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978-0-521-88175-3 - Unmodern Men in the Modern World: Radical Islam, Terrorism, and the War on Modernity
Michael J. Mazarr
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1 The Argument

Six years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 inaugurated a new era of conflict, we still do not understand our enemy.

We – in the United States, the West, the large parts of the world that have come under attack from militant jihadists – refer to "extremist Islamic terrorism," without a clear sense of what we mean by the phrase. Our mind's eye still brings forth al Qaeda and the sinewy figure of Osama bin Laden as the symbols of the enemy, despite the fact that he and his organization represent only a declining, or perhaps severely damaged and only now resurgent, fraction of the larger trend.[1] We asked five years ago "why they hate us," and we still do not have very many persuasive, or widely accepted, answers – either to who "they" are or to the origins of the purported hate. Six years into a conflict that is supposedly reshaping world politics, an assortment of impressions, half-truths, and unanswered questions still guides our thinking.

Given the solemn importance of 9/11 and the changes it inaugurated, it seemed reasonable to expect that the U.S. government would conduct a thorough and rigorous analysis of its new adversary before it plunged into the conflict. It seemed obvious that there were several interpretations of al Qaeda at large, and the wider trend of radical Islamism it reflected – its origins, its goals, the true motives of those who joined or sympathized with its activities. And it seemed equally apparent that those varying interpretations suggested very different courses of action for the United States, everything from a simple hunt-and-kill exercise to a sort of Marshall Plan

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for the Islamic world. Without understanding the movement, we could not appreciate what to do about it. And yet it is little exaggeration to say that, in 2001, the U.S. government plunged into a hastily declared, ill-thought-through "war" with only the crudest and ultimately most misleading understanding of the adversary; and since that time, not nearly enough time or effort has been spent at the seniormost levels of government to make up the lost analytical ground.

That process, I will contend, could profitably benefit from viewing this threat as the latest in a series of violent reactions against the process and outcomes of modernization and modernity. Wherever modernization touches societies, it leaves instability and disaffection in its wake. Some societies manage this transition; some do not. Those that do not tend to suffer from a typical set of circumstances, and take a similar route to antimodern radicalism. It is in the similarities and parallels between these movements that we can find much wisdom about current events.

II From the very first days after 9/11, President Bush and his administration have displayed a strikingly indistinct vision of the origins of the radical Islamist challenge. Immediately after the attacks, the administration embarked on a pattern from which it has never substantially deviated: referring to al Qaeda and other jihadist movements as "evildoers" whose primary motivation is their hatred of freedom and the American way of life. Al Qaeda's goal, President Bush claimed in his September 20, 2001, State of the Union address,[2] was "remaking the world – and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere." The radicals, he said, reflected "a fringe form of Islamic extremism" whose doctrine "commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans," and who "hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."[3] That November, speaking in Warsaw, Bush suggested that the jihadists aimed to "impose their radical views through threats and violence," an endeavor characterized by "intolerance of dissent," "mad, global ambitions," and a "brutal determination to control every life and

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all of life." Since that time, in dozens of speeches and press conferences, the president and his senior advisors have used these same phrases over and over again, referring to "evil" terrorists who "hate our way of life."

Part and parcel of this effort has been a seemingly conscious refusal to admit that this "enemy" has any legitimacy whatsoever, in its anger or its goals or its worldview. Take one October 2005 presidential speech as an example: Bush said that, "In fact, we're not facing a set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed. We're facing a radical ideology with unalterable objectives: to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world." Such a view of the enemy, needless to say, endorses an uncompromising and militaristic approach; if an enemy is simply a force of evil, unconnected to any real human hopes or fears or angers, then the only thing left to do is to annihilate them.

Such sentiments could perhaps be understood as the product of an initial shock and horror at cruel attacks on the American homeland. What is astonishing, however – in a substantive if not perhaps a political sense – is how little has changed since then in the administration's public depiction of the threat. This is not to say that notions of radicalism, jihadist, and the history of both within Islam go unmentioned: In a September 5, 2006, speech to the Military Officers Association of America, for example, President Bush did lay out a fleeting history of the movement, discussing al Qaeda as "violent Sunni extremists" hoping to establish a Caliphate across the Muslim world. But the rhetoric quickly returned to form: These men, Bush continued, were "driven by a radical and perverted vision of Islam that rejects tolerance, crushes all dissent, and justifies the murder of innocent men, women and children in the pursuit of political power"; they "have declared their uncompromising hostility to freedom." Less than a week later, in an address to the nation on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Bush said that America had glimpsed "the face of evil"; the resulting struggle, he claimed, ought properly to be seen as "the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century, and the calling of our generation."

Official U.S. strategy documents for the so-called war on terror furnish little better in the way of deep analysis of the adversary.

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The revised *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, released in September 2006, defines radical Islamists as "The followers of a murderous ideology that despises freedom and crushes all dissent, and has territorial ambitions and pursues totalitarian aims." It continues:

> What unites the movement is a common vision, a common set of ideas about the nature and destiny of the world, and a common goal of ushering in totalitarian rule. What unites the movement is the ideology of oppression, violence, and hate. Our terrorist enemies exploit Islam to serve a violent political vision. Fueled by a radical ideology and a false belief that the United States is the cause of most problems affecting Muslims today, our enemies seek to expel Western power and influence from the Muslim world and establish regimes that rule according to a violent and intolerant distortion of Islam.

"For our terrorist enemies," the document contends, "violence is not only justified, it is necessary and even glorified – judged the only means to achieve a world vision darkened by hate, fear, and oppression."[4]

Interestingly, the *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* sees things differently – its analysis hews largely to the vision of "network-centric warfare" prominent in the Pentagon these days.[5] "The enemy is a transnational movement of extremist organizations, networks, and individuals – and their state and non-state supporters – which have in common that they exploit Islam and use terrorism for ideological ends," the report contends. It argues that these networked terrorists are "motivated by extremist ideologies antagonistic to freedom, tolerance, and moderation." The report then offers a somewhat detailed – if entirely antiseptic – analysis of the "functions, processes, and resources" used by these networks; it considers the enemy as a structure and process rather than a set of people with powerful motivations and mind-sets. The same report then goes on to define "extremists" as those who "(1) oppose . . . the right of people to choose how to live and how to organize their societies and (2) support the murder of ordinary people to advance extremist ideological purposes." Having characterized

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the enemy in this way, it naturally follows that the "war on terror" represents an effort "to preserve ordinary peoples' ability to live as they choose, and to protect the tolerance and moderation of free and open societies."

The administration, for its own purposes, wants this conflict to be seen as a grand and heroic civilizational war against mindlessly evil haters of freedom and attackers of ordinary people. It therefore defines the enemy to preordain such an interpretation. In this war, as in all wars, we make our enemy what we need it to be rather than recognizing them for who they are.

Yet these descriptions are vastly too simplistic and narrow, and give no credence to the very real motives afflicting the jihadists. To be sure, there are hundreds of thoughtful, expert analysts in the U.S. government – in regional affairs bureaus, intelligence agencies, counterterrorism shops, policy-making offices – with a deep, nuanced appreciation for the character of radical Islamism. Surely they report their thinking to senior leaders in various ways. For whatever reasons, however, this degree of appreciation has not found its way into the Bush administration's public characterization of the conflict; and more dangerously, it has not influenced the shape of our strategy and policy for dealing with it.

You will not be able to review such speeches and documents for any true (as opposed to rhetorical and reproving) sense of what drives radical Islamists. You will search in vain for any significant reference to the movement's roots in a centuries-old tradition of Muslim and Arab resistance to outside influence. You will see no distinction made between Sunni and Shi'a radicalism, between classical political terrorism and more recent fantasist varieties, between those groups possibly willing to reach a settlement and those who live only to fight and die in service of an obscure utopia. You will encounter the stubborn, willful refusal to admit that the United States and the West have played any role in fostering this anger.

To be very clear: I am not suggesting *sympathy* for al Qaeda and other terrorists. As nearly all Muslims and even many Islamists recognize, the tactics of the jihadists, involving the rejection of all compromise and the murder of innocents, are abhorrent; and their

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goal, a totalitarian theocracy, would be ruinous for those forced to live under its brutal rule. Those who engage in terrorism *are* doing "evil." But as we also must recognize, the objective social, economic, and psychological conditions that have brought the jihadists to a place of self-destructive rage are very real. *To understand an enemy*, to be able to see the world through their eyes, *is not the same as sympathizing with them*, and this task of understanding remains an urgent one. It is a truism about any conflict that, to win, you must know your enemy – its character, motivations, and goals. On this score, the U.S. response to the radical Islamist challenge has simply failed.

III Some years ago, a group of troubled young men in a country wracked by disorienting progress and development poured out their grievances into a bitter accusation against their society. They held, as one later chronicler put it, "strong feelings about what they were against, but had some difficulty defining exactly what it was. Westernization . . . was like a disease" that had infected the spirit of their nation. Capitalism, commercialism, science, notions of individual freedom – these and other imports from the encroaching West affronted these men. One conference of impassioned academics from among their number concluded that their traditional culture was "spiritual and profound, whereas modern Western civilization was shallow, rootless, and destructive of creative power."[6]

Some decades earlier, another set of young men in a different country had come to similar conclusions. "Above all," Fritz Stern tells us of this group,

> these men loathed liberalism. . . . [E]verything they dreaded seemed to spring from it: the bourgeois life . . . materialism, parliament and the parties, the lack of political leadership. Even more, they sensed in liberalism the source of all their inner sufferings. Theirs was a resentment of loneliness; their one desire was for a new faith, a new community of believers, a world with fixed standards and no doubts, a new national religion that would bind all [of their people] together. All this, liberalism denied. Hence, they hated liberalism,

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> blamed it for making outcasts of them, for uprooting them from their imaginary past, and from their faith.[7]

When this country eventually capitulated to the virulent appeal of a demagogue, it did not do so, another writer explained, because it "had become part of modern western society." Instead, it succumbed "because this modern society had been imposed on pre-modern social and intellectual foundations which were proudly retained."[8]

Decades later, an Iranian essayist and fiction writer named Jalal Al-e Ahmad would coin a new phrase for the threat he perceived: "Weststruckness" or "Westoxication." The thing was "like cholera," Al-e Ahmad wrote. He believed that the result was a loss of identity. "We're like a nation alienated from itself, in our clothing and our homes, our food and our literature, our publications and, most dangerously of all, our education."[9] That same period and same culture inspired another angry observer of the moral and cultural debasement of his people. One translation of the man's best-known book, *Signposts along the Road*, begins this way:

> Humanity is standing today at the brink of an abyss . . . because humanity is bankrupt in the realm of "values," those values which foster true human progress and development. This is abundantly clear to the Western world, for the West can no longer provide the values necessary for [the flourishing of] humanity.[10]

Finally, consider a fourth case, yet another angry radicalism whose leaders possessed motivations that conform to the same pattern I have been sketching out. "Their ideological leaders were a small group with the cohesiveness and sense of mission of a religious sect," one historian has written. "In their fervent moral opposition to the existing order, their single-minded preoccupation with ideas, and their faith in reason and science, they paved the way for . . . revolution."[11] "Imagine, then," the historian and political theorist Isaiah Berlin adds,

> a group of young men . . . with a degree of passion for ideas perhaps never equaled in a European society, seizing upon ideas as they

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> come from the west with unconscionable enthusiasm, and making plans to translate them swiftly into practice – and you will have some notion of what the early members of the intelligentsia were like. . . . Like persons in a dark wood, they tended to feel a certain solidarity simply because they were so few and far between; because they were weak, because they were truthful, because they were sincere, because they were unlike the others. . . . They were a persecuted minority who drew strength from their very persecution; they were the self-conscious bearers of a western message, freed from the chains of ignorance and prejudice, stupidity or cowardice, by some great western liberator – a German romantic, a French socialist – who had transformed their vision.[12]

The result of such a catalogue of mind-sets is a sort of "superfluous person," a "member of a tiny minority of educated and morally sensitive men, who is unable to find a place in his native land and, driven in upon himself, is liable to escape neither into fantasies and illusions, or into cynicism or despair, ending, more often than not, in self-destruction and surrender."[13]

Apart from the likeness of their psychologies and worldviews, the radicals who populated these four contexts – the authors of these anti-Western jeremiads – had much else in common. All were bourgeois, intellectual, morally aware and concerned. All lived in countries that had started promisingly on the road to wealth and worldwide respect, only to be derailed by corrupt, dissolute governments, a collapse of public morality, and meddling by outside powers. All had come to believe that the only answer to their society's decline was the reveneration of primeval national values and myths. All had embraced, or at least endorsed, violence as a necessary tool in this struggle.

The first set of quotes describes the mind-set of young Japanese nationalists in the early 1930s. The second deals with the intellectual origins of National Socialism in Germany. The next pair of quotations comes from two famous Islamists – one a leading theorist of the Iranian revolution, the other from arguably the pivotal ideologist of modern Islamism, Sayyid Qutb; and the final quotes about "superfluous men" describe the Russian prerevolutionary intelligentsia. The parallels between these disparate situations and

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beliefs point to the central thesis of this book, to the true character of the wave of radical Islamism. In its resentments, its bill of complaints, the sorts of people it attracts, and the mechanism through which it approaches power, radical Islamism falls into a well-worn pattern, a pattern that the West has encountered over and over again.[14] It is a pattern on display in the twentieth-century radicalisms of Germany, Japan, and Russia, a pattern that as we will see was chronicled as well as reflected by the philosophical school known as existentialism.

The reality of al Qaeda and similar terrorist groups, and the danger that the ideology motivating them will infect vastly greater numbers of people in the Arab and Muslim worlds, emerges from peoples' reactions to the modern, Western-shaped world; the anger and confusion of that reaction; and the fury at their governments' inability to promote the interests and welfare of their peoples in a globalizing world. Its origins lie in historical insults to national as well as individual identity and self-esteem, and in the socioeconomic crisis of Arab and Muslim societies. "Though there are obvious differences between the fanatical Christian, the fanatical Mohammedan, the fanatical nationalist, the fanatical Communist and the fanatical Nazi," contended that genius stevedore Eric Hoffer half a century ago, "it is yet true that the fanaticism which animates them may be viewed and treated as one. . . . There are vast differences in the contents of holy causes and doctrines, but a certain uniformity in the factors which make them effective." For Hoffer, the main thread of unity in this tapestry of radical and reactionary movements was the sort of person to whom they appealed. All of them drew their "adherents from the same types of humanity and appeal[ed] to the same types of mind"[15]: A mind-set besieged, thwarted, filled with real and invented grievances, overwhelmed with the existential demands of modernity, thrilled with the prospect of revalidating a humiliated nation or ethnic group by recapturing age-old values and glories.

There is little question that this is precisely the type of mind against which we are facing off in the violent purveyors of radical Islamism. The psychiatrist Marc Sageman quotes an influential Islamist theoretician of the mid-twentieth century, Muhammad

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Abd al-Salam Faraj – a follower and disciple of Sayyid Qutb – who struck a theme common to the whole movement when he referred to the "lowness, humiliation, division and fragmentation in which the Muslims live today." In his interviews with terrorists in custody, Sageman found other parallels. "Just before they joined the jihad," he writes, "the prospective mujahediun were socially and spiritually alienated and probably in some form of distress."[16] The French scholar of radical Islamism Olivier Roy has written of anti-modern radicals in Europe that they are not primarily after policy change; they are, instead, "a lost generation, unmoored from traditional societies and cultures, frustrated by a Western society that does not meet their expectations."[17]

Yet half a decade after September 11, we continue to portray these men as nothing more than "evildoers," and to define national security by and large in the traditional way. Threats are concrete, specific, and grounded in material capabilities. At issue, for the most part, are political-military questions such as power, territory, alliances, credibility, and prestige. Terrorist groups are quickly lashed to "state sponsors" and thus made intelligible in traditional terms; and, having thus traditionalized the nontraditional, we deploy in response the tried and true elements of *realpolitik* – military action, coalition building, threats and promises, intervention overt and covert. It is one thing to confront a handful of evil men who must be caught or killed. Regard such people as the tip of an immense psychological iceberg, which reaches miles down into the history, culture, and sense of dignity of the Muslim world, and the challenge takes on rather different dimensions.

The psychological factors at the root of terrorism and the anti-modern movements that have spawned it are making a mockery of our militarized, muscle-flexing response. The security threats faced by the United States and other developed nations today have everything to do with the pressures of modernity and globalization, the diaphanous character of identity, the burden of choice and the vulnerability of the alienated. That is not *all* that they have to do with, and such psychological factors are themselves nestled in a larger context of geopolitical, socioeconomic, cultural, demographic and other realities. Yet those material issues become most

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