

“Islamic” Violence in Context and Perspective

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Since the horrific events of September 11, 2001, American understandings of “terrorism” have narrowed, congealed and hardened. Many Americans now regard terrorism as a tactic employed distinctively, if not uniquely, by “jihadist” Muslims. Many have been further persuaded that Islam is an inherently violent ideology, and that, therefore, the term “jihadist” rightly applies to Muslims as a category—all 1.57 billion of them.

One could argue that it was the suicide bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 that first linked Islam inextricably to “terroristic violence” as many Americans see it. But that event occurred in a context that itself calls such a linkage (Islam = religious sanction = terrorism/suicide bombing) into question. To put this into perspective, it helps to consider a recent study of the origins of suicide bombings in the Middle East. An investigation of forty-one such incidents occurring between 1982 and 1986 in Lebanon identified and traced thirty-eight of the perpetrators in detail. Twenty-eight of them were avowedly secularist and most belonged to communist or other leftist Arab organizations; three were Christian, including a young woman who was a primary school teacher; only seven of the thirty-eight were known to have espoused a distinctly religious ideology. These figures apply explicitly only to Lebanon during a four-year period that saw no other such action elsewhere in the Middle East, and they hint at the enormous complexity of the issue and the multiple motivations behind the tactic. In an environment in which the vast majority of Americans assume with certainty that all such actions are purely “religious,” data like this require a

closer look across the board.^[1]

A significant but virtually unnoticed recent report of research on terrorist attacks perpetrated in Europe during 2006 puts the situation in a still more startling light. Europol tallied a total of 498 “terrorist attacks” during all of 2006. Of those, ETA, the Basque separatist organization, was responsible for the highest tally (136), including the only fatal incident of the lot. Islamist groups perpetrated only one such attack, with reports of a total of two foiled Islamist plots filed by England and Denmark.^[2]

Pervasive and persistent identification of terrorist ideologies and deeds almost exclusively with Islam ignores, or denies outright, the shocking global record of mass violence driven by clearly non-Islamic motivations. Take, for instance, the six most glaring instances of genocidal campaigns since just before the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut. Pol Pot’s killing fields yielded the slaughter of nearly two million Cambodians between 1974 and 1979, with no inkling of religious motivation. The very few Muslims involved in Cambodia were among the victims. In central Africa, where Muslims generally account for less than four percent of regional populations, nearly five million people were slaughtered in less than a decade: 800,000 in 100 days in Rwanda and nearly four million in the majority-Christian Democratic Republic of the Congo. In Rwanda Christian-on-Christian violence was in shocking instances facilitated by ministers and priests who lured cowering Tutsi crowds into churches with the promise of sanctuary, only to call in the Hutu executioners.

More ominously, ongoing terrorism virtually unnoticed in Central and East Africa has spilled over into the twenty-first century. The so-called “civil war” in the Congo has seen the massacre of an additional million victims since 2001, with untold scores of thousands raped in systematic application of rebel (or government) policies of terror. I can’t recall a single American “breaking news” story about Congolese renunciation of the terrorism endemic in over more than a decade of suffering. But if Muslims constituted 51 percent, rather than 2 percent, of the population of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Congolese silence would be one more deafening proof that terrorism is just fine with Muslims everywhere.

None of these first three scenarios of large scale terrorism have involved large numbers of Muslims, and in no case have Muslims been among the perpetrators. The other three major examples of genocidal terrorism since the late 1980’s have involved Muslims. But where

Muslims have clearly been responsible for the policies of terror, it is not at all clear that explicitly religious motivation has fueled strategies of mass murder. Saddam's pogroms against parts of Iraq's Kurdish population in 1988 and the Shi'a of the south following Desert Storm in 1991 appear to be examples of Muslim-on-Muslim violence; but even though the unabashedly secularist Saddam invoked Qur'anic imagery when he named his slaughter the "Anfal Campaign," his motives were in no way religious. Even Saddam's closest friends would scarcely have claimed that he honored Islamic values, except cynically and only when it served his political agenda. In Darfur at this moment, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese Muslims are being slaughtered by other Muslims in a strategy that is clearly ethnic and in no way expressly religious.

In the sixth recent genocide, the Serbian attempt to wipe out the Muslim population of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the role of religious imagery was particularly interesting. June 1989 marked the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, and Slobodan Milosevic took the occasion to launch his campaign for a Greater Serbia with a blood-curdling speech dripping with religious rhetoric. Prince Lazar, who had died a glorious martyr's death defending his homeland against the Turks in 1389, was a Christ-figure and the Muslims were the Christ-killers. Milosevic then inferred that he was the new Prince Lazar whose mission was to reverse the score. But few careful observers of the Balkan conflict would identify religion as the true instigating factor, let alone claim that Christianity (or even Serbian Orthodoxy) is inherently and irredeemably violent.^[3] Radovan Karadzic, Christian psychiatrist and leader of Bosnian Serbs, is arguably responsible for the deaths of more innocent people than even Usama bin Laden and his minions. During his flight from justice, Karadzic took refuge over a dozen years in as many Serbian Orthodox monasteries. Had he been a highly placed al-Qaeda operative eluding capture in a succession of Muslim homes and madrasas across South Asia, there would almost certainly have been widely expressed outrage at yet another proof of Islam's inherently violent ideology.

One could cite numerous examples of smaller scale communal violence not incited by Muslims. In 1992, angry mobs of Hindu "pilgrims," inflamed by the newly elected BJP and its supporters, the World Hindu Congress, attacked and destroyed a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya on the pretext that it had defiled the birthplace of the god Rama. Hindu sacred texts bristle with references to violence, but no one well-informed would characterize that and countless more recent episodes of communal violence in India as primarily

religious or call for the extirpation of Hinduism. I am in no way attempting to minimize the threat of mass murder by terrorist action conducted under ostensibly religious motivation by persons who identify themselves as Muslims. I am merely suggesting that prospects for large-scale violence are far broader than threats posed by such groups, and equally ominous. Is the possibility of mass murder more horrific when the expected perpetrators express religious motivation than when they do not?

During the earliest years of this millennium, a former Israeli prime minister courted various American Christian communities by arguing that Christians do indeed have a stake in seeing the fulfillment of the Biblical promise of the Land. Though he admits he is not particularly religious, he has no qualms about preaching passionately to stir emotions and enlist support from Christians who believe the Land was promised to them as well as to Jews. There are countless Biblical allusions to the violent possession of the Land, but only a handful of extremists on either side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persist in believing that it is religious in origin. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of the Israeli Defense Forces enter the service right out of orthodox Yeshivas, bent on enacting a divine mandate through religiously sanctioned use of violence.

The flip side of that claim is the widespread notion that Muslims have never experienced religious discrimination at the hands of non-Muslim majorities and have thus never had a justifiable claim to self-defense. One needs only to look at recent events in India to see shocking evidence to the contrary. For over a decade, the ultra-nationalist ruling Hindu BJP and its sectarian supporters has given whole-hearted support to anti-Muslim mob violence, leaving scores of thousands of Muslims dead and hundreds of thousands homeless. India faces a grim future of communal violence instigated not by its more than 140 million Muslims but by Hindus wrapped in the Indian flag—a sobering reminder that it was a Hindu who murdered Gandhi, a Jew who shot Yitzhak Rabin.

What specific data from closer to home might provide mind-changing perspectives on such a vexing global problem? Part of the difficulty is that it is so easy to project blame onto others when we so conveniently consign “them” to the category of “other than truly human,” on the one hand, and consider ourselves above the fray and immune to the human tendency to violence on the other. If all that the “rest of the world” knew about America amounted to the kinds of things most Americans know about Muslims, for example, we might have reason to gain insight into a major ingredient in our shared humanity. Imagine

that you are a Middle Easterner, African, or South Asian who has six general impressions of America. First, you have been told that the United States incarcerates the highest percentage in absolute numbers of citizens of any nation (twice as many as China). Second, murder rates in major American cities are among the highest in the world. You know also that law enforcement and social service agencies estimate conservatively that every day five to six thousand Americans commit spousal abuse. Fourth, you have heard that most Americans think their homeland was founded on Judaeo-Christian principles. You know, moreover, that for over 250 years, Christians sustained slavery and apartheid with wide approval and encouragement of preachers, protestant and catholic, including Jesuits, who owned slaves. And for 100 years thereafter (and even now) racial supremacist groups, such as the KKK, Aryan Nation, and WAR (White Aryan Resistance), have continued to preach the rightness of segregation as a biblical mandate. Finally, you have heard that since 9/11 some 130,000 Americans have been murdered by other Americans, the vast majority of whom grew up in Christian families and often sport clearly Christian symbols even as they commit their mayhem.

Are there any signs of change in American attitudes toward the alleged uniquely Islamic trappings of terror? Perhaps, if one counts stealth, back-door metamorphoses. Nearly seven years after 9/11 came the first public institutional recognition of a problem in how we perceive and talk about terrorism. On July 17, 2008, the State Department issued a memo to all its employees cautioning them against using Islamic references whenever condemning terrorist attacks. Call the perpetrators murderers or terrorists, but not Muslims. The Department of Homeland Security also advised its employees to avoid those same mistakes. For the original broader meanings of the term jihad, it was too little too late, since by then the evidence of colloquial usage was clear: most Americans had long since become convinced that there is a simple equivalence between jihad and violence, and therefore between Muslims and terrorism. The directive was a step in the right direction but for the wrong reasons: the goal was not to remove the obvious stigma from Islam and Muslims, but to avoid giving the murderers and terrorists in question the satisfaction of having their ideology acknowledged in religious terms. One has to start somewhere.

1. 1. Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

2. 2. Europol, “EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2007,” The Hague, Netherlands. Full report available at <http://www.europol.europa.eu>.
3. 3. See, for example, Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).