

# Terrorism—A Cultural Phenomenon?

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## Introduction

This article is aimed at providing a cultural perspective on contemporary terrorism. I will examine not domestic terrorism, but rather the form of terrorism we are confronted with today: terrorism with global reach, terrorism without borders and any conceptual limitations, terrorism that defines death and destruction as achievements in themselves.

In my view, the ideological terrorism (such as the Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof Gang) that plagued many Western societies in the 1970s and 1980s, the nationalist and ethnic discontent that has been and continues to be the greatest inspiration for terrorists, and the religiously motivated forms of terrorism all have a cultural aspect. Still, I will not focus particularly on any of these types of terrorism, but I will rather try to find out what is culturally distinct about today's brand of global terrorism and which solutions, if any, can we find in the realm of culture that will help us in the struggle against terrorism. This is not because I underestimate the many and various manifestations of terrorism, but because I am interested in today and tomorrow more than in yesterday. I am also particularly interested in this new type of terrorism because I think that contemporary forms of terrorism are more cultural in origin and nature than ever.

Analyzing culture as a category is not an easy task, and it is not a purely scientific enterprise. What people think, how they think, and the way they react to events are all influenced by culture. Even terrorists are products of culture. Thus, regarding a definition of culture, most readers will probably be able to agree with me only on the fact that there is much disagreement about the meaning of *culture*, both as a word and a concept. I interpret culture in the usual social-scientific sense of beliefs, values, and lifestyles on the world scene, with special attention to religion as a central component. Obviously, culture is not only about religion, but it is also true that the most prominent cultural dimension of twenty-first-century terrorism can be found in religion. In particular, the events of September 11 are deeply rooted in religious and cultural tensions sharpened by the end of Cold War. So the focus of this article will be particularly on religion, because I think that changes taking place in the area of religion throughout much of the world are also working to reinforce the cultural differences between societies, and differences between cultures are helping to facilitate (in my view) the rise and development of terrorism.

It is a tendency in Western society, which is politically oriented, to assume that there is a rational pragmatic cause for acts of terrorism, and a corresponding belief that, if the particular political grievance is addressed properly, the phenomenon will fade. However, when the roots of a terrorist movement are not political (or economic),

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it is naïve to expect political gestures to change the hearts of radicals. Attempts to deal with the terrorist threat as though it were divorced from its intellectual, cultural, and religious wellsprings are doomed to failure.<sup>1</sup> In short, I would not argue that terrorism is purely a cultural phenomenon, but I take as a theorem that modern terrorism has significant cultural aspects in its objectives, causes, methods, and consequences.

All readers will agree with Martha Crenshaw's observation that terrorism is not justified by any group identification or affiliation: moral, cultural, religious, or ethnic.<sup>2</sup> Still, it is obvious that culture underpins and influences terrorists' thoughts and actions, so it seems logical that terrorism is *perceived* differently and is *used* differently by different cultures.

I will focus in particular on two main cultures, Islamic and Western Judeo-Christian, because I think it is in the interface between these two that the so-called "new terrorism" is flourishing. I will not argue here in favor of or against Islam or Christianity as competing cultures and sets of values in relation to terrorism, but I will try to offer an objective approach in order to better understand and eventually bridge the gap between the two cultures, a gap that, in my view, could possibly be widened by the phenomenon of modern terrorism.

## Perceptions of Terrorism in Different Cultures

After September 11, the historic cultural difference between the West and the Muslim world re-emerged as one of the principal frontiers of cultural suspicion. While terrorism—even in the form of suicide attacks—is not by definition an Islamic phenomenon, it cannot be ignored that the lion's share of terrorist acts, particularly the most devastating, in recent years have been perpetrated in the name of Islam. This fact has sparked a fundamental debate both in the West and within the Muslim world regarding the link between these acts and the teachings of Islam.

### *Perceptions of Terrorism within Islamic Culture*

Most Western analysts are hesitant to identify terrorist acts with the central teachings of one of the world's great religions, preferring to view them instead as a perversion of a religion that is essentially peace-loving and tolerant. Moreover, an interpretation that places the blame for terrorism on religious and cultural traits runs the risk of being branded as bigoted and Islamo-phobic.<sup>3</sup>

Muslims often accuse Western analysts of misinterpreting Islam and ignorance about its real essence. *But if these critics do not wish to see their religion associated with contemporary terrorism, then they need to be reminded that it is not "the others" who initially misunderstood and misjudged Islam, but rather the terrorists themselves.* They have sent scholars all over the world looking everywhere—including in their re-

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<sup>1</sup> Shmuel Bar, "The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism," *Policy Review* 125 (June & July 2004), available at: <http://www.policyreview.org/jun04/bar.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Political Psychology* 21:2 (June 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Bar, "Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism."

ligion—for explanations of their actions. It is not the case that Islam itself is a danger, but we have the duty to investigate any possible source of inspiration and motivation for terrorists, in order to try to defeat the threats we currently face. Thus, I will investigate what Daniel Pipes calls the “terroristic version of Islam.”

### *Terroristic Version of Islam*

Martin Kramer, a research professor in Middle East affairs at Tel Aviv University, has written that “Islamism” is Islam reformulated as a modern ideology. Whereas Islam is traditionally viewed as being comparable to Judaism and Christianity, Islamism is a response to ideologies that emerged in the modern West, such as communism, socialism, or capitalism. It has a political agenda; it is an effort to draw meaning out of Islam that can be applied to problems of contemporary governance, society, and politics. We therefore may ask if there are any historic similarities between Bin Laden, et al., and Martin Luther and the Reformation. In his own eyes, Bin Laden may see himself as a profound reformer of Islam, just as Luther was in the history of Christianity, but most scholars of Islam describe Bin Laden’s vision as a highly distorted and retrograde version of the faith.

According to Daniel Pipes, militant Islamism derives from Islam but is a misanthropic, misogynist, triumphalist, millenarian, anti-modern, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, terrorist, jihadist, and suicidal version of it.<sup>4</sup> Still, what I hope to examine is not the political dimension of Islamism, but its cultural elements. To Islamists, living by the *sharia* (religious law) is the key both to the moral life and to the regeneration of the Muslim faith. The ideology of Islamism is given coherence by its focus on this one element.<sup>5</sup>

The basic sentiment expressed by contemporary Islamist terrorists was also present in the Muslim Brotherhood, a political movement that started in Egypt in 1928 with the goal of restoring Islamic laws and values in the face of growing Western influence. At about the same time, another group of radical brethren was taking shape in Saudi Arabia, advocating the puritanical interpretation of Islam known as *Wahhabism*. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Wahhabi radicals in Saudi Arabia both rose out of an Islamic religious movement called the *Salafiyya*, which held that the practice of Islam had become corrupted and needed to be reformed to reflect the original seventh-century form of Islam practiced at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This extreme interpretation of Islam would eventually influence a new generation of violent radical Muslim groups, including the Taliban, Al Qaeda and Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Although all these trends and religious movements have been present for almost a century, they never seemed to achieve the level of extremism and the global reach that can be found in the language of today’s terrorists. This new quality is due to the fact that terrorist discourse has evolved and exploited religious concepts in order to advance their political and cultural agenda.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Pipes, “Aim the War on Terror at Militant Islam,” *Los Angeles Times* (6 January 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Martin Kramer, “Is Islamism a Threat? A Debate,” *Middle East Quarterly* (September 1999).

The message of terrorist organizations is not Koranic, but heretical. Four main concepts are of interest for my approach.

- *Dar al Islam/Dar al Harb*. The underlying element in the radical Islamist worldview is a-historic and dichotomist: perfection lies in the ways of the Prophet and the events of his time; therefore, religious innovations, philosophical relativism, and intellectual or political pluralism are anathema. In such a worldview, there can exist only two camps—Dar al-Islam (“The House of Islam,” i.e., the Muslim countries) and Dar al-Harb (“The House of War,” i.e., countries ruled by any regime but Islam)—which are pitted against each other until the final victory of Islam. The radical Muslims carry these concepts to their extreme conclusion.<sup>6</sup>
- *Ummah*. This is an ancient Arabic term that denotes the totality of Muslims in the world at any given time; in this sense, it refers to much more than our word religion usually comprehends.<sup>7</sup> In Islamic terms, *ummah* means what secular diplomats call the international community. The two terms correspond in internal variety, geographical dispersion, and potentially global ambition.
- *The Great Caliphate* calls for the replacement of all secular leadership with religious leaders in any country having Muslim majorities. This would include Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, all the Emirates, Sudan, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, and finally what Muslims call the “occupied territory” of Israel.
- *Jihad* is such an important concept to Islam that it is almost regarded as a sixth pillar. It is also the most misunderstood of all aspects of Islam. Most Islamic scholars interpret *jihad* as a nonviolent quest for justice: a holy struggle rather than a holy war. The word *jihad*, they argue, actually means “striving” in the spiritual sense. It means that a Muslim’s real daily striving is to become pure in spirit and to resist sin and evil. All of the Koran’s chapters except one begin with the phrase “Allah is merciful and compassionate.” So if Islam is such a compassionate and tolerant religion, why then do the militant/extremist Islamists continue to resort to the use of violence?<sup>8</sup> Compassion and tolerance, after all, are not part of the common Western perception of *jihad*, at least as it is used by terrorists. They are interpreting *jihad* to mean a holy war, departing from the notion that a Muslim’s duty is to keep up the struggle against the spiritual enemies of Islam.

Today’s *jihadis* are calling their war the “Third Great Jihad,” and are doing so within the framework of a time line that reaches back to the very creation of Islam in the seventh century. This constitutes part of their attempts to recreate the dynamics that gave rise to the religion in the first two hundred years of its existence. *Jihad* represents

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<sup>6</sup> Bar, “Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism.”

<sup>7</sup> Jack Miles, “Theology and the Clash of Civilizations,” *Cross Currents* 51:4 (Winter 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Ivar Hellberg, “Notes on Islam,” Course presentation, MDD-12 Defense Diplomacy Course - July 2004, Cranfield University, United Kingdom.

the chance to overcome the shame of Islam's long decline from glory and superiority over the West into the decay and decadence represented by current Arab governments.

All these concepts are illustrative for my discussion, simply to show how things have changed. If, at the beginning, *jihad* was considered just a holy war in the House of Islam, it then became a mobilizing concept justifying political activities, and finally emerged as an efficient terrorist activity in its own right. Due to these new interpretations of the teachings of Islam, we today have arrived at a completely erroneous (in the Muslim view) perception of Islamic culture. Many Muslim scholars say that Osama Bin Laden and other Islamic fundamentalists do not represent the real Islam. If that is the case, then how can one distinguish between the real Islam and the distortion of it?

*Who does represent true Islam: "Will the real Islam please stand up?"*<sup>9</sup>

Islam represents an ethical, ideological, ideational, and cultural phenomenon. It is both a belief system and a code of conduct based on a hierarchy of values, norms, standards, laws, and institutions; it represents a way of life, a world system, and a social movement for historical change.<sup>10</sup> *Still, there is a tendency to not judge Islam by its books, but by what is done in its name.* The problem is that Islamism has, in some respects, become more visible than the real Islam.

Why is it that the Islamist message seems unitary, while the perception of Islam is so diverse, even among Muslims themselves? Within Islam, the unifying influence of faith (insofar as Sunni and Shia can be said to be united) is outweighed by other societal differences. Even within the Arab world, where a more or less common language (to a significant extent), common culture and historical experience are added to shared religion, there is no immediate likelihood of unity. In addition, most Muslim violence is directed against co-religionists. So Muslims are not united, a fact that some observers attribute to the teachings of Islam itself, arguing that they make Muslims confrontational. How does the Muslim world perceive terrorism? Does the Muslim community see it and feel it the way we do? Saddam Hussein was the only state leader to praise the attacks of September 11. Many Muslim-majority countries are members of the U.S.-led coalition fighting terrorism. Moreover, Al Qaeda also targets Muslim governments, such as those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, that it sees as godless. Still, do the populations of those nations really support the coalition against Bin Laden and its member states? Talking with people from Muslim communities, they shared with me their view on that specific issue: maybe the political leaders are in favor of supporting the Americans in the war against terrorism, for political and strategic reasons, but the ordinary people are not. What is more, there are Muslims who morally support the terrorists, and think their war is right. One confusing problem is that one may find this trend even among Europe's fifteen million Muslims. To take but one example, in the UK, a recent poll has shown that 13 percent of British Muslims surveyed would "regard further attacks by Al Qaeda or similar organizations on the U.S. as justified." We may also re-

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<sup>9</sup> Miles, "Theology and the Clash of Civilizations."

<sup>10</sup> See "Islam and Terrorism: What Does Humanity Need; Confrontation or Cooperation?", available at: <http://www.jamaat.org/iat/humanity1101.html>.

member that the attacks of September 11 were popular on Arab streets, where they were met with spontaneous celebrations and reportedly made Osama a popular name for newborn boys.

To what extent is the Islamic world the target of terrorism? Some authors say that the war being waged by Bin Laden and his followers is as much against Islam as it is against the West. Al Qaeda and its allies represent a perversion of Islam, and are engaged in a campaign to change Islam itself.<sup>11</sup> This analysis is borne out by terrorist attacks in Central Asia and Morocco, in Saudi Arabia, Algeria—and some in Iraq—that have been directed against fellow Muslims, who have abandoned what the extremists view as “true Islam.” Still, the primary targets of today’s terrorists remain modernity, Christianity, America, and the West, which in the Islamist perspective make up a single unholy stew.

Now we will shift to the other side of the equation. Why is Western culture perceived in this way by the Muslim world? How “alien” is Western culture from Islamic culture?

### *Perceptions of Terrorism in Western Judeo-Christian Culture*

The West is no longer a mere geographic proposition; it has also taken on cultural and civilizational dimensions. It obviously differs from all other civilizations in that it has had an overwhelming impact on all other civilizations in the world that have existed since 1500.<sup>12</sup> The West’s popular culture is global in its reach, but in many parts of the world it is widely regarded with suspicion, and met with varying degrees of resistance. Within the Islamic world, the West has been stereotyped as the embodiment of arrogance, exploitation and irresponsible individualism.<sup>13</sup>

*A first distinction between Islam and Christianity occurs with regard to the place and role of religion within society. Many of the cultural features of Western societies are the result of the “privatization of religion” in the Christian world.* The modern form of governance, democracy, is about privatization, and thus everything in Western societies—including religion—became a private issue. Indeed, religion in Western societies is largely restricted to the private sphere. It is substantially independent from government, and its role is reduced to the private life of each individual.

Islam, on the other hand, is a pervasive religion. It regulates every aspect of human life. Western culture is completely different. It gives first priority to the human individual. Societies that are structured around the pursuit of religious objectives can appear illogical to societies like ours, based as they are on individual rights and freedom.

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<sup>11</sup> David F. Forte, “Religion is Not the Enemy,” *National Review Online* (19 October 2001), available at: <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-forte101901.shtml>

<sup>12</sup> Josh Burek, “The Clash of Civilizations: a reading guide,” on-line resources and expert commentary on Samuel P. Huntington’s essay (quoting Vincent Ferraro); available at: [http://www.csmonitor.com/specials/sept11/flash\\_civClash.html](http://www.csmonitor.com/specials/sept11/flash_civClash.html).

<sup>13</sup> Simon Murden, “Cultural Conflict in International Relations: The West and Islam,” in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, edited by John Baylis and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 377.

But the values that are prized by these societies are completely different. One observant Muslim told me once, “My country is above myself and above my family. My country is my religion.” Individual freedom is not their main concern – they care most about their fellow Muslims and their countries. Westerners cannot comprehend how “rational” people can “joyously” destroy their lives and the lives of innocent civilians in America and Israel and elsewhere in the world. They do not understand the psychology that drives suicide bombers to their deaths in order to bring honor and paradise to them, their families, and Muslims everywhere. We cannot conceive of a culture that encourages young people to slaughter themselves for the perceived benefits of the afterlife. These concepts are totally alien to Western thinking.

On the other hand, Western values such as individualism, liberalism, human rights, equality, liberty, democracy, free markets, and separation of church and state often have little or no resonance in Islamic culture. Western efforts to propagate these values produce instead a reaction against “human rights imperialism” and a reaffirmation of indigenous values.

*Is Christianity as such a target of terrorism?* Modern terrorism is religious only in means, not in its targets. What we see is that terrorists are targeting values, rather than religion.

Terrorists are not fighting against the Christianity as a religion, but rather against the products of Christian culture, which are Western values.

If this is the case, then it might be asked exactly in what way Western culture challenges Islamist terrorists. This question brings me to the next point of my analysis, where I hope to shed light on what is cultural about contemporary terrorism, and from what perspective can we define terrorism as a cultural phenomenon. As I said in the introduction, I consider twenty-first-century terrorism to have cultural objectives, causes, means, and consequences.

## **What Are the Cultural Aspects of Contemporary Terrorism?**

First of all, I consider the terrorist agenda to be at times primarily social and cultural, not political. Among the cultural objectives terrorists have on their agenda, I would include:

1. *Reject and destroy Western culture.* Today’s terrorists are seeking the elimination of Western secularism and values, and of those who support them.<sup>14</sup> In the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, the openness of Western culture and its values are repulsive. There are numerous books and articles that point to this antipathy toward the Western world, either because of a broad cultural incompatibility or a specific conflict between Western consumerism and religious fundamentalism.<sup>15</sup> Western values are seen as contaminating Islam, and therefore there is a perceived cultural

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<sup>14</sup> Stephane Lefebvre, “Perspectives on Ethno-nationalist/separatist Terrorism,” *Conflict Studies Research Centre Monthly*, Issue M29 (May 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Well known examples of such articles are Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (Summer 1993); and Benjamin R. Barber’s “Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism’s Challenge to Democracy,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1992).

duty to fight against this influence. Terrorists want to insulate their societies from penetration or “corruption” by the West.

2. *Defeat globalization.* Associated with Western values is the process of globalization. Globalization is what terrorists dislike most, and this is because globalization is not only about exporting and importing prosperity, but also values. Pope John Paul II suggested what these values might be in an address earlier this year in which he spoke of globalization as not just an economic fact, but a “cultural phenomenon” as well: “Those who are subjected to it often see globalization as a destructive flood threatening the social norms which had protected them and the cultural points of reference which had given them direction in life. Globalization is moving too quickly for cultures to respond.”<sup>16</sup> Fear and rage in the face of threats to established beliefs and ways of life—threats seen as originating above all in America’s liberal, consumerist culture—are a large part of the dynamic driving Islamist fury today.
3. *Fighting the infidels, unifying the ummah.* This new form of terrorism is more intent on punishment for perceived wrongs, destruction of the existing order, the quest to create Islamic states by the imposition of the *sharia* law. Today’s militant form of Islam seeks to rid the Middle East of all Western influence and establish an Islamic state. Fundamentalists believe that violence, including killing civilians, is justified as a means to restore *sharia* and maintain Islamic cultural identity. And Islamists not only want to preserve their identity, but also to either convert or punish nonbelievers.
4. *Targeting societies becomes a terrorist objective.* What appears to be emerging today is a desired goal to devastate an entire society, not simply to politically influence an audience. If traditionally the objective of terrorists’ political violence was to influence government structures or states, the new form of terrorism is oriented toward the society that they want to change: the society itself has become the main target.

There is also a cultural motivation behind contemporary terrorism. Terrorists are fighting their war because of a religious commandment. September 11 occurred because of a religious commandment to wage *jihād* and work toward the establishment of *sharia*. Terrorism therefore became a culture that gave the poor and the hopeless a basis for self-worth: to fight for their faith.

*Islamist terrorists are also fighting out of a sense of cultural frustration.* The cultural anger against the West is quite explicit, and is clearly invoked as a motivation for terrorist acts. Their hate is not limited in time and space. Once asked what the *jihadis* will do if U.S. forces finally pull out of Iraq, one terrorist said: “We will follow them to the U.S.”<sup>17</sup> Their level of frustration is high because they are looking at the past. As

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<sup>16</sup> Russel Shaw, *The Catholic Response to Terrorism* (30 September 2001), available at: <http://www.osv.com/whatthechurchteaches/wheneverilstrikes/shaw.asp>.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Ware, “Meeting the Jihad,” *Time*, 5 July 2004.



Francis Fukuyama wrote, the days of Islam's cultural conquests are over, and fundamentalists cannot accept it.<sup>18</sup>

Terrorists also exploit globalization in order to justify their activities. Kashima reverses the role of globalization in modern terrorism, from a violent intrusion that provokes terroristic opposition, to a neutral medium that terrorists use to advance their violent agendas. He claims that globalization offers an opportunity for terrorists to gain publicity for their political agenda, to place it on the "communal common ground of the people who engage in public discourse" about it. As Carl Ratner has written, "Globalization makes terrorism an 'attractive' political strategy for some."<sup>19</sup>

*Terrorism is also cultural in its approaches and means; the first such instrument that comes to mind is the religion of Islam itself. One question therefore arises: Is religion a weapon of terrorists?* Some analysts agree that, although some terrorist organizations may have a religious and political face, they have built their strength on terrorist tactics, which have nothing in common with religion.

I disagree with this perspective. I think that the believers—the human capital of terrorist organizations—are the main weapons of terrorism, and therefore I would argue that religion becomes an organizing principle, a mobilizing factor, and therefore can be seen as a weapon of terrorists. By appealing to deeply ingrained religious beliefs, radical leaders succeed in motivating the Islamist terrorist, creating for him a social environment that provides approbation and a religious environment that provides moral and legal support for his actions.

Terrorists are also using religious ideological centers to teach extremism, which raises the question of whether these *madrasas* are centers of education or nurseries of terrorism. It is well known that religious indoctrination is a pre-condition for creating good militants. It can be safely assumed that the great majority of Muslims in the world have no desire to join a *jihad* or to politicize their religion. However, it is also true that, insofar as religious establishments in most of the Arabian Peninsula, in Iran, and in much of Egypt and North Africa are concerned, radical Islamist ideology does not represent a marginal and extremist perversion of Islam but rather a genuine and increasingly mainstream interpretation. Many religious schools in these countries impart only religious education (along with a minimal level of general education, which tends to produce semiliterate religious scholars). They promote negative thinking and propagate hatred and violence in society.

We may also see today the global means of the new forms of terrorism. Because of globalization, terrorists have access to more powerful technologies, more targets, more territory, more means of recruitment, more financial resources, and more easily exploited sources of rage than ever before. This new terrorism is using global and modern means to achieve its ends. Extremist ideologies are spread through websites and videotapes, and the use of information technologies such as the Internet, mobile

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<sup>18</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 45–46.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Ratner, "A Cultural Critique of Psychological Explanations of Terrorism," *Cross-Cultural Psychology Bulletin* 38:1-2 (2004), 18–24.

phones, and instant messaging has extended the global reach of many terrorist groups.<sup>20</sup>

Along with the material results of terrorist attacks, we are at present also confronting the cultural consequences of terrorism, such as:

1. *Negative impact on Western societies.* Although terrorism is generally unsuccessful in reaching its political objectives, it often does succeed at the tactical and strategic levels, instilling fear and confusion and impacting societies by causing tremendous physical destruction and grave bodily harm. It is an interesting situation: contemporary terrorists have society as a whole as a target, because in democracies the individual and society both play a very important role within the state, as well as on the international scene. It is no longer effective to simply kidnap people or kill political representatives. When the society as a whole is the target, the efficacy of terrorist activity is by far enhanced. The impact of terrorism on Western societies becomes therefore very important. A terrorist attack such as the one of September 11 may have profound political, social, and economic consequences for the targeted society. It can inspire widespread anxiety, anger at the government for failing in its primary mission of providing security, and popular demand for draconian measures that could shake a political system and fundamentally alter the society's lifestyle.<sup>21</sup>
2. *Terrorism as an "intellectual fashion."* What we also see today is that subcultural elements crop up in contemporary intellectual fashion, along with extremist policies. Terrorists are becoming popular, and this is not only among the illiterate. We witness today an "intellectual attraction" to terrorism, to the use of intellectual means of propaganda, and therefore to a certain level of attention being paid to the "intellectual nature" of the new terrorists. This is a dangerous trend as, over the long term, the popularization of extremist views cannot augur well for the security of any state or society. This kind of "intellectual terrorism" can be worse than physical terrorism.
3. *Copy-cat influence on other types of terrorism.* All types of terrorism are profoundly influenced by the form of terrorism we currently face. For instance, the influence of Al Qaeda on Muslim separatist groups active in their home countries is growing. It is a worrying trend, as each Al Qaeda attack becomes a recruiting poster for terrorism in general, no matter the specific type.
4. *Clash of ideologies/cultures/civilizations.* One of the main consequences of modern terrorism is the controversial "clash of civilizations" that Samuel Huntington suggested in 1993. The essence of this thesis is that the great divisions among humankind and the dominant source of conflict in the future will be cultural. Re-

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<sup>20</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism," in *Defeating Terrorism—Shaping the New Security Environment*, ed. Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer (New York: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2004), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, "Countering Al-Qaeda," in *Defeating Terrorism*, ed. Howard and Sawyer, 134.

ligion discriminates sharply and exclusively between people, and the main cultural fault line in the world occurs where the West meets Islam. Were the September 11 attacks, from a Huntingtonian perspective, part of a clash between Islamic and Western civilizations? Bin Laden and his terror network see it that way. Al Qaeda considers its terrorist campaign against the U.S. to be part of a war between the *ummah* and the Judeo-Christian West. For Al Qaeda, the fight is against Western civilization as a whole. Islamic scholars say that it is a fight between the vast majority of progressive Muslims and the miniscule percentage of radical Muslims. According to Rohan Gunaratna, it is not a clash of civilizations but a clash among civilizations, a fight that must essentially be fought within the Muslim world.<sup>22</sup>

Many experts say that the new form of terrorism cannot be reduced to a clash of civilizations. Still, we see a continuously growing gap between Islam and Western civilization. Anti-Western feelings openly manifested in the Muslim world are generating an increase in Western hostility towards Islam in general. Western societies, the main victims of contemporary terrorism, are exposed to the danger of an increasingly hateful attitude toward Muslim communities. If you go in the streets in Western countries and ask ordinary people what they feel about Muslims, they will make—even if not deliberately—an association between the current threat to their security and the Muslim world. The more terrorist attacks take place, the greater the anti-Muslim resentment on the part of the targeted populations.

Having in mind all these cultural aspects of terrorism, it is logical to consider how terrorism might be fought using cultural means. What is the role of culture in the fight against terrorism?

### **Cultural Approaches to Fighting Terrorism**

It has been assumed that understanding terrorism crucially affects the responses to it. Therefore, in order to comprehend the motivation for these acts and to draw up an effective strategy for a war against terrorism, it is necessary to understand the religious-ideological factors that underlie it, and which are deeply embedded in Islam. Consequently, counter-terrorism begins on the religious-ideological level, and must adopt appropriate methods. The cultural and religious sources of radical Islamic ideology must be addressed in order to develop a long-range strategy for coping with the terrorist threat to which they give birth.

To this end, I suggest there is an urgent need for a more effective, meaningful, and all-embracing dialogue between the Muslim and the Western worlds in order to bring about a better understanding of each other's interests and aspirations. Therefore, the Muslim world must take the course of openly learning from the West and confining the role of religion to the private sphere. A reformist movement in Islam is required, an interpretation of Islam that combines a proper respect for Muslim traditions with a

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<sup>22</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, "Defeating Al Qaeda—The Pioneering Vanguard of the Islamic Movements," in *Defeating Terrorism*, ed. Howard and Sawyer, 20.

willingness to embrace the opportunities and obligations for development offered by the modern world.

There is a need for an Islamic Reformation, to allow modernization to take place; as Rohan Gunaratna has pointed out, this is a battle within Islam itself, rather than between Islam and the West. I think that progress has been made already in this direction, by bringing the subject of Islam into the public debate within the Muslim world itself.

Another effective approach would be to engage Islam—and therefore theology should become a topic in international diplomacy—not as a security issue, but as tool to better understand each other. Because of the secularization of the state in the West, Western governments when dealing with one another do not expect to be required to deal with one another's religious leaders. It is different in the case of the Muslim world, where religious leaders typically have a far greater influence on the public than civilian leaders do.<sup>23</sup> So theology should become of interest for makers of policy and diplomacy.

Promoting moderate Islam should be another approach taken by the West. The best way of managing the fundamentalist challenge is to initiate a serious dialogue with moderate Islamic groups that may foster in the long term, if not the democratization of their regimes, at least a marginalization of their radical elements. Moderates must win in the struggle within Islam. Every precaution should be taken not to antagonize moderate elements in the Muslim community, and therefore it is important to know if it is power or weakness that moderates Muslims, and act accordingly.

*Integrating Islam within the Western community is also important.* Gert Weisskirchen, the foreign policy spokesman for Germany's Social Democrats, spoke about the need to Europeanize Islam.<sup>24</sup> But is it possible for Europe to Europeanize Islam, or for America to Americanize Islam?

Some argue that, in the years ahead, it should be the voice of Western Muslim communities that should be heard rather than that of Bin Laden. Western Muslim communities can make a difference, due to their connections to and understanding of Islamic culture. These communities can serve as a link between the Islamic and Western worlds. Still, it has been shown that many terrorists belong to these communities. Expatriate and refugee communities remain vulnerable to ideological penetration and recruitment, and they still identify themselves with the struggles in their homelands. Until and unless host governments develop a better cultural understanding of the threat and target terrorist propaganda—both its producers and their tools—the threat from within will persist.<sup>25</sup>

*A crucial element of the cultural front in the fight against terrorism is reforming the education system in the Muslim world.* Extremists primarily come from societies where there is a high level of extremist teaching. Social change must be encouraged and promoted, with an emphasis on education. There are serious problems caused by the religious schools. Terrorists make use of these schools to disseminate ideologies

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<sup>23</sup> Miles, "Theology and the clash of civilizations."

<sup>24</sup> *Time*, 29 March 2004, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Gunaratna, "Defeating Al Qaeda," 5.

that are contrary to the teachings of Islam. It is not religion that is taught there, but politics: the politics of hatred.

When asked which is the best measure of whether you are winning or losing a war on terrorism, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, said that the best way is “to monitor whether the numbers we are killing and deterring are greater than the numbers the Madrasas are producing and Al-Qaeda is recruiting.” Here stands the difference between two approaches: “hard,” or military power, used by Westerners to defeat terrorism, and “soft,” or cultural power, used by terrorists to win. This has to change. In the same way that terrorists are using now more and more hard power, those fighting them should focus on soft power. Joseph Nye, one of America’s leading thinkers on foreign policy, has advocated for the use of soft power in order to improve America’s image in the Middle East. He argues that the spread of information and American popular culture has generally increased global awareness and openness to American ideas and values.

Soft power worked with Communist Europe because of a common history, a shared religious heritage, and a similar cultural framework. But in the Middle East, there is a great disparity on all of these issues. Can efforts based in soft power really take root in Muslim societies? It is more difficult to wield soft power where there are deep cultural differences. For instance, it is almost impossible to think that Western values could be spread among the radical Islamists who abhor democracy, who believe that human rights and tolerance are imperialist inventions, and who want to have nothing to do with deeper Western values which are not those of the Koran as they interpret it. But the target of soft power should, again, be the large Muslim communities that are not yet radicalized, and the uneducated masses. In this regard, illiteracy is another important aspect to be dealt with. Destitute and illiterate young people, in my view, are the easiest target for recruitment by terrorist organizations, because they are the easiest to manipulate.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, a cultural approach to terrorism may not offer any concrete solution to it, but it definitely can provide us with a far more insightful and effective strategy to understand the concrete cultural issues involved in terrorism. Comprehending both the conditions that provoke terrorism as well as the ideological and cultural objectives that guide the terroristic response to these conditions will make us better prepared to understand the reasons for terrorism and to fight against it.

As it seems that there is no purely political or military solution to terrorism, it is reasonable to try to approach it differently. Nobody wants to antagonize the Muslim community. The United States has avoided portraying its campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban as a crusade against Islam, and it is not my intent to make Islam into a security issue either. Instead, I agree with those analysts who describe the enemy as an ideology, a set of attitudes, a belief system organized into a recruiting network that will continue to replace terrorist losses unless defeated politically, economically, and culturally. Therefore, if states do not have policies towards religions, they do respond to

ideologies, so it is important to develop hard power solutions in relation to Islamism and soft power approaches to Islam. Hard power is needed to eliminate the Islamist threat, while soft power is needed to attract the moderates, appease militant Islamists, and to promote a true alternative to Bin Laden in the world where he originated.

Islamic fundamentalism is a threat to Western culture, in the same way that Western culture is perceived as a threat to the Islamic world. It is always about misperceptions, misunderstandings, and ignorance about each other. But when people of one culture perceive those of another not just as alien but also as threatening, serious conflict is likely.<sup>26</sup>

I don't know if it is a clash of civilizations that we are facing today, but I do realize that there is a gap between the Muslim and the Western world, and I do think that terrorism increases that gap. This chasm needs to be narrowed, and cultural means may contribute to the effort. Without being blind to the dangers of militant fundamentalism, we must remain aware of the moral distinction between discrete religious sects like Wahhabis and terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and Islamic Jihad.

By continuing to maintain that moral bright line between terrorism and Islam, we help to legitimate all the varied and peaceful traditions of Islam, *including those that oppose fundamentalism*. This permits us to precisely isolate and destroy terrorists, while working on a multifaceted program to blunt and reduce militant fundamentalism within Islam.<sup>27</sup> Understanding the diversity of Islam gives those of us who are not Muslim a valuable tool to facilitate our dealings with Muslims, and is therefore a step that is much too important to ignore or deny.<sup>28</sup>

To conclude, viewing terrorism purely as a cultural phenomenon would be too extreme. Indeed, contemporary terrorism has cultural features, and may be taken as a cultural phenomenon, but the point is that, so far, the terrorism of the twenty-first century is the manifestation of only an isolated part of a culture, not of the whole. Just simply associating the two words seems inadequate to me. This is because I don't want to conflate a positive word with a complete negative one. Still, as we have seen, they meet somewhere. Therefore, I would argue that the form of terrorism we are facing today is rather a non-cultural, sub-cultural, or an a-cultural phenomenon. And, indeed, this sub-cultural phenomenon could well nourish "a clash of civilizations."

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<sup>26</sup> Murden, "Cultural conflict in international relations," 375.

<sup>27</sup> Forte, "Religion Is not the Enemy."

<sup>28</sup> Llewellyn D. Howell, "Act of war: terrorism in the Clash of Civilizations," *USA Today Magazine* (July 2002), available at: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1272/is\\_2686\\_131/ai\\_90683547](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1272/is_2686_131/ai_90683547).

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