

Viewing Violence and Terrorism in a Larger Context

By Mehrzad Boroujerdi

A German philosopher once said: "It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home." Allow me to speak as a man who by deliberate choice as well as involuntary circumstances often finds himself "homeless." Better yet, allow me to speak as a "skeptical homeless man" who in the aftermath of the heinous acts committed on September 11 is more inclined than ever to subscribe to that worldview best summed up in the phrase "pessimism of intellect, optimism of will."

AP/Wide World Photos



The Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia, is a holy site in Islam second only to nearby Mecca. The conflict between westernization and Islamic tradition has become much more acute since the September 11 attacks.

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What am I pessimistic about? I am pessimistic about the cause of civilizational understanding and world peace as I observe how the various sides involved in this conflict evoke deceptive yet effective "rationales" that are anchored in abstract prejudices and concrete exaggerations. The perpetrators of the recent terrorist attack cheaply clear their conscience by blaming the United States in particular—and the West in general—for the monumental shortcomings, maladies, and self-inflicted wounds of the Islamic world. The cherished antediluvian views, the oft-repeated demagogic slogans, the conspiratorial mindset, the intolerance for dissent, and the callous disregard for the sanctity.

Meanwhile, the twin towers of paranoia and patriotism—coupled with Americans' lack of knowledge and lazy prejudices about the Arab/Islamic world—are also hindering any move beyond politically expedient incrimination. While a disconcerted American public is rather reluctant, under the present circumstances, to acknowledge that its country's foreign policy may have contributed in some way, shape, or form to the recent tragedies, the fact remains that the United States has a serious image problem in the Middle East and the Islamic world at large. At best, America is perceived as a benign yet clumsy elephant in a china shop, and at worst as an imperial power that for more than half a century has been guilty of depredations, double standards, hauteur, interventions, sanctions, strong-arm tactics, and support of ruthless dictators. The former view leads to

Healing and Humanity

The apartheid system in South Africa incarcerated Nelson Mandela for more than 27 years, and was directly responsible for the deaths of more than 2 million people in the Southern Africa region and South Africa. The United States government supported the apartheid regime and branded Nelson Mandela a terrorist. This same leadership once trained and supported bin Laden as a freedom fighter. When South Africa attained majority rule, Mandela established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to investigate crimes committed by the apartheid regime. The tragic bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon brought to the forefront the challenges of how to end terrorism and wanton murders. The Mandela methodology of "Truth and Reconciliation" offers an example of healing and a way of isolating those who carry out criminal acts.

In this moment of collective mourning, let us remember all of those who lost their lives through these acts. As we continue to mourn, let the spirit of healing prevail over the spirit of revenge and massive military build-up so that the forces of peace and justice internationally can prevail over the forces of warfare. Warfare in this moment of the biotech century will open up untold consequences. The reorganization of the priorities of humanity must be at the top of our agenda in this moment.

—Horace G. Campbell, professor of African American studies
and political
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In the interim, I have little faith that the U.S. government will abandon a multitude of policies that have alienated a good number of people in the Islamic world. As a case in point consider America's relations with the "petrolic"—yet despotic—monarchies in the Persian Gulf. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, these countries produce nearly 28 percent of the world's oil and maintain 70 percent of the world's excess oil production capacity in addition to respectively holding 65 percent and 34 percent of the world's proven oil and gas reserves. These statistics become even more significant once we recognize that (a) petroleum and natural gas respectively account for 38 percent and 24 percent of U.S. energy consumption; and (b) U.S. reliance on foreign oil imports has increased from 21 percent in 1966 to 51 percent in 1996. Will any U.S. administration contemplate voluntarily abandoning these regimes so central to its "national interest" in favor of more

anodyne dinner-table jokes or coffeehouse resentments, while the latter inflames the lethal wrath of leftist, nationalist, and religious militants. In short, America's self-congratulatory perception of itself is in sharp contrast to the view that holds it to be colossally responsible for the alleys of discontent, the valleys of despair, and the mountains of disdain permeating certain quarters of the Arab/Islamic world.

Despite the hyperbole currently in vogue, I remain skeptical that the events of September 11 will go down in the annals of history as the tragic inauguration of a fundamentally "transformed world." I believe that once the present ambiance of grief, reprisal, and sympathy dissipates we will realize that the vista of the future is still polluted with the dirty linen of yesteryears and the repulsive problems of today. The Middle East as a region and Islam as a religion will still be in the throws of a severe and multifaceted identity crisis. Implacable enmity, vitriolic denunciations, and revanchist designs will in all likelihood remain the mantra of those marginalized by the mutilated modernity now reigning supreme in the Muslim world.

democratic, independent-minded, and transparent governments? Is there any surprise as to why the United States is so inclined to resort to gunboat diplomacy against its enemies while remaining reluctant to expose the parody of democracy practiced by its regional allies? Furthermore, in light of the "global campaign against terrorism," will the United States ever be in a position to object when these states—which all have been handed the equivalent of a "get-out-of-jail-free" card in a Monopoly game—start to hunt down their local dissidents under the banner of "fighting terrorism?" Finally, let me remind the reader that 50 years of America's unqualified support for Israel and its lack of evenhandedness have begotten this country a great deal of ill will in the Arab/Muslim world.

I wish it were possible to exile all the above troubles and follies from history, or at least force them to take an extended vacation from it. Yet, as a student of politics, I know that this is a mere fantasy. As far as I am concerned, it is a safe bet that violence will remain the corollary of dissidence and that terrorism, as a political tool, will linger on as the favorite method of conducting asymmetrical warfare. We should make sense of the spasms of violence and terrorism in the larger context of the growing disparity between rich and poor individuals and nations, the revolution of rising expectations, the void left by the disappearance of previously potent ideologies and cultural unifiers, the revival of religious and ethnic identities, and the collapse of states in certain parts of our global village.

Those who exploit the present abyss of fury, embrace cultural vandalism and killing vendettas, and promise Manichean visions are not delivering the proper benediction for a new world order. Now, more than ever, we are in need of developing what a contemporary philosopher has called an "ethic of the ear." Can the optimism of will triumph over the pessimism of intellect?

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