chief from Brazil; and Montesquieu invented letters from a Persian tourist to denounce the vices of Europe.

Had we had our own eminent experts on Western civilization, we might know that the West is a diverse, plural, and complex entity. Its political culture has produced horrors but also institutions that protect human dignity. One of these horrors was the imperialism imposed on Muslim and other lands, but even that did as much harm to the Europeans themselves as it did to us, as anyone familiar with the casualty figures from the First World War will know. Our experts might have helped us understand that Qutb and Khomeini's denunciations of human rights were remarkably similar to Pope Pius VI's denunciation of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789. We might have grasped that, not long ago, Westerners faced the same obstacles that we face today on the road to democracy. Citizens in the West fought for their freedoms; in this fight they lost neither their souls nor their religion. We too must roll up our

sleeves to fight for freedom, remembering that we are first and foremost free and responsible human beings whom God has endowed with dignity.

NOTES

We would like to thank Hormoz Hekmat for his useful comments and critiques and Laith Kubba for providing some useful information.

1. Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 133–34.

2. On the heterodoxy of the Islamists' references to Muslim jurist Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), see Olivier Carré, *Mystique et politique: Lecture révolutionnaire du Coran par Sayyid Qutb, Frère musulman radical* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 16–17. On Ibn Taymiyya's theology and life, see Henri Laoust, *Pluralisme dans l'Islam* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1983).

3. This account of the Saleh case is based on reports in *Le Monde* (Paris), 8 and 10 April 1992.

4. For an overview of the career of Islamist terror networks, see Xavier Raufer, *La Nebuleuse: Le terrorisme du Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Fayard, 1987); Roland Jacquard, *Au nom d'Oussama Ben Laden: Dossier secret sur le terroriste le plus recherché du monde* (Paris: Jean Picollec, 2001); Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (Rocklin, Calif.: Prima, 1999); Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); and Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam, *Usama Bin Laden's al-Qaida: Profile of a Terrorist Network* (New York: Transnational Publishers, 2001).

5. To confront Western colonialism, Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars such as Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani of Iran and Muhammad Abduh of Egypt concluded that a reformation and a new interpretation of Islam were needed in Muslim societies. The reforms that they advocated were aimed at reconciling Islam and modernity. They sought to promote individual freedom, social justice, and political liberalism. After the First World War, however, this movement was succeeded by one that was hostile to political liberalism. On Afghani, see Nikki K. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). On Abduh, see Yvonne Haddad, "Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform," in Ali Rahnama, ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed, 1994), 31–63.

6. This section draws on David Dean Commins, "Hassan al-Banna (1906–49)," in Ali Rahnama, ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, 146–47; as well as Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). See also Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

7. Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 29.

8. The widespread but mistaken impression that a Shi'ite cult of martyrdom serves as a religious inspiration for suicide attacks is one of the illusions about themselves that the terrorists skillfully cultivate. It is true that Shi'ites revere Hussein (d. 680 C.E.), the third Imam and a grandson of the Prophet, as a holy martyr. Yet Shi'ite teaching also enjoins the avoidance of martyrdom, even recommending *taqieh* ("hiding one's faith") as a way of saving one's life from murderous persecutors. Moreover, Sunnis are not noted for devotion to Hussein, and yet when it comes to suicide attacks, there is little difference between the Sunnis of al-Qaeda and the mostly Shi'ite cadres of Hezbollah. There are striking similarities between the Islamist justification for violence and martyrdom

and the discourse of German and Italian Marxist terrorists from the 1970s. On this subject see Philippe Raynaud, "Les origines intellectuelles du terrorisme," in François Furet et al., eds., *Terrorisme et démocratie* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), 65ff.

9. On Mawdudi, see Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

10. Olivier Carré, *Mystique et politique*, 206–7.

11. Muhammad Qutb, Sayyid Qutb's brother, was among the Muslim Brothers who were welcomed in Saudi Arabia. He was allowed to supervise the publication and distribution of his brother's works, and became ideologically influential in his own right: The official justification for the Saudi penal code uses his definition of secular and liberal societies as a "new era of ignorance." Exiled Muslim Brothers became influential in Saudi Arabia. Wahabism, the intolerant and fanatical brand of Islam that prevails in Saudi Arabia, was not in its origins a modern totalitarian ideology, but it provides fertile ground for the dissemination of terrorist ideology and facilitates the attraction of young Saudis to terrorist groups. See Olivier Carré, *L'utopie islamique dans l'Orient arabe* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences politiques, 1991), 112–14; and Gilles Kepel, *Jihad*, 72–75.

12. Banna's followers recalled that he often said, "Each of the four schools [of Islam] is respectable," and urged, "Let us cooperate in those things on which we can agree and be lenient in those on which we cannot." Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 217.

13. Mawdudi, *The Process of Islamic Revolution* (Lahore, 1955).

14. See Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 246.

15. Cited in Olivier Carré, *L'utopie islamique dans l'Orient arabe*, 197.

16. Cited in Olivier Carré, *L'utopie islamique dans l'Orient arabe*, 231–32.

17. Olivier Carré, *L'utopie islamique dans l'Orient arabe*, 232.

18. The then-head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Mohsen Rafiqdoust, said that "both the TNT and the ideology which in one blast sent to hell 400 officers, NCOs, and soldiers at the Marine headquarters have been provided by Iran." *Resalat* (Tehran), 20 July 1987.

19. On 22 March 1998, the *Times of London* reported that bin Laden and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had signed a pact the previous February 16 to consolidate their operations in Albania and Kosovo. Roland Jacquard adds that in September 1999, the Turkish intelligence services learned of an Islamist group financed by bin Laden in the Iranian city of Tabriz. See Roland Jacquard, *Au nom d'Oussama Ben Laden*, 287–88.

20. The first conference on the unification of Islamist movements was organized under Iranian auspices in January 1982. See the speeches of Khamenei and Mohammad Khatami (who is now the elected president of the Islamic Republic) in *Etela'at* (Tehran), 9 January 1982.

21. Xavier Rauffer, *La Nebuleuse*, 175.

22. Charles Tripp, "Sayyid Qutb: The Political Vision," in Ali Rahnama, ed., *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, 178–79.

23. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad*, 122–23.

24. Roland Jacquard, *Au nom d'Oussama Ben Laden*, 76.
25. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad*, 187 and 579.
26. As reported in *Jomhuri-e Islami* (Tehran), 5 March 1994 (14 esfand 1372), 14 and 2.
27. Reported in the daily *Khalq-e Mosalman*, 4 and 9 December 1979.
28. M.H. Nad'ni, *Tanbih al-Omma va Tanzih al-mella* 5th ed. (Tehran, 1979), 75–85.
29. Bernard Lewis, "License to Kill: Usama bin Ladin's Declaration of Jihad," *Foreign Affairs* 77 (November–December 1998): 19. Bin Laden's declaration of *jihad* mentions Ibn Taymiyya's authority and yet clearly contradicts the latter's ideas on *jihad*. Ibn Taymiyya explicitly forbids the murder of civilians and submits *jihad* to strict rules and regulations. See Henri Laoust, *Le traité de droit public d'Ibn Taimiya* (annotated translation of *Siyasa shar'iyah*) (Beirut, 1948), 122–35.
30. See "Declaration of war against the Americans occupying the land of the two holy places: A Message from Usama Bin Muhammad bin Laden unto his Muslim Brethren all over the world generally and in the Arab Peninsula specifically" (23 August 1996), in Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam, *Usama Bin Laden's al-Qaida*, 13.
31. In 1989, the vice-president of Parliament, Hojatol-Eslam Karoubi, proposed the creation of training camps for the "anti-imperialist struggle in the region." Quoted in the daily *Jomhuri-e Eslami* (Tehran), 7 May 1989, 9.
32. *Jomhuri-e Eslami* (Tehran), 7 May 1989, 11.
33. In this connection, it is worth noting that after the end of the Terror, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was not officially restored to constitutional status in France until 1946.
34. Howard Kurtz, "Interview Sheds Light on Bin Laden's Views," *Washington Post*, 7 February 2002, A12. Bin Laden gave this interview to Tayseer Alouni of the Arabic-language satellite television network al-Jazeera in October 2001.
35. Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Enqelabe va defa'e Moqadass* (Revolution and its sacred defense) (Tehran: Press of the Foundation of 15 Khordad, 1989), 63–64.
36. Russell Leigh Moses, *Freeing the Hostages: Reexamining U.S.-Iranian Negotiations and Soviet Policy, 1979–1981* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 174–75.
37. In an interview that ran in the Tehran daily *Jomhuri-e Eslami* on 4 November 1981 to mark the second anniversary of the embassy seizure, student-radical leader Musavi Khomeiniha remarked that the neutralization of Iranian liberals and democrats was the hostage-taking's most important result.
38. Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Enqelabe va defa'e Moqadass*, 64.
39. *Amnesty International Newsletter*, September 1982. The representative was Hadi Khosroshahi, another translator of Sayyid Qutb.