

Regime Strategies in the Middle East: The Role of Islamism, Anti-Americanism, and Terrorism (Part I)

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In-Depth Reports

There is an old adage that the first casualty of war is the truth. If offering up this casualty can spare real casualties in lives, it is worth sacrificing some truth. I heard it said the other day, by a very accomplished analyst of the Middle East, that this is not the time for too deep an analysis. There is something to be said for that: the focus must be on winning. Yet, it is still important to get basic assumptions right, and not to let certain untruths -- let us call them myths -- go unchecked for too long. Practicing certain economies of truth is supposed to handicap the enemy. But if these turn into our own myths, they could wind up handicapping us.

In that spirit, I want to focus on some myths that have emerged in the aftermath of September 11. Some myths, of course, have had a very short shelf life. I no longer see any need to explode the myth that September 11 was a protest against Israel. This myth flourished briefly in the first few days after the attacks, but now it has been relegated to the furthest margins of the public arena. Yes, most people think progress between Israelis and Palestinians would help. But very few believe that the actual attacks were motivated by the breakdown of the "peace process," especially as we know that September 11 was set in motion long before that breakdown. And few think that progress in the peace process would deter future attacks. The more we learn about this plot, the more it seems to have operated on several regional levels. September 11 certainly did not constitute a chapter in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it seems to belong properly in another book.

Yet, two other myths have taken root, largely because they have arisen within influential quarters in this country. The first purports to explain the motives of the attackers; the second purports to interpret the reaction of the Arab world. These myths are already powerfully ensconced in the American understanding of September 11. Unfortunately, they are both dangerous. By misreading the terrorist motive and the Arab response, the United States, in the best instance, could cloud the objectives of this war. In the worst instance, it could effectively invite further terrorist attacks.

The first myth has to do with motive in the most general sense, and it has been propagated most effectively by a part of the media. Perhaps it reached fullest flower in the cover article of the October 15, 2001, issue of *Newsweek*: Fareed Zakaria's mega-essay "The Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?" In that piece, Zakaria argues that the failed states

and collapsing societies of the Arab world are awash in resentment against the creativity, wealth, and democracy of the West. The success of America, and the influence radiated by that success, drives them to distraction -- and to terrible deeds. The world's greatest losers, the Arabs, are seeking revenge against the world's greatest winners, the Americans. Francis Fukuyama has written something similar, and it can well be argued that this has become the preferred spin of those who think history has truly ended with the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism. What we are dealing with, they seem to say, is a rearguard action by the losers in the great battle among organizing principles of humankind. Needless to say, by this analysis, we do flatter ourselves a bit.

I propose a different thesis. Yes, America is hated by many Muslims, and it is a reflection of their resentment against American success and power. But it is actually worse, because this rage against America is mingled with contempt -- contempt for America's perceived weakness, a weakness most manifest in the Middle East. It is the contempt, not the hatred, which poses the immediate danger. And while you cannot do anything about the hatred -- after all, it is a side effect of your success -- you can and must do something to diminish the contempt.

Let me frame the question this way: are we certain that, in Arab and Muslim eyes, the United States really does look like the great winner? It is not difficult to see why Osama bin Laden and his cohorts have a rather different view. After all, they defeated another superpower, the Soviet Union, in Afghanistan. You think you won the Cold War. They think they won it. To them, the United States is a similar giant with similar feet of clay. And they summon their best evidence right from their doorstep in the Middle East.

The new contempt dates from the Iranian revolution, "Exhibit A" for American weakness. In Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini threw out the shah, held Americans hostage, sent his agents to kill Americans by the hundreds in Lebanon, and got away with it. Iran is a shining instance of successful defiance of the United States, evidence that you can run a major state in the region for more than twenty years completely outside the orbit of American influence. The list of most-wanted terrorists was published recently. Several of those on that list killed Americans sixteen years ago, and still roam free in Iran.

In the 1990s, the record was no better. Saddam Husayn crossed every line in the sand, spit in the face of the United States, and got pummeled in return -- but still stands on his own two feet. Other Arabs may not have a lot of sympathy for Saddam. But he is living, breathing proof in their eyes that the United States never presses its advantage, that it remains highly "risk-averse" in the Middle East, that it does not always get its man, and that you can defy the last superpower and live to fight another day.

Do you remember the horror of Pan Am Flight 103? A single Libyan operative went to prison for this, while Muammar Qadhafi recently celebrated his thirty-second year in power. Perhaps removing Qadhafi would have been a very tall order. But what about removing the Somali warlord Muhammad Aideed, against whom a previous administration sent the Marines? It turned out that getting him was too tall an order as well.

Consider Osama bin Laden. He has been America's "most wanted" for years. Yet, aside from a few misguided cruise missiles, no serious operation was mounted against him until now. Many Muslims admire him not just because of what he says about the United States, but because the United States has not killed him yet. The bin Laden we saw in the most recent video was not spewing hate, he was displaying outright contempt, wagging his finger at America while sipping tea.

Perhaps there is rage against American power in these attacks. But there is even more contempt for America's weakness -- its perceived lack of resolve; its quickness to forgive, or at least forget; its penchant for creating categorical boxes, like the state sponsors of terrorism list, and then ignoring them altogether. This is perceived as weakness, and when you are perceived as weak in the Middle East, you become a tempting target and the vultures begin to circle. Needless to say, the images of the Twin Towers in flames have only compounded the problem.

America now appears still weaker, more vulnerable than ever.

But paradoxically, Americans seem almost too concerned with the hatred. America wants and even expects to be loved in the world. It wants to be admired and respected. And it is shocked to discover that in many quarters, it is hated. The desire to be loved, the bewilderment at being despised, are endearing American foibles. And it is curiously endearing to see American statesmen running to mosques, telling the world that Islam is a religion of peace -- in the hope that this love will be returned.

But September 11 has to bring America to two realizations. First, while it is good to be loved and admired, it is more important to be feared. The United States is not sufficiently feared in the Middle East. If it wants to maintain its own interests or even simply deter attacks against its homeland, it will have to rectify that impression. And second, although no one likes to be the target of hatred, it is far worse to be the subject of contempt. Look, for example, at the suicide pilots, the men who spent long months, even years, here in America. What is striking is not their hatred for this country, but their contempt: the fact that America is so naively trusting of foreigners, that it gives everyone the benefit of the doubt, and that it is willing to sell the very training needed to destroy it.

The people in the streets of Karachi or Cairo who burn U.S. president George W. Bush in effigy are in a blind rage, but they are not dangerous. They do not know enough about America to be dangerous. The dangerous ones are like these suicide pilots -- those who are familiar with America, who know where to find a Wal-Mart or how to get a credit card, whose idea of the "women of paradise" probably owes more to MTV than to anything they saw back in their dusty corner of Saudi Arabia. Their own familiarity with America has bred a deep contempt, far more deadly than impotent rage. The hatred will always be there. It comes with the turf, and it is the price of success. Get used to it. But contempt is another story. It is much more dangerous, and it will eat away at your deterrence.

Contempt can be banished, however, if you work at it. Let me summarize this way: nothing engenders greater respect in the Middle East than the rewarding of your friends and the certain punishment of your enemies. Over the past two decades, the United States has gained a reputation for inconsistency on both counts. And this has left America more vulnerable. American credibility cannot be reestablished overnight. But the United States has now been given an opportunity, a license, to rebuild it. It is the gift given by the thousands who perished, and it seems to me absolutely crucial that this second chance not be missed -- not only if U.S. interests are to be defended abroad, but also if the American way of life is to be preserved at home.

And in the region, this means that you must smite your enemy in a decisive and demonstrative way. This requires two things. First, you must get rid of the Taliban regime. The United States has not deposed a regime in the Middle East in fifty years. It must do so now. Second, you must get Osama bin Laden -- and not in one, two, or sixteen years. Every day he lives is an affront to American credibility.

Let me be clear: nothing you do will ever even the score for September 11. But do these two things, and you will rebuild the gaping hole left in your wall of deterrence. Do these two things, and you will create awe and fear among the multitudes. Fail, and you will engender derision and contempt -- and the fear will be yours. Fail, and the "war on terror" could become something like the "war on drugs" -- not a matter of a few years but of decades, a struggle waged indecisively against a succession of bin Laden impersonators who continue along the path of terror because the gains outweigh the risks, and in the end it pays off.

I come now to the second myth, regarding the Arab response. This myth has its origins not in the media but in government. It is best appreciated in a quotation from Secretary of State Colin Powell: "Out of a deep sense of shared humanity, and a chilling appreciation of common vulnerability to terrorism, we see new scope to strengthen our relations with the Islamic world."

No one can doubt all of our shared humanity, or that it includes the Islamic world. And no one can doubt that it is in

America's interests to strengthen relations with the Islamic world. But I would like to focus on an assumption that I found perplexing: that the Arab world shares with America "a chilling appreciation of common vulnerability to terrorism." Or, as someone else put it, "Saudi and Egyptian support is not a favor to us; it is an act of self-defense." When I first read these arguments, I was perplexed, because something about them did not ring precisely true. Now, after more than a month of American diplomacy predicated on this assumption, I am more certain than ever that it is not true -- and because it is false, any attempt to build a coalition on this assumption is destined to falter and fail.

Obviously, Osama bin Laden is a Saudi, and the perpetrators of the crimes in New York and Washington were Saudis and Egyptians. Bin Laden's network is made up primarily of nationals belonging to Arab countries in the Middle East. It is also true that this network would like to topple Arab regimes. But Osama bin Laden wound up in Afghanistan for a reason. And the reason, in a nutshell, is this: his brand of Islamic fundamentalism has been driven out of the Arab Middle East, where it has ceased to be much of a problem.

Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the lot of them are in Afghanistan precisely because they failed in the Middle East. When the Afghan jihad ended, bin Laden and many other Arabs left Afghanistan to return to the region. Once in place, they did try to terrorize regimes, assassinate leaders, and seize power. But they failed. By the late 1990s, those regimes had them cornered. The rulers in the Arab world were not about to be terrorized out of their presidential or royal palaces, and they unleashed a massive counteroffensive. Egypt put some 50,000 fundamentalists in its prisons; hundreds went to the gallows. In Saudi Arabia, those who were not beheaded were exiled. Today, no Arab regime faces a credible threat from Islamist extremists.

In fact, what happened in New York and Washington was, to some extent, a consequence of the Arab success in pushing those like bin Laden to the margins. Since the extremists could not defeat the Arab regimes, they went over their heads and attacked the American patron of those regimes. Since they could not build a network in Saudi Arabia or Egypt without it being betrayed and its members sent off to torture chambers, they built networks in East Africa, and even in America itself.

Osama bin Laden and his crowd want to drive America from the entire Middle East in order to topple regimes. But they have no strong base in the region itself, nor can they easily strike there. So they have gone straight for the jugular -- and there is no greater jugular than lower Manhattan.

This means that, at the moment, there is no one in the Middle East who shares a sense of "common vulnerability" to terrorism, except Israel. In the 1990s, the Arab states had a terrorism problem, and they got rid of it by the usual methods: mass arrests, torture, expulsions, "disappearances," and so on. These states are not threatened in any way by terrorism, which they have pushed out to Afghanistan and the West where it is somebody else's problem -- above all, America's. In the region, there is some sympathy for bin Laden because he symbolizes defiance of the West. But only the smallest minority of Arabs would want to live under a Taliban-style regime. Actually, there seems to be less "turmoil" in the Arab street than there was during the Gulf War. The Arab world is riveted by the September 11 story, but so far it has not been moved by it.

The regimes are not threatened, and this is why the Arabs are not going to be very predictable partners in this coalition. Every time Americans sit down to talk to them about terrorism, they are going to want to talk about other things that really do worry them: what they want from Israel, how many weapons they need, how much their debts weigh on them, or how much they want for their oil.

One can understand why some American diplomats might look upon this "war on terror" as a possible theme around which to organize the Middle East. Right now, there is no organizing theme, and that is a problem. During the Cold War, the United States tried to organize the region on the basis of the Soviet threat, which inspired the Baghdad Pact, CENTO, and so on. This never worked particularly well, because the states of the region felt more threatened by one

another than by the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War, the United States tried to organize the Middle East around the "peace process" and economic cooperation, the so-called "new Middle East." This, too, never quite worked, since Arabs feared it might become a form of veiled Israeli hegemony.

Now, some seem intent on organizing the region around the "war on terror," buttressed by the ancillary notion that America is the true defender of Islam. All of this is perfectly understandable, but let us be frank. The war on terror is shaky scaffolding for a new Middle East architecture -- even shakier than the Soviet threat and the peace process. Already the Saudis are stonewalling, the Egyptians are balking -- and these are America's friends. Arab governments do not need American help to fend off fundamentalist terrorism these days; they are looking for some bigger payoff before they get on board.

But even if the Arab governments were willing, and there were something to be gained from their cooperation, chasing after these fickle friends has a major downside: it signals that the United States needs the blessing of others before responding to an attack on its own territory. In essence, America is saying that even its own self-defense is legitimate only if it is approved by a "rainbow coalition," which ironically includes not a few veteran America-bashers. There is something unseemly in this image of the United States seeking the support of a lot of tin pots. If the United States smashes the Taliban and gets bin Laden, no damage will have been done. But if this whole grand coalition fails to meet minimal goals, it could contribute to the kind of contempt that made September 11 an appealing strategy in the first place.

These then, it seems to me, are two myths that must be challenged before the end of hostilities. The war's outcome must create awe and banish contempt. No amount of kowtowing to Islam can substitute for victory. And since America is going to win this war by itself anyway, victory should be made to look unquestionably like America's triumph, not the triumph of a gerrymandered coalition. The less credit you share, the more awe you will induce.

Finally, do not neglect your friends. There is an old adage: keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. Be careful not to confuse the two. Israel does not need to be a big cog in this coalition -- the latter is unlikely to last very long anyway. But America will do itself more harm if it even appears to be shunning its friends. This will not produce more Arab respect; it will only invite more Arab contempt -- adding to the problem, rather than subtracting from it.

The best guarantee that there will not be a next time is for America to rely on itself to win this war, and on its proven friends to build a common wall of deterrence. So far, the going has been easy in the American offensive against terror. At some point, it will get tough. When it does, the United States will find out who its real friends are. And on that day, it will need more than Arabic.

The full proceedings of the 2001 Weinberg Founders Conference were published as a [monograph](#). [\(templateC04.php?CID=141\)](#) Ibrahim Karawan addressed the conference on this same topic; [read his remarks](#). [\(templateC07.php?CID=218\)](#) ❖

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