



The Sources of Terrorist Conduct

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 12 (December 2004)

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Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

America lacks a grand strategy for waging the Global War on Terrorism. Though the Bush Administration and the military leadership understand that this will be a long and difficult conflict, we have no clear national policy to guide the day-to-day conduct of this war, including firm declaration of whether the Department of State or Defense is the lead federal agency.

Like the era of a Soviet threat, the United States needs a proven strategy to counter the terrorist threat. George Kennan's "Long Telegram" of 1947 (the foundational document of America's Cold War "containment" policy) provides a suitable framework for developing a strategy for defeating the Islamic Fundamentalist movement that has grown out of Sunni Wahabbi extremism, and employs terror attacks as its primary method of operation. What follows is a strategic and policy prescription for the war on terrorism, adapted from Kennan's distinctive work.

Part I

The political personality of Islamic Fundamentalist terrorism as we know it today is the product of ideology and circumstance—ideology inherited by the present terrorist leaders from the movement in which they had their political origin, and circumstances of the power which they now have exercised for two decades since the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Few tasks of psychological analyses are more difficult than to try to trace the interaction of these two forces and the relative role of each in the determination of global terrorist conduct. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made if that conduct is to be understood and effectively countered.

The set of ideological concepts with which the terrorist leaders came into power are extensive and complex, but Sunni Wahabbi ideology, in its extremist projection, has always been in process of subtle evolution. The outstanding features of jihadist thought as it existed in the early 1980s can be summarized as follows:

1. that the central factor in the life of man, the factor which determines the character of public life, is the Wahabbi interpretation of Sunni Islam;

2. that the democratic, Western capitalist society is a nefarious one which inevitable leads people away from Allah;
3. that democracy and capitalism contain the seeds of their own destruction and must, in view of the inability of the secular polity to adjust itself to global change, result eventually and inescapably in a revolutionary transfer of power to the emerging caliphate of the Islamic world; and
4. that imperialism, the final phase of democratic capitalism, leads directly to war and revolution.

The rest may be outlined in Bin Ladin's own words:

"It has become clear that the West in general and America in particular have an unspeakable hatred for Islam...Terrorism against America deserves to be praised because it was a response to injustice, aimed at forcing America to stop its support for Israel, which kills our people. We say that the end of the United States is imminent, whether Bin Laden or his followers are alive or dead, for the awakening of the Muslim umma (nation) has occurred. It is important to hit the economy (of the United States), which is the base of its military power...If the economy is hit they will become preoccupied."[\[1\]](#)

It must be noted that there was no assumption that America and allied, un-Islamic governments would perish without attacks from outside. A final push was needed from a jihadist movement in order to enable the coming of the third caliphate. But it was regarded as inevitable that sooner or later push would be given.

Part II

This historical summary provides the context of the political personality of Islamic extremist power as we know it today.

The fundamentalists have officially rejected nothing of the original ideology. Belief is maintained in the intrinsic depravity of democratic capitalism and Western mores, in the inevitability of its destruction and in the obligation of the Islamic faithful to assist in that destruction and to take power into their own hands. But stress has come to be laid primarily on those concepts that relate most specifically to the Islamic Fundamentalist regime itself: to its position as the sole truly righteous regime in a dark and misguided world, and to the relationships of power within it.

The most powerful of these concepts is that of the inherent conflict between democratic capitalism and Islam. That concept is deeply imbedded in foundations of terrorist ideology. It has profound implications for the extremists' conduct as members of a new international order, one where state boundaries are less important than the unity of the greater Islamic community. Because of this new and growing phenomenon there can never be on Islamic Fundamentalism's side an assumption of a community of aims between the true believers and powers that are regarded as non-believers.

The aims of the democratic capitalist world are antagonistic to Islam, and therefore to the interests of the people it controls. If individual extremists or Islamic governments occasionally set their signature to documents that would indicate the contrary, this would be regarded as a tactical maneuver permissible in dealing with the enemy (who is without honor) and should be taken in the spirit of *al-Taqiyyah*.[\[2\]](#) Basically, the antagonism remains. But we should not be misled by tactical maneuvers. These characteristics of the terrorists' policy, like the postulate from which they flow, are basic to the internal nature of Wahabbi power, and will be with us, whether in the foreground or the background, until the extremist nature of Islamic Fundamentalist power is appropriately identified, challenged, and eliminated.

Consequently, the West—specifically the United States—will continue to face terrorist threats in the foreseeable future. The enemy must be recognized as embarked upon a do-or-die path to defeat Western society, regardless of the cost to its own people—including sacrificing their own lives. Despite their theory of the inevitable fall of democratic capitalism implying an eventual victory, Osama bin Laden and his followers have declared their intent to hasten the downfall of the West. Their intent is viscious, their tactics bloody, and their aggression ongoing.

The sub-state and apocalyptic nature of Islamic fundamentalism make it more difficult to deal with than the threat of individual aggressive leaders like Napoleon and Hitler, or even state-based monoliths such as the Soviet Union. This enemy is less sensitive to contrary force, more able to disperse its forces and withstand the blows of direct combat while choosing the time and place of its own increasingly lethal attacks—which includes their increasing access to the technology for developing, testing and employing weapons of mass destruction.

Further, Islamic fundamentalism cannot be easily defeated or discouraged by a single victory on the part of its opponents or the loss of a sanctuary, such as Afghanistan. The very nature of the enemy dictates that it can adjust, adapt and move across borders in ways that defy traditional armies. And its patience and persistence, with which it develops further attacks, means this enemy can be effectively countered not by sporadic acts which represent the momentary whims of global democratic opinion, but only by intelligent long-term policies on the part of all the terrorists' adversaries—policies no less steady in their purpose than those of the Islamic Fundamentalists themselves.

It is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the terrorist threat must be that of firmly and vigilantly *diminishing the appeal* of their extremist beliefs while simultaneously *defeating* the core terrorists who are actively plotting to attack the US and its interests. The terrorist leaders are keen users of propaganda, and as such they are highly conscious of any appearance of weakness on the part of their enemy. They are quick to exploit evidence of such weakness as signs of the righteousness of their cause.

For these reasons it is a sine qua non of successful dealing with Islamic Fundamentalists that the United States should remain at all times aggressive and resolute in its efforts to counter the appeal and the tactics of terrorist movements.

Part III

In the light of the above, it will be clearly seen that the terrorist pressure against the free institutions of the western world is something that cannot be merely contained by diplomacy alone, and must instead be met with a two-pronged approach: *diminishing the appeal of Islamic Fundamentalist extremism while simultaneously defeating terrorist aggression.*

The terrorists look forward to a period of hegemony over the West—and they believe they have already scored great successes. We must bear in mind that the fame and reputation of the terrorists are expanding; indeed, there was a time when the Fundamentalist ideology represented far more of a minority in the sphere of Islamic countries than that ideology today represents in the world community as a whole.

Free and open societies must reverse this tide of acceptance of extremists' beliefs even as it actively destroys those whose minds cannot be changed and whose aggression is already in motion.

The terrorist leaders, taking advantage of the contributions of modern technology, have solved the question of obedience from the people who live in Islamic nations. They have branded moderate and modern regimes as apostates and declared their rulers “un-Islamic,” calling their

violent overthrow a duty to Allah. Few in their own community openly challenge their religious authority; and even those who do are unable to make that challenge valid as against the entire community of believers.

The al Qaida leadership has also proven able to accomplish its purpose of building alliances with and inspiring regional terror groups—including those in Bali, Madrid and Riyadh. This has led to a terrible cost in human life, and in human hopes and energies, as previously insignificant groups have become emboldened by a sense of unity with the global terrorist movement. This has, in turn, necessitated the use of stricter laws and internal security powers on a scale unprecedented in modern times under conditions of peace—further fueling the fires that propel these regional conflicts.

The war on terrorism has exacted a tremendous toll in destruction, death and human exhaustion. But the terrorists are certain to continue the fight, and we must continue the fight as well. The appropriate means is to attack the underlying causes of terrorism by diminishing its appeal to those who can be dissuaded from violence and terrorism, while simultaneously attacking and defeating those who cannot.

The proliferation of the technology, materials and means of delivery for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons also play an important part in dictating that we act immediately to find a solution for the threats posed by Islamic Fundamentalist extremists. It is the potential—or rather inevitable—marriage of terrorists' methods with the inherent capabilities of such weapons to do great harm that further demands a vigilant and aggressive American response.

Part IV

It is clear that the United States cannot expect to enjoy political accord with Islamic Fundamentalists. Their absolutist ideologies, intolerance for peace and democracy, and terrorist methods all belie the notion of peaceful co-existence. Therefore, the United States must continue to regard these ideologies as not merely a potential threat but as a clear and present danger. It must continue to expect that the enemy's policies will reflect no love of peace or stability, no faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Islamic Fundamentalist and democratic capitalist worlds, but rather a persistent state of conflict.

Balanced against this is the fact that, if America decides to sacrifice other wants and needs to fully focus on diminishing the appeal of the terrorist ideology while defeating the aggressors, the terrorists are at present by far the weaker party.

By the same token, exhibitions of indecision, disunity and internal disintegration within this country have an exhilarating effect on the whole Fundamentalist movement. At each evidence of these tendencies, a thrill of hope and excitement goes through the terrorists' world; a new jauntiness can be noted in the enemy's tread; new groups of supporters climb on to what they can only view as the band wagon of international support; and extremist pressures increase all along the line in international affairs, threatening the stability of our allies and the world's other moderate regimes.

American behavior unassisted and alone may not command the power of life and death over the Islamic Fundamentalist movement and bring about the defeat of its worldview. But the United States has within its power to means by which to increase enormously the strains under which the terrorists' policy must operate, to force upon them a far greater degree of open debate and empowerment of the disenfranchised than would be able to be expressed under their tyrannical rule. America can and must work with her allies to promote open dialogue, to offer up discussion among the voices of moderation and tolerance that will sow the seeds of individual thought and responsibility throughout the repressed populations in the Islamic world. For no movement that

aims to dominate and control the human spirit—and particularly not that of the extremists Wahabbis—can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself in one way or another to the logic of the value of individual needs and wants.

Thus the decision will really fall in large measure to the United States itself. The issue of defeating terrorist aggression is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as the most powerful of nations among a community of nations. To avoid destruction, the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation. It must encourage open dialogue with the world as a whole, and allow the merits of freedom and democracy to be debated. Winning the struggle to diminish the appeal of terrorism will depend upon the strength of our conviction that all life is valuable and free, and that open debate is the best form of self-governance. At the same time, we must draw deeply on the American ethos of fighting when forced to fight, and actively opposing those terrorists whose aggression cannot be countered by debate alone.

Surely, there was never a fairer test of national quality than to defend oneself against the absolutist doctrine of fundamentalism. The thoughtful observer of international relations will be clearly concerned with this threat posed by the emergence of terrorists willing and able to employ weapons of mass destruction. Steps must be taken to defeat this enemy, not merely to subsist alongside it. As during the Cold War, the American people have been presented with an implacable challenge, and our entire security as a nation is dependent on pulling ourselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended for us to bear.

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References

1. Statement of [Osama bin Laden](#) as broadcast by Al-Jazeera, December 27, 2001.
2. "Al-Taqiyya" literally means "Concealing or disguising one's beliefs, convictions, ideas, feelings, opinions, and/or strategies at a time of eminent danger, whether now or later in time, to save oneself from physical and/or mental injury." From the Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project on the [Al-Islam.org](#) website.

About the Author

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