The Roots of Islamic Radicalism

Professor Bernard Lewis once told me about a cartoon in an Arab-language newspaper in the Middle East, while we were discussing the Middle Eastern custom of drinking strong, black coffee. The cartoon depicted a eunuch talking to an Arab woman covered in traditional clothing, with only her eyes showing. AMadam,≅ said the eunuch, Ayou smoke filtered cigarettes, you drink decaffeinated coffee, why not have me?≅ With his typical wit, Lewis captured the core dilemma confronting the Arab world in the modern age. Inheritors of a once-great civilization that could not withstand the challenges of the modern age, Middle Easterners are torn between the grandeur of their past and the crisis of their present condition.

For a thousand years after its founding in A.D. 622, Islam ruled the largest and most powerful empire in the world, a realm even more advanced than that of Christendom. The Muslim world=s achievements in philosophy, science, art, poetry, mathematics, and medicine, and its great cities in Spain, the Levant, and the Fertile Crescent, enabled it to surpass Europe as the world=s leading civilization. But since its zenith a millennium ago, the Arab world has experienced a steady decline. The Islamic realm reached its territorial peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Turkish Ottoman Empire reached the gates of Vienna, spread from the Pyrenees to Indonesia, and ruled millions of people. But since the collapse of that empire, especially following World War I, Islam has been on the defensive and its world on the decline. The story of that decline helps explain what happened to America on September 11, and what the United States must do in response.

Seeds of Decline

The West gained direct or indirect control of much of the Middle East following the collapse of Ottoman Turkey, the Asick man≅ on the Bosporus. The Allies divided the region into new entitiesXnation-states whose borders were drawn either at random or in a manner that served the interests of the Western powers. This division frequently ignored the sentiments and loyalties of the local populations. After this partitioning, the Middle East=s decline accelerated. Today its governments are dictatorial, its populations largely uneducated and impoverished, and its politics violent and oppressive. The defeat and resultant humiliation of this world, and its inability to stand up to the challenges of modernity and secularization, have bred feelings of resentment toward the West. These sentiments characterize much of Middle Eastern culture today. Yet this sense of humiliation and resentment is paradoxically mixed with feelings of admiration toward the West. Many Middle Easterners cherish the ways and achievements of the democratic, open societies of the West, but are revolted by what they view as its moral corruption and fading spirituality and values. For them, the West, with its democratic and free ways, is a

beautiful seductress, an object of desire which they reject and whose allurements they begrudge because it exposes their own shameful wants and because it is so completely unattainable.

Elements within Middle Eastern societies, especially the Sunni religious extremists, hate the West because our success exposes the malaise of their world. They are threatened by the globalization of American values, economics, and popular culture, and by the extent to which the United States captures the imagination of Middle Eastern intellectuals and youth. They believe that television, music, movies in which men and women have promiscuous relationships, and Western science (which puts evolution before God and serves as an alternative explanation to reality), all corrupt the minds and hearts of their people. In Islam, Satan=s power works through temptation; the West is thus satanic to many Muslims. Hence, these Muslims= envy is matched only by their contempt toward what they view as the West=s lack of principles and loose moral code. The Western concept of individual freedom, they believe, leads inevitably to the license to pursue lusts and desires and to the blasphemous worship of the god of the free market.

Paradoxically, Muslim fanatics in the Arab worldXwho themselves use violenceXview themselves as defenseless victims of the modern world. They see themselves as the last barrier protecting their society against the ills of modernityXliberalism, individualism, and secularism. They recognize that Islam was defeated during its rendezvous with the West and modernity as the ideas and values of the modern West spread throughout the world while Islam, despite what they consider its moral and intellectual superiority, drifted to the margins. The situation grew even worse, they believe, when the decay of the modern world spread into the heartlands of Islam. The rise of modern nation-states in the Middle East artificially separated Muslims from one another, and the nationalism that followed broke down their solidarity even further. The emphasis placed by some modern Arab states on their own unique, pre-Islamic heritageXevoking the memory of the Pharaohs in Egypt or of the Babylonian past in Iraq, for exampleXonly deepened the radicals= sense of despair, their mood of gloom and impending doom. Even the Muslim religious establishment in the new Arab nation-states could not be trusted to stop the erosion of Islam. The largely secular leaders of the Arab world appointed this establishment, thereby reducing its members to the level of mere civil servants who depended on the state for their positions and salaries. As author Emmanuel Sivan pointed out in his seminal work *Radical Islam* (1990), the clerics= betrayal of pure Islam, their submission to the rule of man-made governments, was, in the eyes of Sunni Muslim radicals, the most telling sign of the decline of their religion and its civilization.

Flaws in the Foundation

During the 1950s and 1960s, radical Sunni Muslim thinkers, especially in Egypt (where the terrorist group the Muslim Brotherhood had been active since 1928), managed to fuse their sense of pessimism with political activism, turning their desperation into a plan of action. Spurred by the soul-searching that followed the Arab world=s defeats at the hands of Israel in 1948 and 1967, the radicals shaped a new, more radical Islamist ideology calling for revolutions and violence. For the radicals, 1967 was a watershed. The devastating loss of the war made themXas one of the few truly introspective forces in Arab societyXlook for the ills of their own world, to search for the flaws within. They concluded that the shortcomings of their society resulted from the fact that Islam did not govern the Arab world, that the latter had become a land of apostasy and profanation. During this period, Islamists developed the idea that the war against Israel was not the true, meaningful jihad (holy war). Instead, in order to defeat Zionism, a holy war first had to be waged against the forces that had brought Islam to its current state of decline. This war had to be directed against the Arab world=s secular, apostate, nationalistic regimes.

During the next twenty years, radical Muslims concentrated on fighting these regimes. They directed their violence not only against the leaders of those states (the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981, for example), but also against the state-appointed religious establishment and the nations= economic interests (including attacks on Western tourists, which were meant to destroy the local tourism industries). Feeling increasingly threatened by this violence, secular Arab regimes have been doing battle against radical Muslims since the 1950s. Arab governments threw many of them in jail, in some cases torturing and even executing their leaders.

Period of Ignorance

A turning point in this struggle was the execution, in 1966, of Sayyid Qutb, one of the key leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and a leading Sunni radical theorist. Qutb, a literary critic and educator, developed in the 1940s and 1950s many of the ideas of radical Islam that still guide the movement today. As a young man, Qutb was drawn to the ideas of pan-Arab nationalismXthe notion that all Arabs should be united under one rule. In fact, prior to the 1956 revolution, he befriended Gamal Abdul Nasser, the eventual Egyptian president, who even attended some of Qutb=s lectures. Coming later to the conclusion that nationalism alone could not provide sufficient answers to the ills of Arab society, Qutb turned to radical Islam.

Like the terrorists who committed the atrocities of September 11, Qutb was familiar with the ideas and lifestyle of the West. Between 1948 and 1950 he studied

modern systems of education and training at several American colleges, including Wilson=s Teachers= College (now the University of the District of Columbia) in Washington, D.C.; the Teacher=s College, an institute at the University of Northern Colorado; and Stanford University in California. From the Teacher=s College he obtained a master=s degree in education. His familiarity with the West became the basis for his rejection of it.

Qutb described his American experience in a book titled *America That I Saw.* He rejected three features of American society which he found shocking and appalling: materialism, racism, and sexual permissiveness. Qutb argued that the American leadership of the free world was purely economic and offered no moral guidance. Despite its undeniable achievements in technology and science, the West, Qutb believed, offered nothing to the human soul. The principles of the West were destitute, and America stood tall like a grand dead treeXwholly rotten to its core and ready to fall.

Nowhere was Qutb=s criticism of the West more venomous than in his description of American religious behavior. To comment on this matter, Qutb joined some church clubs and attended their services frequently. He wrote that no people were as Aremoved from feeling the spirituality, respect, and sacredness of religion than the Americans.≅ The church, he argued, became for Americans a place of amusement rather than of worship. The priests, he wrote, did their utmost to attract the largest possible number of people to their church services, even providing Aattractive young girls≅Xnot out of piety but simply in order to outdraw the many competing sects and churches. The church itself, far from being a place of morality and devotion, had become a mere meeting place for young men and women. There they could get acquainted, befriend one another, and even touch each other during dances hosted by the priests. The priests, according to Qutb, did not feel that their job was any different from that of Astage managers or store managers.≅

After returning to Egypt, however, Qutb put aside his contempt for America and turned his attention toward the ills of his own society. He adopted many of the ideas of the Indian Muslim thinker Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi, especially the notion of the *Jahiliyyah* (period of ignorance). The *Jahiliyyah,* a term by which radical Muslims denote the pre-Islamic state of spiritual confusion, was expanded by Qutb to indicate not only the historical period before the prophet Muhammad=s time but also to provide a framework for understanding the present and to condemn those whose lifestyles did not conform to divine directives. *Jahiliyyah* was present wherever an individual lived according to his whims and wishes, and it existed anywhere people held to a collective identity other than Islam. *Jahiliyyah* was also Athe rule of one man over another, . . . man being a subject of another man and not of Allah.≅

Accordingly, the modern concepts of nationalism and sovereignty were marked conditions of *Jahiliyyah*. This was Qutb=s battle cry, not only against the Western democracies but first and foremost against the Arab states.

Qutb=s writings were laced with despair. He believed that he was witnessing the dawn of a new age of *Jahiliyyah*, and that stopping the tide was possible only by way of a revolution against the secular Arab regimes that controlled so much of the region. Only their destruction and the establishment of an Islamic empire would return the Arabs to their former glory and enable them to defeat Israel and the West. Qutb=s radical revolutionary plan of action included the assassination of the president of the Egyptian Republic, the prime minister, the head of intelligence, the head of the military police, and others, as well as the destruction of essential lines of communication and transportation. This ambitious plan did not escape the watchful eye of President Nasser=s regime, which put Qutb, other members of his family, and many of his disciples in jail and tortured them.

Ironically, Muslim radicals had initially viewed Nasser as a potential ally, a man who might bring about Arab unity. His success, they felt, would provide a stepping stone for the revival of the pan-Islamic empire. But Nasser offered no such foundation. He failed to bring about lasting Arab unity and instead used the full might of his state to extinguish all residual freedom and crush his opposition. Rather than withering away to make room for the union of all Muslims, the modern Arab state became even stronger and more oppressive.

Qutb was sentenced to death after serving several prolonged jail sentences during which he suffered unthinkable abuses. Author Ahmad Moussali described one of Qutb=s arrests. Already suffering from a high fever when he was arrested, Qutb was sent to a military prison where the guards beat and abused him for two hours. A trained military dog was let loose on him and held his thigh in its jaw as it dragged him back and forth. He was then taken to a cell and interrogated continuously for seven hours. For years after his execution, Qutb=s teachings continued to inspire Sunni Muslim radicals. Among other violent acts inspired by Qutb=s words of hate, his pupils assassinated President Sadat in October 1981 and made several attempts on the life of President Hosni Mubarak. AI have killed the Pharaoh,≅ declared the young Muslim radical who killed Sadat, but even the assassin=s bullets failed to destroy the modern Arab state.

Jihad Comes to America

In the 1990s, Sunni radicals turned their attention away from the destruction

of Arab regimes, which had been their main concern since the 1940s and 1950s, and abandoned their hopes to transform their own societies. For men like the blind Egyptian sheik Omar Abdel Rahman and his disciples, the greatest challenge in the 1980s and 1990s was in coming to grips with a failed prophecy. Their expectations of eventual victory for IslamXand their personal sacrifices, jail terms, piety, and acts of violence toward that endXhad been to no avail. Islam had not won. Even the Islamic revolution in Iran had failed to reverse the tide. The Iranian regime paid much lip service to the cause of exporting the revolution, but it was bloodied in a prolonged war against Iraq and eventually lost its revolutionary zeal. Obstinate Islamic movements were defeated in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt. Even Saudi Arabia, the most religiously orthodox Arab state, chose to suppress its radical Muslim opponents.

The turning point in this process of rethinking strategy was the Persian Gulf War. The rage and resentment toward the West, long present in the Middle East, became much more pronounced. For the Muslim world, not only was America now directly meddling in internal Arab affairs, but as the dominant power in the world, it was spreading sedition in the region, turning one Arab regime against another. As Arab nations joined the American coalition against Iraq and a new *pax Americana* dawned upon the region, the West looked more invincibleXand the Arab and Muslim worlds more divided, weak, and defeatedXthan ever. Not only had the Arabs failed to recapture their old glory, but their enemies had become even mightier, practically impossible to overcome. Arab regimes that participated in the war against IraqXregardless of their own history of oppression and corruptionXgained international legitimacy and were labeled Amoderates≅ by the West. They were empowered by the *pax Americana* that followed the war, and were warmed by American friendship and support. Their new partnership with the West made them seem invincible. To overpower these states and cleanse them, radical Islam would first have to defeat their American patron.

America had come to the center of Arabia uninvited, to protect its own interests, and shamed the Arab world by establishing itself as the ultimate king-maker in the region. Moreover, America=s insulting cultural hegemony was now accompanied by a physical presence in the heartlands of the Middle East. (Note that the stationing of American troops on Saudi Arabian soil to protect the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina from being attacked by a fellow Muslim nation has been one of Osama bin Laden=s main complaints against the United States.) Therefore, to bring Islam back to the realm, the region would first have to be cleansed of the infidels. Thus the first step in sanitizing the Middle East from the apostasy that was polluting it would be to declare war on America.

And war was declared. Terror became a frequent consequence of the

American presence in Arabia in the 1990s, including the bombing in Riyadh in November 1995 and the attack on the Khobar Towers in Dhaharan in June 1996, the bombing of the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, and the attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen in October 2000. There was even a failed dress rehearsal for the events of September 11, in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, led by Rahman. The sheik, who had been previously implicated in the murder of Sadat, had found asylum in New Jersey, of all places. Radical Islam was not only fighting the West, but it was also learning to use the freedoms of the West against its host.

State Sponsorship of Terror

Today, a malaise of weakness and despair is hovering above the Arab world. This is the air of a world that once was great, and now is in ruins. It is a world which the West can neither ignore nor accept in its current form since the violence of its own politics have burst through the confines of the region and come into the West.

But Middle Eastern violence is not turned only against Western targets. Much of it, in fact, is a broad resignation born of a recognition of its own tyranny, poverty and shortcomings. In turn, most of that violence is a result of pervasive brutality employed by governments and turned inwards, against the impoverished and oppressed people of the Arab world. Its targets are mostly the Arab youth, and more recently even pre-adolescence children. Its great priests, those who sacrifice lives for the sake of vague political goals, are an array of Arab leaders and sometimes even the religious authorities.

One could hardly criticize the men and women of Araby for resenting their states. Not only are the idealistic answers they have provided mutated into perverse, murderous ideologies, nor have these states become only undemocratic and anti-pluralistic. They are also often led by cruel and corrupt elites whose main objective is to suppress any opposition to their rule. But the full depth of betrayal of the Arab leadership of its own people is only now starting to fully surface.

If the key to the Western concept of a nation-state is a certain agreement, a social contract between the individual and his social order, then the states of the Arab world have abandoned their unspoken agreements with their populations. Western political order is based on the assumption that the individual, who is born with inalienable rights, willingly choose to compromise some of those rights in order to receive protection by the state from other individuals who might attempt to undermine his rights and freedoms. But in recent years Arab states are doing just

the opposite-instead of providing protection asking their children to die for the survival of tyranny. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Palestinian war against Israel.

The Palestinian war has become a cult which normalizes death and terror. The homicide bombers do not die a patriotic death. Life is not sacrificed for the protection and defense of Arab or Palestinian interests. Indeed, no borders are protected, no enemy, real or imagined, will be defeated. Killing oneself in order to spread fear in the hearts of one's enemies and targeting civilian population will not win the war, or even a specific battle. At best, it will spread terror and create a new Arab national ethos of a questionable nature. This is an ethos whose only myth is that of young people and children who were talked into dying a dishonorable death for the sake of regimes that declared war against their own people; regimes that inflame the fire of hate and beat the drums of war so that their people will not declare their own war against them.

The point I am trying to make is that in the Middle East today the radicals are not alone. It=s not only Muslim radicals who declared war on us, but also many regimes, some of whom we considered to be our friends.

A peculiar partnership, a common interest, arose between the repressive regimes of the Middle East and the repressed, often radical Muslim opposition. For the regimes, directing Arab resentment outward and co-opting the message of the radicals would successfully channel local fervor and bitterness toward the West and Israel and stifle the potential re-emergence of domestic assassinations and terror that could be directed against the regimes. While many Arab regimes crushed their opposition ruthlessly, they did little to address the conditions that fueled its fervor-namely the failure of their corrupt and repressive form of governance. Fomenting anti-Western and anti-Israel sentiments was thus a matter of survival for these failed, incorrigible regimes, a way of riding the tiger and deflecting the growing resentment among their impoverished, oppressed populations. In essence, the very regimes that the West considered friends-such as Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and Syria-decided to blow the fire of hate, to encourage anti-Semitic and anti-Western sentiments among their people.

They struck a deal with the religious and secular radicals: the radicals would be free to engage in terror and might even receive official encouragement, funding, or support, as long as the violence was directed only at the West and Israel. And in order not to endanger their friendship with the West, regimes across the Middle East insisted that these terrorist acts be executed in ways that would not incriminate them or expose their double-dealing. During the 1990s, Arab regimes

not only refused to fight anti-Western sentiments; they fueled them. Supporting and aiding terror was not only a matter of survival for many Arab regimes, it was also a tool used to tighten their grip on their populations and stave off revolution. These regimes had good reason for concern. The dictators of Syria, Iraq, and even Egypt, all of whom came to power as a result of military coups, decided in the mid-1990s to turn their revolutionary republics into dynastic monarchies. This process was successfully implemented first in Syria, when Bashar Assad succeeded his late father, Hafiz al-Assad. Similarly, Saddam Hussein in Iraq has been laying the groundwork for eventually transferring power to his son. Even in supposedly more democratic Egypt, President Mubarak's son--his name is Gamal-- is mentioned as a possible heir to the throne. Anti-Americanism provided these regimes with a cloak behind which to hide their true designs for both their families and their societies.

So anti-western violence and war became tools used frequently by Arab regimes in order to guarantee their staying in power. Lets take, for example, the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority's central interest over the last few years was to direct local unrest outwards, toward Israel. Arafat had to do this because Palestinian men and women became growingly resentful of his regime. Their hopes for freedom are being crushed by an elite whose desire to survive has lifted any restraint on either its corruption or cruelty. In early June, for example, the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Watan* reported that Arafat deposited 5.1 Million Dollars from U.S. aid into his personal bank account.

The war that erupted between Palestinians and Israelis following the failure of the Camp David Summit was not inevitable. It was not about the lack of Israeli concessions, because Israel offered unprecedented compromises. It was also not about what Israel had done. It had much more to do with the nature of the PLO and the ambitions and political constitution of its leader, Yasir Arafat.

This is part of a region-wide drift toward an explosion which has much more to do with the nature of the regimes and leaders of the region than it was about specific grievances over U.S. or Israeli policy.   In turn, survival has become synonymous with destruction. The ideological rulers of the Arab worldBsecular and religious alike--can no longer provide a hope that they can lift the Arab world up to meet the West with mutual respect; instead, they can only offer to drag the West down into their world of destruction. On the one side this has manifested itself in the attacks o September 11, but on the other it has taken the form of the Palestinian war on Israel.

Not only Arafat, but also the leadership of the PLO is entirely dependent on

confrontation for survival and political identity. As Palestinian society descended into political enslavement, it remained entwined with a vibrant, free democracy - Israel. The juxtaposing of a free society enmeshed with a gradually captivated society was a prescription for rage. And that rage could easily engulf the PLO. Part of the PLO's conflict with Israel is the unavoidable conflict between a nation symbolizing freedom and a regime extinguishing it. The regime rightly sees a danger, if not existential threat, in the example of a free nation. So it lashes out at the free nation to destroy it as a form of twisted self-defense.

The same is true of Syria, another Aterror master≅ who engages in violence against the West in order to starve off revolution. Like many other regimes in the region, Syria is becoming more, not less, oppressive of its own population. After President Bashar Assad came to power in July 2000, many in Syria believed that a new dawn, an age of grater openness might be awaiting Syrian society. Intellectuals in Damascus and other cities have begun publicly discussing the development of "civil society" in Syria. Some seventy "dialogue clubs" were established throughout the land, and the fact that the security services did not crack down on them strengthened the general impression that President Assad supports these activities.

The regime, however, was quick to signal that it had no intention to relinquish control. In an interview with the London-based daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat in February 2001 President Assad limited the political discourse in Syria to a discussion of the past, and opposed the discussion of a possible change in the future. He also stated that in any discussion of the past the Ba'ath party must not be criticized. Soon, legal measures were taken against one of the leaders of the reformers, Syrian Member of Parliament Riyadh Al-Seif. Syrian Vice President, Abd Al-Halim Khaddam, explained by stating that "Freedom is not absolute, but rather a relative concept."

The situation is not better in Egypt. There, even as Mubarak was enjoying American Presidential attention at Camp David, one of Egypt's courts was hearing the case of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a dual Egyptian-American citizen who is one of the country's foremost advocates for democracy. Ibrahim was on trial for the second time. Officially, his offense was that he accepted money from "foreign sources"--the European Union--for his institute, which has conducted studies of fraud in Mubarak's fake elections. In reality, As the *Washington Post* recently noted, he was arrested because he published an article calling attention to the Arab world's trend of "republican monarchy" in which longstanding dictators--including Mubarak--plot to install their sons in power.

If we look at the politics of the region as a whole, in other words, what we see is an epidemic of tyranny. Arab autocracies encourage violence domestically by blocking peaceful change, and export violence by using state-controlled media to deflect demands for accountability with propaganda against the United states, Jews, or the West. Therefore, our war against terror must be a war against tyranny. Only when we bring freedom and orderly politics to the region it will cease being a threat to the well-being of the West.

The problem in the Arab world today is not just the terrorist organizations themselves, but the absence of good governance and open societies. It is more than just defeating Al Qaeda. If all we do is fight the terrorists, the West will continue to face the same problem, for it originates in the politics of its ostensible friends in the center of the Arab world. In their tyrannical rule, they have failed to govern responsibly, and this, in turn, has fueled a rage which, in self-defense, these regimes have deflected toward America. For decades, the United States has anchored its position in the Arab world to a crumbling foundationXa decrepit collection of failed, brutal regimes. If America is to win this war and play as useful a postwar role in reshaping the region as it did after its two great victories in the last century, then it must build the new world around its most cherished principleXfreedomXand choose its friends and associates on that basis.