

Religion and the Global War on Terrorism

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As made clear by the experience of September 11 and its aftermath, the United States is operating at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to dealing with conflict that involves a significant religious component. Indeed, the principal reason religious terrorism poses such a difficult challenge is because we as a nation-state have virtually no capability to understand this phenomenon, let alone deal with it. For most of our country's existence, religion has effectively been off the policymaker's screen—a victim of enlightenment prejudice and its accompanying assumption that religion would have a declining influence in the affairs of state. Tied closely to this has been our ongoing commitment to the rational-actor model of decision-making, which effectively excludes religion as an irrational factor. As a result and as made abundantly clear by our experience in Iraq, the United States has little, if any, ability to deal with religious differences in a hostile setting. Nor does it have any ability to counter demagogues like Bin Laden or Milosovic, who manipulate religion for their own purposes.

This lack of capability is not merely a function of purposeful neglect. It also relates to very real operational constraints imposed by our legal separation of church and state. For example, there were instances early on in Iraq where investments in the religious arena could have helped enormously with the security challenge, but those investments were not made for fear of violating the establishment clause relating to church/state relations.

It is also sadly the case that we have let our commitment to separation of church and state serve as a crutch for not doing our homework to understand how religion informs the world views and political aspirations of others (who don't similarly subscribe to the idea of separation). With the wake-up call of September 11, however, religion is finally moving into our policy calculations as a defining element of national security and with it accompanying concerns about the prospective marriage of religious extremism with weapons of mass destruction.

In confronting the challenge of religious terrorism, it first becomes necessary to understand

how it works. After all, most religions at their core subscribe to laudable principles of neighborly concern, the betterment of humanity, and one's relation with one's Creator (for those religions that profess a Creator). So, why is it that religion is so easily co-opted by power politics or the forces of nationalism? In most instances, co-option takes the form of a badge of identity or a mobilizing vehicle for nationalist or ethnic passions. At times, though, it assumes a more central role, more often than not as a result of manipulating holy scripture. For example, how is it that Bin Laden can claim religious legitimacy for suicidal attacks against civilians when the Qur'an specifically prohibits both suicide and attacks against innocents? Bin Laden answers this question by noting that:

It is commanded by our religion and intellect that the oppressed have a right to return the aggression. ... Is it in any way rational to expect that after America has attacked us for more than half a century, that we will then leave her in security and peace? You may then dispute that all the above does not justify aggression against civilians, for crimes they did not commit and offenses in which they did not partake.

Bin Laden justifies such attacks on the basis that the American people choose their government through their own free will—a choice that stems from their agreement with its policies—and that they pay the taxes which "fund the planes that bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that strike and destroy our homes in Palestine, the armies which occupy our lands in the Arabian Gulf and the fleets which ensure the blockade of Iraq. So the American people are the ones who fund the attacks against us."

On a related note and in his self-appointed role as a religious spokesman, Bin Laden cites verse 89 of Surah 4 in the Qur'an as a call to violence: "Slay the enemy wherever you find them." In isolation, this verse seemingly promotes a spirit of violence. However, if one continues on to verse 90, one finds the opposite to be the case: "If they leave you alone and offer to make peace with you, God does not allow you to harm them." Muslim extremists purposely overlook this second half of the admonition, and in so doing compromise Qur'anic intent.

There is no end to the verses al Qaeda can find to meet its needs, just as officials of the Dutch Reformed Church were able to do in justifying apartheid in South Africa or Jewish zealots do today in rationalizing their misdeeds in the West Bank. Sadly, the task of perversion is made all the easier by the impoverished circumstances that prevail in most

Muslim countries. In South Asia, for example, where the Washington-based International Center for Religion and Diplomacy has teamed up with indigenous partners to reform the madrasas (religious schools), including those that gave rise to the Taliban, it is not unusual to find students who attend these schools solely because they are provided free room and board. Nor is it unusual to find students who have memorized the Qur'an from cover to cover but who are absolutely clueless as to what it means. Because their first language is Urdu or Pashto (or some equivalent) and the Qur'an is in Arabic, it often becomes a matter of mindlessly memorizing what is no more than a medley of strange sounds. (Although students typically receive some exposure to Arabic, it is by no means sufficient to provide Qur'anic understanding). Then when the local militant comes along and misappropriates a few verses of scripture to enlist new recruits, these students, who have no ability to question or challenge, become easy prey.

When religious scripture is retrieved selectively and applied situationally, it thus becomes a powerful tool for justifying the unjustifiable. This is crucial for religious terrorists where religious legitimacy trumps all other considerations. If they can point to a "precedent" in sacred scripture or tradition, opponents will find it difficult to dispute the morality of their actions, despite their obvious contradiction with the overarching spirit of the religion. This is true of all major world religions, as illustrated by the bitter 20-year conflict in Sri Lanka where the peaceful tenets of Buddhism have been distorted to justify an endless stream of military atrocities.

So why doesn't someone set the record straight? Though long overdue, there are signs that this is finally beginning to happen. A poignant example took place several years ago in Yemen, one of the most ignored, yet important fronts in the global war on terrorism. In late 2002, a Yemeni judge, Hamoud al-Hitar, announced to five captured al Qaeda members that, if they could convince him and four of his friends that their (the captives') ideas were consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an, the judge and his colleagues would join their struggle. If, on the other hand, they could convince the terrorists that they were wrong, then the terrorists would have to renounce violence.

This high-stakes theological poker was readily accepted by the prisoners, who were supremely confident in the soundness of their interpretations. With the help of Judge Hitar and his team, however, they came to see just how wrong they had been. Two years later, those five prisoners, and more than three hundred others like them had been released after

engaging in such a dialogue. According to the Judge, and as affirmed by European diplomats, the approach was highly successful, at least until recidivism began to set in as later prisoners abused the opportunity by faking their newly professed convictions. Early on, however, some of the former militants led authorities to weapons caches and even provided advice on tracking former terrorist colleagues. In one astounding example, a reformed militant provided the tip to authorities that resulted in the death of the top al Qaeda commander in Yemen by a U.S. air strike.

As evidenced by the Yemeni experiment, these sorts of organic approaches may well hold the key to dealing with the plague of religious terrorism. At the same time, though, there are steps we can take institutionally to enhance our own national effectiveness in dealing with this problem. First, one needs to bring to bear those existing assets that are relevant to this new challenge. Foremost among such assets is the chaplain corps of the U.S. military services. Historically, the role of military chaplains has been one of addressing the spiritual needs of the men and women of their respective commands. With additional training and expanded rules of engagement, however, they could also enhance their command's ability to deal with the religious dimensions of military operations.

Through greater and more effective interaction with local religious communities and nongovernmental organizations, chaplains could develop an improved understanding of the religious and cultural nuances at play and help identify incipient threats to stability posed by religious frictions or ethno-religious demagogues. At times, they might provide a reconciling influence in addressing misunderstandings or difficulties that may arise between their commands and local communities. Finally, they could provide informed and politically sensitive advice to their commanders on the religious and cultural implications of operational decisions that are about to be taken or that should be taken. In other words, in addition to their ongoing function of addressing human casualties after conflict has erupted, chaplains could and should be viewed as important tools for preventing its eruption in the first instance.

In 2001, the previously mentioned International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) led an effort to train all U.S. Navy, Marine, and Coast Guard chaplains in a nuanced examination of religion and statecraft, with an eye toward playing the kinds of roles suggested above. The purpose was to enhance the conflict prevention capabilities of the sea-service commands (i.e. those commands that are typically at the cutting edge of our

overseas involvements). As might be predicted, about a third of the chaplains were enthused about the expanded role, and another third were quite willing to give it a try. Although the remaining third weren't interested at all, the fact remains that those colleagues who were, constitute a formidable capability that could be brought to bear to good effect. All that is required is for the military services to expand the chaplains' rules of engagement to encompass these kinds of activities (in addition to what they are already doing). As a resource already-in-being, the only costs involved would be those associated with the additional training that would be required. Further, any constraints relating to separation of church and state would largely be finessed, since the chaplains already deal with both.

It is interesting to note that in the Algerian War for Independence, when French troops were in a tight situation, it was their military chaplains who they sent out to negotiate with the Muslim insurgents. Even the authors of secularism understood the need to deal with religious imperatives.

A second asset that can be brought to bear in situations where political considerations may (or may not) preclude effective government intervention is the trans-national capability of NGOs (non-governmental organizations). Illustrative of the potential these NGOs have is the role that ICRD has played in the Sudan over the past seven years. At a time when U.S. policy toward Sudan was one of isolation and demonization, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy set out to establish relationships of trust with the Islamic regime in the North and from that vantage point inspire them to take steps toward peace that they would not otherwise take.

In addition to assisting behind the scenes to persuade the Bush Administration to lean on both sides to force an end to Sudan's long-running civil war between the Islamic North and the Christian/African Traditionalist South, ICRD undertook two institutional initiatives to help ensure that any peace that eventually materialized would be lasting in nature. (More than two million people paid with their lives because an earlier peace brokered in 1972 subsequently broke down). Chief among these was the establishment in 2003 of the Sudan Inter-religious Council (SIRC), which for the first time in that country's history, provided a forum where key Muslim and Christian religious leaders could come together on a monthly basis to work out their problems. As an independent body, the SIRC has as one of its principal objectives the task of holding the Sudanese government accountable for its religious policies. In just the first few months of its existence, the Council was able to

advance the interests of non-Muslims well beyond what the churches had been able to achieve working on their own over the previous ten years.

The second institutional initiative involved the creation in 2004 of a Committee to Protect Religious Freedom (CPRF), which serves under the Council's auspices. Until this Committee's establishment, there was no mechanism for investigating alleged violations of religious freedom to determine the truth of what had actually taken place. Nor was there any capability to rectify problems once the facts became known. The CPRF has been bringing accountability to this highly sensitive area through the use of fact-finding teams.

It is significant that these two independent bodies were formed in a totalitarian context. Not only did the Islamic regime permit their establishment, but it also agreed to give serious consideration to their recommendations. To date, the government has honored that commitment, even though doing so has required more than \$500,000 in land and funding to support the building of new churches and to provide restitution for the past seizure of church properties. All of this is notwithstanding the intra-Muslim conflict that continues to rage in the Western state of Darfur. Even there, however, the SIRC in its capacity as a reputable reconciling body, convened a major conference on Darfur (a conflict that some would say is beyond its purview); and they did so against the wishes of the government.

Beyond strategically redeploying existing assets to counter religious terrorism, another step that could be taken would involve the development of new capabilities such as the creation of a religion attaché position within the U.S. Foreign Service for assignment to overseas missions in those countries where religion has particular salience. These attachés could help those missions deal more effectively with the complex religious issues that typically get pushed aside by more pressing business. It is the neglect of such issues that has led the United States to uninformed foreign policy choices in such places as Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq.

A cadre of thirty such attachés could cover the globe and greatly enhance our ability to anticipate and deal with religious developments and their prospective impact on the conduct of international relations. It would cost approximately ten million dollars annually to train, deploy, and maintain such a cadre; and while that may sound like a great deal of money, it pales in comparison to the billions that are currently being spent to address symptoms, such as baggage inspectors and the like.

In much the same manner that setting a counter-fire is often the best antidote for a blaze that is raging out of control, so too does religious reconciliation offer a potential counter to religious terrorism. Incorporating religion as part of the solution, however, is not without its challenges. Beyond requiring a special set of skills, the work itself is physically, emotionally, and psychologically draining. And it is by no means risk-free. There are vested interests surrounding all conflicts that want to see those conflicts continue, and more than a few spiritually-motivated peacemakers have paid the ultimate price for their efforts. Despite such risks and whatever other discomfort one may feel in navigating the uncharted waters of spiritual engagement, the stakes are simply too high to refuse the challenge. Time alone will tell if we are up to the task.

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