Regime Strategies in the Middle East:

The Role of Islamism, Anti-Americanism, and Terrorism (Part II)

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In-Depth Reports

Three recurring themes have marred much of the recent analysis of terrorism. First, many analysts downplay the danger of Islamic militants by arguing that they represent a very small percentage of the Muslim population. This argument is specious; September 11 should be enough to illustrate that small can be lethal. In fact, the very logic underlying contemporary terrorism is that small numbers of people are difficult to identify, and their small number also gives them a sense of elitism -- which in turn gives them a sense of mission.

In fact, a small band of terrorists can cause enormous damage. In Egypt, for example, just six individuals killed dozens of tourists at Luxor in 1997, and managed to reduce Egypt's annual growth rate by nearly one full percentage point; of course, the repercussions of that massacre cannot compare with the potential impact of September 11. Moreover, many terrorist groups enhance the destructive power of their small numbers by rotating their members, thereby complicating the process of identifying and tracking them. Most alarmingly, even the smallest terrorist group could inflict unprecedented damage if it obtained access to weapons of mass destruction. So, in assessing Islamic militancy, the argument that only a "small number" of Muslims are militants is not really helpful, because it fails to recognize the enormous impact that a few people can have.

Beyond that, if we focus on the methods that individuals employ to express their disagreement, we may discover that the true number of militants is larger than we realize. Given a choice between two people with whom I disagree ideologically -- one who confronts my argument with a book, and one who confronts it with a machine gun -- I would invariably choose the one with the book. There is a basic difference in human discourse between relying on words and relying on bullets. A fundamental, qualitative change occurs in political movements that switch from rhetoric to guns.

This distinction is complicated when some who are supposed to be ideologically or politically moderate offer verbal support for militancy. For example, Egyptian Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali of al-Azhar University appears to be an intelligent and presumably enlightened man; yet, he sanctioned the murder of my friend, Farag Foda, explaining that if the state does not put an end to behavior that is considered apostasy, true believers should take matters into their own hands. With moderates like that, who needs extremists? We need to look carefully at the statements of such individuals; they may be professing moderation, while actually sending quite a different message. We should pay special attention to statements they package for certain audiences, and to the mentality they promote during times of crisis. However difficult it may be, we must learn to distinguish between moderation and militancy -- between what is dangerous and what is not.

A second recurring theme in recent commentary is the focus on the "root causes" of terrorism. Seeking to understand the sources of discontent in the Middle East is important. Yet, the argument that these sources constitute the causal root of terrorism often twists the truth. Certainly, terrorist acts must be viewed in context; the challenge is to interpret that context correctly. Is every disgruntled person in the world opposed to America and American policy? Does every person who abhors American policy fly airplanes into buildings full of innocent people?

Take, for example, those who blame the September 11 attacks on the stalled Arab-Israeli peace process. My own daughter, a student of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley, recently asked me whether she should expect more of these attacks in the future if the Palestinian-Israeli talks hit another wall. This way of thinking elides the distinction between the motives of the terrorists and the attitudes of the general public in the Middle East.

As the United States considers making concessions in order to build a coalition against terrorism, it must be very careful to avoid such elision. Any concession must be based, among other things, on a careful determination of whether that concession is really necessary -- and sufficient -- to achieve the objective. America must also realize that any concession it makes for the purpose of building a coalition may do nothing whatsoever to deter terrorism. To paraphrase Dennis Ross, does anyone really believe that September 11 would have been averted if Bill Clinton, Ehud Barak, and Yasir Arafat had succeeded in their search for a settlement? Would such a settlement have deterred those who do not even recognize Israel's right to exist?

The root problems in the region should not be addressed merely out of political utility, but on their own merits. Anyway, these problems cannot be solved overnight, and focusing on them is not a viable means of dealing with terrorism in the short run. Moreover, terrorists are unlikely to be deterred by the probable Western approach to solving these problems -- that is, the promotion of peace, economic development, and democratization in the region. The terrorists themselves would not implement these measures if they had the opportunity. It is ludicrous to justify al-Qaeda's attacks by pointing out, however correctly, that certain Arab regimes are oppressive and corrupt; al-Qaeda itself is working with the Taliban government, which is hardly a shining example of liberalism. The "root problems" of the Middle East are important in any discussion of terrorism; however, we must distinguish between causal factors and legitimizing factors, and we must avoid using language that justifies political positions but does not actually explain political action in a meaningful way.

A third theme in the media coverage of September 11 is a certain subliminal attitude of near admiration for the terrorists; I do not mean deliberate praise of the men themselves, but rather observations on how meticulously planned and fantastically successful their attacks were on the tactical level. In particular, commentators have focused on the terrorists' innovative and largely unforeseen use of civilian airplanes, and on the possibility that such a wily enemy may, in the future, devise other novel tactics that we would be similarly unable to guard against.

Yet, through these attacks, the terrorists have committed the same strategic mistake of "overextension" that the superpowers committed in the past. Overextension occurs when a country establishes a logical relationship between means and ends, between resources and obtainable objectives, and then imprudently breaks that link. The Soviet Union and the United States made this mistake on a number of occasions during the Cold War. Small, ideologically driven ethnic or religious groups can likewise make wrong strategic choices and land in this same trap of overextension. For example, Islamic terrorists will sometimes act under what some of them call ghadhbatan li-allah, a "rage for God"; they will do something without calculating its practicality, focusing instead on achieving an objective and provoking God to participate in the struggle. Although they may act under this "rage for God" in an attempt to remake reality in their own ideological image, in practice, they often end up creating more enemies, unleashing greater repression, and bringing other adverse consequences upon themselves.

September 11 is just such a case of overextension followed by consequences adverse to the terrorists' interests. The terrorists wanted to humble America, and indeed the attacks did cause embarrassment. Yet, throughout America and overseas, the September 11 attacks have also caused intense discussion about what made such attacks possible, and they have raised powerful new fears and concerns about what the terrorists might be able to do in the future. As a result, America, Western Europe, and other countries have implemented broad new efforts aimed at stymieing terrorism. Groups such as al-Qaeda may now find it very unfortunate to have brought that kind of intense attention upon themselves, as the resulting countermeasures may weaken their ability to move funds, recruit followers, and

train quietly.

Successful exploitation of the terrorists' overextension will depend on a number of factors, including how determined the United States is; whether it relies more on its mind or on its muscle; and how well it can sustain its coalition. I would like to add a word about coalitions. The United States must realize that coalitions are not meant to be collections of states with identical positions on every issue. Leaders who join coalitions must be able to maintain a certain level of credibility within their own societies; if the United States asks its partners to be puppets, it will contribute to their undoing.

As for the titular subject of this panel, Islamism, I am in full agreement with Martin Kramer: Islamism is a stagnant phenomenon in the Arab world today. One would never know this, however, from reading or listening to Western scholars, writers, and analysts. They portray a very different picture -- based on a kind of "touristic" scholarship. They go to Cairo or Amman, sit in coffee shops, and count how many female passersby are wearing scarves. If seven out of ten women are wearing scarves, these observers conclude that the Islamist Revolution is alive and well in that country. The same thing happens with internet cafes; the analysts make their count and then declare that the Information Revolution has triumphed in the Arab world.

Let me share a well-kept secret: neither the Islamist Revolution nor the Internet Revolution has prevailed in the Arab world. We must move beyond touristic scholarship. Arab leaders read this sort of analysis and laugh; they know that Islamism does not pose a significant threat to their regimes. This is not to say that Islamism is irrelevant to analyses of the Arab world today, but it is stagnant. Islamists have failed to achieve their most important goal -- political power. They did not seek to become debating societies or philanthropic organizations; they wanted to gain political power. Indeed, that very goal defines the difference between a Muslim and an organized Islamist.

But the Islamist quest for political power has stagnated. We are now far past the era when the New York Times assembled every Islamic expert it could find in order to ask which Arab regime was on the brink of being overthrown by the Islamists. We no longer see such intensive public focus on that question because the threat has diminished. The Islamists themselves recognize this; they keep producing books with titles such as What Went Wrong? Yet, when I come to Washington, I find that the analysts have declared Islamism triumphant in Egypt, my home country. Their analysis contravenes reality.

Fouad Ajami once said, brilliantly, "If you lower your standards too much, anything will appear as an improvement." If you lower your standard for the "triumph of Islamism," you will always find proof to support your conclusion. But one need only look at the five roads to political power to see how poor Islamist prospects are in the Middle East. Terrorists have already tried one path -- assassination -- in a number of Arab countries; it did not bring them any closer to their goal. For example, they murdered Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, yet his system of governing -- and his main policy orientation -- lives on.

The second path to power is by military coup. In the 1980s, Israeli scholar Eliezer Be'eri, a highly regarded analyst of Arab military regimes, argued persuasively that using military coups to seize power in Arab states is much more difficult than it once was. The intervening years have only proven his point, particularly given the increased size of modern Arab armies. We are past the time when a few hundred soldiers could meet downtown late at night, take over the radio station, and announce that they are suspending certain political liberties for an indefinite period, promising to restore them later -- once certain objectives have been accomplished. Today, a successful military coup would require the cooperation and mutual trust of twenty to thirty generals; keeping such a grand conspiracy under wraps would be extremely difficult. Moreover, some current Arab leaders came up through military coups of their own; they know what it takes to pull one off, so they are careful to put the appropriate safeguards in place. One example: Abbud al-Zumar, a leader of the Egyptian Jihad organization, was an Egyptian military intelligence colonel who came under increasing suspicion and had to leave the army.

The third path to power is the parliamentary path -- and this medium will not work in the Arab world. No Arab leader will step down the way Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski did in Poland, when he peacefully ceded power to Solidarity after it triumphed in popular elections. Arab regimes are more likely to maintain restricted political pluralism, in which the managers -- not those who are managed -- make the rules.

The fourth path is the popular uprising, which would also be very difficult to achieve in an Arab country. Such an uprising requires both a sharp socioeconomic crisis and a political crisis -- including serious splits in the ranks of the core elite. Even if such an uprising were to occur, whoever prevailed among the competing factions of the elite would exercise brutal and indiscriminate repression of the populace, for fear of being overthrown by rivals.

The fifth path to power is what some are fond of calling "Islamization from below." They have this odd vision of Islamists building grassroots organizations in Arab countries, the citizenry flocking to these organizations, and the organizations growing to the point that the regimes are unable to ignore or quash them. Those who traffic in such ideas seem to be forgetting that, in order to form this sort of grassroots organization in an Arab country, you need the regime's permission -- which of course would never be granted. They seem to be confusing most Arab regimes with Sweden.

In Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia, and elsewhere, Islamists found the paths to power blocked. So they began to develop alternative means. Some Islamist groups sought ceasefires with the governing regimes, in part to deal with their own internal divisions. Other groups fled their home countries, relocating to less repressive settings. The latter switched their focus from the domestic to the global -- and came up with a novel approach to attaining political power. Their goal was nothing less than humbling America, and they began to challenge various symbols of American power. They hoped to return to their own countries later, holding up a string of successful attacks against the superpower. They dreamed of bringing a message to existing Arab regimes: "Why are you afraid of America? America is a paper tiger. It could not even protect its most secure structures -- not even the Pentagon." Can Islamist groups achieve their objectives through this kind of strategy? They certainly are trying.

The full proceedings of the 2001 Weinberg Founders Conference were published as a **monograph. (templateC04.php?CID=141)** Martin Kramer addressed the conference on this same topic; **read his remarks. (templateC07.php?CID=217)** ❖

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