



PROJECT MUSE®

The Long War

Vincent M. Cannistraro, Philip Giraldi

Mediterranean Quarterly, Volume 18, Number 1, Winter 2007, pp. 1-11
(Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/med/summary/v018/18.1cannistraro.html>

The Long War

Vincent Cannistraro and Philip Giraldi

After five years of a declared “war on terrorism,” the Bush administration has failed to devise a coherent and comprehensive strategy to deal with political violence. There have been no repetitions of the tragedies of 9/11, but there has been no surcease from terrorism around the world; indeed, violence has metastasized from a single organization located in Afghanistan to a global phenomenon without central leadership and absent sponsorship of a single nation. The “war on terror” has become the ultimate abstraction: global, unending, and amorphous, it is a nontraditional struggle against numerous opponents operating under many different guises and pursuing many conflicting agendas. Nevertheless, President George W. Bush unflinchingly calls it the “decisive ideological struggle of the twenty-first century,” pitting his administration against those who use violence to impose a “dark vision of tyranny,” as if it were a single conflict with a single objective. He has also cited a questionable “worldwide network” of radicals and has vowed to “defeat the terrorists in Iraq” so they cannot “dictate the future of this century,” a dubious proposition in every sense. Speeches over the past year by the president and his cabinet have invoked the preferred Israeli and neoconservative expression *Islamofascism* to describe the enemy, signaling yet another mistaken turn in the government’s ability to conceptualize the terrorism problem.

Vincent Cannistraro is the former head of counterterrorism operations and analysis for the Central Intelligence Agency. He served in the National Security Council as director for intelligence programs during the Reagan administration and currently heads Cannistraro Associates, a security consultancy located in McLean, Virginia.

Philip Giraldi is a former CIA counterterrorism specialist and military intelligence officer who served eighteen years in Turkey, Italy, Germany, and Spain. He is currently a partner in Cannistraro Associates.

Administration supporters have even attacked critics by citing the danger of “appeasement” of terror states, deliberately drawing a comparison to the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s. The assertions that terrorists “hate our freedom” and are seeking to stop the “march of democracy” have also been revived, suggesting inaccurately that our enemies seek to attack our fundamental liberties, when it is obvious it is our foreign policies they seek to undermine.

If it is possible to be completely wrong about nearly everything, the Bush White House’s view of terrorism and terrorists would certainly qualify. Even accepting that recent administration speeches might be reflective of little more than simplistic political rhetoric, there is an obvious major conceptual disconnect taking place in three primary areas: who the terrorists are, where they come from, and what defines a terrorist group. As those questions are not being addressed, an honest attempt to deal with legitimate grievances felt by the world’s more than 1 billion Muslims is hardly likely. Unfortunately, the administration’s conceptual framework cannot be dismissed as a misguided irrelevancy, as the words of our leaders will inevitably shape our responses. If one accepts that there is some kind of worldwide conflict going on, the unwillingness or inability to recognize who the enemy is virtually guarantees that any form of management of the problem will remain elusive or even unattainable. It also suggests that any attempts to anticipate and counter large-scale terrorist attacks like those carried out most recently in Spain and Britain will fail.

If terrorism is an international problem, and it is, what should be done to counter the threat? The Bush administration appears to be hobbled by its ideologically driven responses that deny it a clear recognition of who terrorists are and who they are not. After five years of the “war on terrorism,” American policy is still disconnected from the root causes of global violence and is centered on responses to acts of violence and preemptive moves against identified purveyors of terrorism. But the policy is not significantly different from the previous model of law-enforcement-based responses that were rejected by the Bush administration when it came into office, belittling the Clinton administration’s alleged passivity in the wake of events such as the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the destruction of the USS *Cole* in 2000. Although it was tangled with political overtones, the Clintonian responses were fairly aggressive, if feckless. A guided missile attack on al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan

was launched in an assassination attempt against Osama bin Laden, who was not present. There was also the more doubtful bombing of a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum that was allegedly associated with al Qaeda. Although Richard Clarke, Clinton's counterterrorism chief at the National Security Council, believed this was a legitimate target linked to al Qaeda, subsequent intelligence investigation rejected any direct connection to terrorists, and the Department of the Treasury ultimately dismissed the sanctions against the owner of the factory when it could not validate the White House contentions of terrorist linkage.

It is apparent that the Clinton responses were predicated on intelligence reporting that was deficient on the plans and intentions of al Qaeda. Indeed, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was slow in recognizing the growth and significance of a religiously inspired terrorist movement. Most terrorism during the 1980s had derived from secular terrorists such as Abu Nidal and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine of Ahmad Jibril. The realization that there were religious zealots who were not afraid to die in battle came late. When the Blackhawk helicopters went down in Mogadishu, intelligence had not divined the assistance provided to Somali warlords by this new organization that termed itself, "the Base," or al Qaeda.

The terrorism that resulted in the bombing of the US and French marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983 was carried out by a religiously based movement, Hezbollah, but was supported and provisioned by the government of Iran. Its purposes were political rather than religiously driven, with Hezbollah intent on removing the US presence in Lebanon that it perceived as pro-Israel and anti-Shiite. Hezbollah assumed the Americans had already chosen sides against the Lebanese Shiites when the USS *New Jersey* leveled its guns on hillside Shiite villages. What the resulting withdrawal of the French and the US presence demonstrated was that violence directed at both military and civilian targets (the American embassy in Beirut was also destroyed in 1983) was an effective way to fight and neutralize the conventional military superiority of a superpower. These lessons were misconstrued by Bush administration neoconservatives, who concluded that overwhelming force was necessary when dealing with the Middle East because this was the only thing Arabs and other Muslims in the region would understand. Terrorism from Hezbollah ceased after a round of hostage taking in Beirut in the late 1980s,

but religious ideologues, unsupported by any state, began to recruit among the mujahedin that had been bloodied and trained by the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. While the Americans were the principal supplier of weapons and supplies to the mujahedin through the Pakistani Intelligence Service, the religious parties to which bin Laden and his associates were attached were outside this supply chain, preferring to rely on God and Arab private donations to fund their fight against the Soviets. The question of what motivates bin Laden, until recently the principal source of terrorism against the West, including Russia, is often debated fiercely. But his belief in divine guidance and his role in that divine plan impelled many of his actions. The Americans were despoiling the holy land of Saudi Arabia, guardian of the pilgrimage, and the Saudi monarchy was complicit in this. If Saddam Hussein was a heretic and tormenter of religious Sunnis, then it was Sunnis who should deal with him, not the infidel Americans.

Bush came into office dismissing the foreign policies and programs of his predecessor. The adoption of a serious antiterrorism program was not made until after 9/11, when the administration immediately decided that the attack was a new reality that changed traditional ways of dealing with foreign violence directed at the United States. Vice President Richard Cheney, soon followed by President Bush, misunderstood the nature of the attack. They were certain it had state sponsorship, because the sophistication of nineteen suicide attackers could not have been generated by a group without state support. They were disastrously wrong, but this misjudgment, even though contradicted by the available intelligence, determined US counterterrorism policy and responses. It led to an elective war in Iraq despite Saddam's frantic efforts to forestall an invasion by offering the Bush administration an opportunity to directly verify whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. (Offers came through Egyptian government emissaries, among others, and all were dismissed out of hand by the US government.) And it led to the terminology of an "axis of evil" that demonized three states as sources of terrorism. Iraq and North Korea had not in recent years sponsored or supported terrorist action against Americans. Iran, however, was implicated in the bombing of the American Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996. But it was Iraq and the Bush and Cheney belief that Saddam played a role in terrorism against the United States that impelled the invasion.

Another consequence was the creation of the global perspective that you were either with us or with the terrorists, with no middle ground. America adopted a policy of both clandestine and open aid to countries that were dealing with their own terrorists. Algeria became a focal point for US aid as it confronted violent Algerian groups with al Qaeda affiliations. In neighboring Libya, with which the United States had severed relations because of Tripoli's act of terrorism against an American passenger flight in 1988, PanAm 103, efforts were successfully made to restore relations, ensure US access to Libyan oil production, and resolve Libya's status as a sponsor of terrorism. Libya had been fighting its own insurgency against Libyan Salafists associated with al Qaeda. So the Bush antiterrorism program sought to unify the struggle against terrorism and apparent terrorist sponsors by creating alliances, sometimes with strange bedfellows.

Recent studies as well as the practical experience of CIA officers who have worked against terrorists and terrorist support groups reveal that terrorists are sane and rational, motivated and intelligent. And it is possible to understand just why and how a young man raised in a secular state in the West would become a terrorist. Terrorists act as they do not because they are crazy but because they believe what they do will bring about change. For the global Salafist terrorists, the objective is to put an end to corrupt Arab regimes, replacing them with theocracies, and to bring about a retreat of the West, particularly the United States, from Muslim lands. For other regionally based groups, it is national liberation from occupying powers, be they indigenous or foreign. It is essential to recognize with some candor why terrorism exists and to make an attempt to understand what it feeds on.

There is no universal consensus on what terrorism actually is, and one of the main reasons is that the use of terror is most often driven by a political agenda. But policy objectives are not always the motive for violent actions. They can also derive from a primitive desire for revenge or the settlement of a perceived blood debt. We witnessed a nonstate group, al Qaeda, kill almost three thousand persons on 11 September 2001 to "punish" the United States for its role and presence in Arab countries whose governments are opposed by al Qaeda. Sometimes terrorism can combine both a political objective and a revenge response—an eye-for-an-eye policy—as we have seen over the past several years in the vicious cycle of killings by both sides in the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. Nations routinely brand as terrorism the violent acts of other states and subnational groups considered threats to their national interests, but they often ignore or minimize similar acts of friendly states and subnational groups.

How do we categorize the types of violence sponsored by bin Laden or the rebels in Chechnya? How do we categorize the conflict in Algeria, the pervasive violence among ethnic groups in the Balkans, and the violence coming from extremist cells within the Muslim diasporas in Europe? Even if the sponsor of violence has a jihadist inspiration, the objective is still a political outcome. Suicide bombings whether in Israel or Sri Lanka affect the psychology of civilians and conditions their behavior in an urban environment. Fear increasingly governs their actions—whether in the utilization of public transportation, congregation in shopping areas, or the welling up of hostility and sometimes blind rage that spills over into the punishment of innocents.

That terrorists are both sane and rational might come as a surprise to those who have described them as unbalanced, demented, fanatical, brainwashed, or even perverted. All the enemy-as-terrorist constructs have one thing in common: they effectively dehumanize the opponent, permitting any genuine or legitimate grievances to be ignored. Reduced to a convenient good-vs.-evil formulation, terrorism becomes an amorphous and ill-defined threat that, in theory, can be used to win elections by cranking up a climate of fear seemingly on demand. It also becomes easy to add new miscreants as needed, whether they represent a genuine threat or not. To be tainted with even the faintest whiff of terrorism places one outside the pale in a world of unmitigated evil. Unfortunately, the simplification of a number of complex issues to create convenient political context has a considerable downside: the homogenization process producing a one-size-fits-all terrorist makes for bad decision making and ultimately results in bad policy and over the long term increases the hostility and hatred that breed more terrorism.

The two most serious discussions of the profile of the terrorist, of terrorism in general, and of suicide bombing in particular are by former CIA officer Marc Sageman and Robert Pape of the University of Chicago.¹ Sageman and

1. See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); and Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

Pape look at the two broad categories of terrorists—the global, essentially nihilistic terrorist of the al Qaeda type and the terrorist who is primarily a domestic insurgent opposing either a foreign occupation or his own government. Sageman is most interested in the al Qaeda or Salafist type of terrorist. He argues convincingly that the popular depictions of brainwashed or poor and uneducated terrorists are generally in error. His detailed profiling of 382 terrorists reveals that they are more likely to be normal, well-educated types with families and good professional-level jobs. Most are middle or upper class, not poor, young, single, and deluded. Only a fraction had any religious education, and many, more than 70 percent, had some university education, up to and including graduate degrees. Only a handful attended radical religious schools or the madrassas that have been widely and inaccurately blamed for “breeding new bin Ladens.” More than 40 percent held professional-level jobs as doctors, lawyers, and teachers, and 33 percent had well-paid and semiskilled work. Seventy-three percent were married, and most had children. Al Qaeda and its associated groups are, in short, composed of men who are very well educated, well off, and stable.

The average al Qaeda-type terrorist has traveled, frequently studied in the West, and often speaks several languages. Many terrorists developed their radicalism while they were studying or working in the West, and most entered into the jihadi cause from the bottom up—they volunteered and were not actively recruited. Sageman opines that they frequently drifted into radical mosques as an act of cultural assertion, often because they felt homesick or alienated from the dominant Western culture. Once there, they joined cliques or “friendship groups” of the like-minded, also searching for a new identity. The groups are characterized by a sense of anomie, their social and political alienation eventually being attributed to the decadence, corruption, and immorality of the West. The added step, to seek to join an organization that is doing something to combat and even roll back the Western values, like the Salafists, is perhaps a step that few would take. Those few who manage to go that route and who actually are able to contact an existing group that can support them and give them necessary training and skills become terrorists.

Pape has examined all of the 315 suicide bombings that took place between 1980 and 2003. Reversing Sageman’s formulation, he regards jihadi or Salafist-type terrorism as a special case and looks only at attacks con-

nected to national liberation movements, which means Lebanese, Palestinian, Tamil, Chechen, and Kashmir Muslim attackers. He concludes that all suicide bombers were connected to broader nationalist movements, that such attacks are normally directed against democracies, and that the bombers generally attack what is perceived to be an occupying power in order to achieve legitimate goals of national or regional liberation. Statistically speaking, most of the suicide attacks were carried out in Sri Lanka by bombers who were secular Marxists, and only a minority of bombings was carried out by Muslims. Many of the Muslims were themselves not notably religious, as they were furthering a nationalist or liberationist rather than a religious agenda. Pape also observed that nationalist suicide bombers do not normally act for reasons of poverty or personal or group alienation. They attack regimes that have a populist base in an attempt to shift the playing field and force the government in question to regard the continued occupation as untenable. In Pape's analysis, remove the occupation, and you remove the terrorism. Both Sageman and Pape agree that for the suicide bomber, suicide is a rational choice, not aberrant behavior.

This formulation begs the question of whether many on the US State Department's list of terrorist groups are terrorists at all. It also suggests that the Bush administration is doing itself no favor by making potential new enemies by regularly increasing the roll call of alleged terrorist groups, particularly as it then declines to establish dialogue with them because they are terrorists. Many European and Asian governments do not regard groups like Hamas or Hezbollah, which are focused on the Israeli occupation of Palestine and south Lebanon, as terrorists in any legal sense. International law generally respects an occupied people's right to resist the occupation. Though it is frequently noted that Hezbollah attacked the US Marines and embassy in Beirut in 1983, the attacks took place during the Israeli occupation of the southern half of Lebanon, and the US intervention was widely regarded as being on behalf of Israel and its right-wing Maronite Christian allies. Hamas has carried out attacks only within Israel and in the occupied territories, and it has never targeted the US or any other government. Similar cases can be made for the Chechens, Kashmiris, and Tamils. It can reasonably be argued that where Hamas and Hezbollah are defined as terrorist groups, it is largely due to pressure coming from the United States, which

has uncritically accepted a long-standing Israeli definition of terrorism that deliberately seeks to blur the lines between occupation, national liberation, and terror. Similarly, the Russians, Indians, and Sri Lankans have insisted that the groups that they are combating should also be regarded as terrorists whether or not they are engaged in such activity internationally. The terrorism label thus becomes a political designation and is not really useful in defining the nature of the problem.

Social alienation, not religion, drives the type of jihadi al Qaeda-style terrorism being experienced currently in Britain and is possibly the model for what will be experienced in the future both in Europe and in the United States. While it is reasonable to argue that the young British men of Pakistani origin who have been arrested most recently were far from ready to stage a terrorist attack, their intent to do so is clear. In their profiles they do not differ dramatically from the four bombers who successfully killed fifty-two commuters in London last July. Much has been made of the lower-class backgrounds of the predominantly Pakistani immigrants who make up a large percentage of the Muslim community in Britain as “explaining” the propensity toward simplistic worldviews of Islam against the West, but this explanation has only limited applicability. Many of the perpetrators of the actual and planned attacks in Britain had no Islamic fundamentalism in their upbringing. Most attended dysfunctional state schools in Pakistan or even came through the British education system. Most were not exceptionally religious. Several were students, but none was poor. One, Shehzad Tanweer, who ran a fish and chips shop with his uncle, left an estate of 120,000 pounds.

Though fully 88 percent of British Muslims strongly condemned the London attacks of 2005, a small and growing group of young British Muslims has largely rejected the established Islamic community, which has traditionally stressed accommodation with a larger, predominantly Christian culture. They have done this in order to assert a more personalized version of Islam, which features the Muslim as victim at home and abroad and which seeks to establish a new, more assertive identity. This worldview is frequently not well rooted in reality. One critic notes how young British Muslims complain about the victimization of Palestinians and Chechens even though they have no actual contact with either group and would be hard pressed to find either country on a map. This revived Islamic identity has grown out of the British

brand of multiculturalism that, ironically, emphasizes and protects cultural differences to such an extent that minority groups can be regarded only as culturally inferior, heightening the sense of victimization. It makes young Muslims identify more and more with their religion as a means of self-assertion at the same time as they are becoming more secular in their everyday lives. It turns the most truly alienated and angry into suicide bombers.

Regarding the home-grown terrorists in Britain and elsewhere, there is little to be optimistic about. The British government has responded to the internal threat by seeking more multicultural engagement with local Islamic leaders who are regarded as moderate, or as one critic puts it, “nicer” Muslims. As the terrorists don’t come out of that milieu, it would appear to be a futile exercise at best, more public relations than policy. It would be far better to engage the radicals in an effort to separate them from the truly small minority that is inclined toward terrorism and to begin a process of marginalization of the latter, just as European socialists were frequently able to isolate anarchists in the early 1900s and communists in the 1950s and 1960s.

The lesson for the United States and non-British Europeans is apparent. First of all, though massive immigration into Europe is the root cause of the culturally isolated Muslim communities that are the breeding grounds for terrorism, it is the alienation arising from the misguided multiculturalism that treats Muslims like a group needing to be protected that creates its own sense of victimization, which can in turn morph in an ugly direction. Engagement with the Islamic world by the US government and its European friends should not be based on convenient fictions of social and cultural interaction. It should be based on a clear recognition that Muslims are rational human beings who believe that there are real issues that have to be addressed. A world without a “Palestinian problem” or a “Kashmir problem” would dramatically reduce the number of terrorists who feed off of such emotional hot buttons. For the United States in particular it is important to establish some intellectual clarity on terror and terrorism. It might well be a dangerous illusion to believe that as European Muslims are generally working class and American Muslims are middle class and relatively prosperous there are no grounds for grievance. It is important to understand that economic success is not enough to avoid the British model of alienation and that money or lack thereof is rarely the key determinant in the genesis of a terrorist. Opinion

polls suggest that American Muslims are becoming increasingly isolated and insecure as allegations of so-called Islamo-Fascism proliferate. One might observe that the Bush administration's inability to articulate a sensible policy and deal with the "alien" Muslim presence in the United States is a microcosm of its inability to deal with the world at large. To reverse the drift toward a politics of alienation, American Muslims must feel that they are being taken seriously, that they have a voice, and that their concerns are being heard in the corridors of power.