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Making Enemies: An Anthropology of Islamist Terror, Part I

Simons, Anna

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Making Enemies

An Anthropology of Islamist Terror, Part I

ANNA SIMONS

Soon we will mark the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks, and with it the fifth anniversary of the War on Terror. The good news is that the United States has not suffered a comparable blow since that terrible day; the bad news is that our government still lacks a proper understanding of our enemies and what motivates them. That, in turn, is a major reason why the end of this war is nowhere in sight: After all, how can we know if we have defeated an enemy we cannot adequately define?

Our difficulty in understanding what we are up against flows from the fact that we have no obvious precedent for this Islamist enemy (but there are non-obvious precedents, of which more below). So American policymakers and policy intellectuals, most of whom know little about Islamic and Arab history or modern tribal societies, usually default to reasoning by analogy from historical cases they do know. That is one reason the post-World War II histories of Germany and Japan were so often analogized to Iraq, and why some thought that liberated Iraqis would react more or less as liberated Poles, Czechs and Hungarians did in 1989.

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That is why, too, we often hear comparisons between the Cold War and the War on Terror, and debates about the accomplishments of the Truman and Bush Administration in circumstances presumed to be similar.

One common view in the Bush Administration and among many Americans is that Muslims are oppressed. Liberate them from authoritarianism, from poverty and joblessness, from puritanical interpretations of Islam and a sexist division of labor, and they will no longer be so envious of us, so frustrated or so violent. Implicit here is the notion that they will also become more modern if not more Western, and that that will help, too. Surely they are right that millions of Muslims *would* like more freedoms. But which freedoms, and to what degree? And do all Muslims want for other Muslims of every sect and sex what they want for themselves? This is a far more contentious issue than many seem to realize—as the dissolution of Iraq happening before our very eyes demonstrates.

Push harder on the analogies to the Cold War and it is easy to find other troubling discrepancies. For instance, the Cold War not only stayed cold between the Soviets and ourselves,

Editor's Note: *This article is first in a two-part series, to be continued in the Autumn 2006 issue.*

but there was also a fairly clear etiquette to how each used proxies. Both sides also understood what the other was after. There were, in other words, inherent symmetries within the struggle. No such equivalences exist between Islamists and us. We cannot even say who or what exactly comprises a side.

This conflict is not a contest between two command economies or two different methods of governance. As committed as many Islamists are to achieving social justice and improving social welfare according to religious precepts, they do not just seek to better Muslims' lives in this world. The fate of souls in the world to come, as well as the future of Islam itself, matter just as much and, for some, very much more. On the one hand, we keenly appreciate the apocalyptic stakes involved should terrorists get their hands on weapons of mass destruction, but on the other, we gloss over the possibility that Islamists want to do us grave harm out of deep spiritual conviction. It is easier and more politic to boil the problem down to inequities rather than iniquity. Most of us can understand why young Muslim males might be angry as they face futures in which they cannot afford wives and cannot expect ever to have decent jobs. Tying their anger to emasculation and vice versa makes their violence more comprehensible to us, and we can potentially do something about their poverty and lack of opportunity, just as we may be able to help ameliorate conditions of tyranny and corruption over time. This understanding fits our intellectual framework, yes—but it is dangerously incomplete.

Because, too, most of those in policymaking and policy-advising circles are more familiar with the precepts of political science and economics than with anthropology, promoting good governance is bound to seem like the right response. Only when one notices the structural conditions underlying economic and political dysfunction is it clear that this will hardly suffice. Without question, poverty and authoritarianism act as enablers of Islamist terrorism. But what of other enablers? What about Islam itself, and the ongoing collision between Islam and what we somewhat casually call “the West”?

That is the collision we must examine. When we do, we will see that the Islamist challenge is something more, but also nothing less,

than a nativist reaction to Westernization. The encroachment of Western mores and our push for social and economic change worldwide all threaten corporate Muslim identity—group identity, in other words—in Islamists' eyes. Not all Muslims oppose Westernization, but those who do I will call “nativists.” They not only do not want to Westernize, they also actively oppose accommodationist Muslims who, by succumbing to the West, threaten the integrity of Islam itself. This, in essence, is what we are up against: They want to expunge us; we, in turn, don't seem to realize how omnipresent and troubling we are.

Nativism is hardly a new phenomenon. History is full of instances of violent reactions to changes introduced from without, and in virtually all cases, religion played a key role in mobilizing people against external threats. Indeed, nothing has proven more useful for dehumanizing others and justifying horrific acts of violence. What this means is that Islamist terrorism cannot be regarded as *sui generis*, although Islamism does differ in at least three significant regards from most other nativisms. First, Islamists may be anti-Western but they are not anti-modern; indeed, as many have noted, Islamists have nothing against modern technology. Second, they belong to a world religion whose reach is truly global, which is ideal for helping terrorists recruit, communicate, finance, orchestrate, advertise and hide. Third, not only were nativists more localized in the past, but techniques for defeating them almost always involved the application of indiscriminate force—something that will not work against these nativists unless we want to play directly into Islamist hands.

Islam itself, then, has to be considered a factor—the factor that nearly everyone shies away from discussing. But so, too, are several other factors that may be equally deep-seated and even more difficult to disentangle: adolescence, which affects all young men and thereby funnels actors into this drama; and factionalism, which lurks in all societies and guarantees nativists support. These are the enabling factors of concern to us here. And again, while the sources of grievance most often raised in discussions of Islamic terrorism—authoritari-

anism and poverty—surely deserve attention, to focus solely on what people don't have causes us to miss what people remain attached to and will fight to the death to protect. Corporate loyalty, spiritual hunger and the need to prove moral worth are just some of the drives that can inspire acts of self-sacrifice. When it comes down to it, few people are motivated to fight solely by hate or fear; what they're fighting for likewise matters, particularly when corporate religious identity is at stake.

Many conclusions follow from this sketch. First, if authoritarianism is an enabler but not the core cause of the threat we face, it follows that democratizing the Middle East, were it possible, will not solve the problem. It may ameliorate it, but it

There is a universal bio-grammar to all human societies.

might also make things worse (of which more in Part II). Second, if Islamist radicalism is a nativist reaction born of a fierce desire to protect corporate Muslim identity, it follows that *corporate* identity will increasingly matter and that no sharp line dividing “radicals” from “moderates” can be stable. Since moderates may be radicalized at any point, strategies based on a clear distinction between the two are untenable. Third, once we understand nativist movements, it should become evident that the assumption that Islamists are motivated primarily by negative feelings of inferiority is wrong—a conclusion with first-rank implications for determining our communications strategies in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us first unpack the thesis and approach Islamist terrorism from an anthropological perspective. Let us discuss adolescence and factionalism, the dialectic between Westernization and accommodation that gives rise to religiously infused nativism itself, and Islamism as a particular case in point.

Adolescence

It is an elemental observation of anthropology that organized violence might not exist, and certainly could not long persist, without young males. This simple fact too often goes unspoken. Without ample supplies of young men attracted to violence, Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine would be different sorts of places. Arguments which assume that adolescent males act violently only because they feel alienated, bitter, frustrated or even just anxious ignore the evidence. While violence does offer a release for rage, resentment, repression and pent-up hormonal urges, and while aggression can earn those who are good at it loot, booty, sex, higher status and respect, weapons and the instruments of violence themselves hold a certain fascination. Adrenaline rushes are fun, no matter their source.

We would be wise to approach the young male-organized violence nexus by reconsidering the contours of adolescence more broadly. As Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox have noted, there is a universal bio-grammar to all human societies.¹ Ideally, adolescence represents the period during which young males are supposed to rebel in order to be socialized. Cleverly constructed societies channel male aggression outward and into institutions (e.g., warriorhood, monasteries, universities) where they can do little social harm but still test the limits of their capabilities and others' reactions. Because learning how to lead and follow—or to manipulate and respond to social dynamics—can only really be done among peers, young men group (or are grouped) together.

For better or worse, such groups generate their own sets of internal tensions from which, in communal societies especially, there is no escape. In these settings youth are hemmed in by a finite number of prospective roles, set societal expectations, a pre-determined cast of adults, and peers who will likely remain peers for life. This may help explain differences in mutual expectations among young adults raised in places like Pakistan as against young adults

¹Tiger and Fox, *The Imperial Animal* (Transaction, 1997 [1971]).

raised in more atomizing environments like Lodi, Lackawanna or Leeds, and the yearning that the latter often feel for the tight peer communities the former seem to have.

As for emotions stirred up during adolescence, most seem to be more intense versions of those felt during childhood, but associated with more and different targets. These include disgust, humiliation, outrage, the need to prove ourselves and be taken more seriously, but also desire, love, compassion and the need to be useful. Physicality takes on a new urgency, especially for males. Intensity is sometimes sought for its own sake—*ergo* drugs—though quests on behalf of causes can prove equally exhilarating.

Just having or collecting experiences seems to help adolescents. Different experiences not only help youth learn but also to establish track records. Handled correctly, any type of experience can be counted as an achievement. Experiences earn youth bragging rights and, transformed into “war stories”, help impress peers or girls (as well as other key audiences: younger kids and older men). But storytelling also fuels one-upmanship. With the glue for virtually all groups being shared experiences, the more hardship, misery, daring and even foolishness that is shared the better. Danger helps. So does skirting the edge of what is

socially allowed. Illicitness holds cachet, while in tandem secrecy and camaraderie reinforce each other’s mystique.

Camaraderie is both much simpler and more complex than is often realized. First, it provides purpose. Second, group dynamics act as a goad to experimentation. Third, strength in numbers makes potential consequences seem less consequential. In a sense, and because they focus on the future, adolescents are all about progress: Novelty is not just good, but the highest good. To belong to a group solves the problem of what to do, while doing stuff—anything—helps generate the next idea and, ultimately, the next “adventure.” Vandalism is one typical kind of by-product: It provides a rush of excitement for individuals, an activity for the group and memories to bond by. *What* is destroyed is immaterial. *Why* is even harder to explain.

Given the importance of belonging to a group, it is small wonder that one of the most difficult balancing acts in adolescence is learning how to stand out *and* fit in. No one wants to be odd man out. To avoid such a fate requires conforming. Yet to be indispensable one has to bring something of one’s own to the table. No formula exists for how to pull off being different but not too different, and similar but not too similar to others in the group, as every group has its own composi-

The Bio-grammar of Baby-talk

The idea that IDS [infant-directed speech] is not primarily about language is supported by the universality of its musical elements. Whatever country we come from and whatever language we speak, we alter our speech patterns in essentially the same way when talking to infants. . . . It is evident that those who use facial expression, gestures and utterances to stimulate and communicate with their babies are effectively moulding the infants’ brains into the appropriate shape to become effective members of human communities, whether we think of those as families or societies at large. Parents largely do this on an intuitive basis—they do not need to be taught IDS—and use music-like utterances and gestures to develop the emotional capacities of the infant prior to facilitating language acquisition.

—Steven Mithren, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* (Harvard University Press, 2006)

tion and chemistry. This is why so much of what adolescent males learn *has* to be experiential.² But what camaraderie also makes possible is belonging to something bigger and more important than oneself. Losing oneself to a group or a cause—especially in combination—not only helps an individual to transcend the mundane, but also to *feel* significant. This may be all the more important for adolescents, when hormones wreak havoc with mind/body relations, and transcending one's body, one's age, and adults' expectations holds ineffable appeal.

Escape is always possible through art, music, drama and sports if these are available, although they can also prove problematic. To earn recognition and keep advancing, one has to be sufficiently talented. Otherwise, why continue to

The main motivator for suicide terrorism may be as simple as the adolescent quip, “I’ll show you.”

compete? “Why bother?”—that classic teen response to whatever teens cannot or do not want to do—signals something else: rejection or rebellion. This is the flip side of sublimating oneself to something large and noble. If we think about how adolescents often view themselves—as trapped between being freer than children but not as autonomous as adults—then why *not* try to seize rewards early, by whatever means available? This explains some of the allure of crime, war and violence. But on the other hand, why seek material rewards at all? Why not eschew possessions? Asceticism can lend itself to even greater flights of self-righteous fancy.³

Often adolescents do things just to test their limits. How much *can* they feel, and make others feel? Sometimes, the more someone else *seems* to feel, the more this drives others to imitate him. Intensity—the great evanescent elixir—works like a sump. But on whom it works, how and to what ends, especially in heterogeneous societies, is impossible to predict.

It is possible that *the* motivator for suicide terrorism, for instance, is as simple (but profound and quintessentially adolescent) as “I’ll show you.” But it could also be that suicide on behalf of a cause represents something so daring, so extreme, so final and so explosive that, for those seeking the ultimate, this is it almost by definition. Because the same act can satisfy any of a number of feelings or yearnings (yearnings being even more inchoate than feelings), it seems unlikely we will ever figure out what entices or drives adolescent X to commit act Y. The trigger could be anything from a personal insult to the televised plight of imagined comrades. Herein lies the diabolical cleverness of this method of tapping into adolescents: Adolescents are not just prone to violence because violence *seems* to deliver what they want, but they also prime one another.

One would think, given our own personal experiences—never mind the historical, cross-cultural record—that we would better appreciate what traditional (especially tribal) societies have long recognized: Adolescence itself is a big social problem. Traditional societies would never have developed or bothered to perfect lengthy rites of passage and methods of social control to domesticate young men if there were not some pressing need to have done so. That need remains. Not that grievances do not matter in contemporary affairs between the Muslim world and the West—but it is far more important for us to understand that the reason they matter, and how they are expressed, has everything to do with adolescence.

When does adolescence begin and end? For an anthropologist the answer is obvious: whenever society says so. Most traditional societies demarcate entry and exit with

²Lionel Tiger, *Men in Groups* (Random House, 1969).

³As do veganism and numerous forms of environmentalism, which fit with the kind of holier-than-thou attitude adolescents with no real responsibilities can afford to adopt. Alternatively, adolescents who lack the luxury of being able to reject something they do not have (e.g., lots of stuff) can be just as self-righteous about poverty as a virtue.

specific rites. Along with new sets of roles, responsibilities and rewards may come new dietary restrictions, new forms of dress, new codes of behavior and a new place of residence (something we see, by the way, in most militaries). But in modern societies there are no clear gates through which young men *must* pass in order to advance. This means that individuals can stay in prolonged (or arrested) adolescence as long as they want and are financially able. We see such individuals all around us, not just in the United States, but in growing middle classes worldwide. And if we look back at social rebels and revolutionaries through time, we see that most caught fire during adolescence and many remained firebrands their entire lives.

We are all familiar with the division of radical labor that generally results as time passes: As rebels age they instigate rather than participate in violence. They theorize, rationalize, finance, orchestrate and direct. Of course, some extremist intellectuals might never have engaged in violence, while aging thugs may still routinely participate in violent acts; but we see the basic pattern over time and across cultures. Now we see it increasingly in Muslim societies, as these societies collide with modernizing influences worldwide. One obvious conclusion from this is that age affects males in similar ways. If so, then perhaps the best societies can do is to redirect male energy when (and as) it spikes. But even were we to (re)recognize the need to better control young males, we would still need to also do something about the second of our enablers, which is independent of age: the urge to factionalize.

Factionalization

Young males are not the only ones to group; they simply behave differently in peer groups than they do when they mix with the rest of us. All societies are riven by factions. Factions arise from *personal rivalries writ into principles*. It does not matter which comes first, genuine disagreement or interpersonal antipathy. Actors themselves may not know. But the process is clear: To make something out of a rivalry, to create or rally a faction, Person A

must oppose something associated with Person B—a position, belief, *something* he can point to as significantly and discernibly different. Significance, difference and discernability are all important. To attract and retain supporters, Person A and his lieutenants *must* ensure that others can see for themselves that B's differences from them do matter. Ideally, these should matter in substantive or symbolically resonant ways.

Another way to explain the dynamic is to consider two factions. Because members of A hate members of B *on principle*, members of A should dislike everything members of B stand for. But members of A are only likely to attract recruits and allies if they can de-personalize and then moralize what is at stake. Once “*on principle*” is turned into “*for the sake of principle*” potential friends do not need direct experience with A's enemies to be asked for support. But also, with the shift from hating people for no good reason to hating them *for* good reason, it is just a short slide to being able to dehumanize them altogether and slaughter them in large numbers. Other factors facilitate this process, but for now it is enough to observe how circular the process of factionalization usually is: Members of A convince themselves that B's *principles* are deserving of hate, even though it was really specific members of B whose behavior led members of A to infer what those odious principles were in the first place.

We see this circular process of factionalization in the schisms that have wracked Christianity, as well as in splits among social revolutionaries. (It certainly holds true in academia, which should not be surprising since to produce conflict out of the “narcissism of small differences” takes prodigious efforts at intellectualizing, rationalizing and justifying.) If one steps back and objectively considers the early debates within the Church, for instance, or between the Church and the Lutherans, or the Lutherans and the Reformed Church, it is hard not to conclude that initial battles were fought over relatively minor and even arbitrary issues. Why care more about Trinitarian doctrine than predestination, or predestination than infant baptism? The amount of time, effort and single-mindedness that was devoted to turning just one matter into a breakpoint is astounding. No

less impressive is the relentlessness of the logic that was applied by each side. All of this suggests that theologians and Church intellectuals positively sought out points on which they *wanted* to differ from others, knowing that their opponents would oblige their desire for faction.

It is understandably difficult to find personal rivalry cited as the impetus for factionalization, for that would make defenders of difference seem petty and insufficiently principled. But finding examples of rivalry at work once factions exist is easy. For instance, in his history *The Reformation*, Diarmaid MacCulloch writes: “. . . it was what Calvin or the Reformed believed that decided what mainstream Lutheranism would pronounce as orthodoxy. If Calvin had affirmed it, then they were against it. . . .” Or, because the non-Catholic English sought to exploit the Irish, the Irish were bound to stick to and even make more of their Catholicism. Such reactions are so commonplace that we tend to accept the fact that, when one group tries to subjugate or influence another there is bound to be resistance. We pay less attention to *what* is used as the bone of contention, than to *how* it is used. Whatever the bone is, it may well have mattered less than people *now* believe it did. It may even have been invented.⁴ For instance, the more 19th-century French *philosophes* looked to Ancient Rome as their model, the more their British and German counterparts then looked to Ancient Greece. Each side used one set of differences to sharpen another, though any of them could have laid claim to either tradition.

Mau Mau, in contrast, offers an example of what happens when a difference that always mattered suddenly matters more. It is just one of many cases that highlights what happens when Westerners seek to change things that non-Westerners consider integral to their identity and moral well-being. In the mid-1900s, Christian missionaries attempted to squelch certain local practices—like female circumcision—among the Kikuyu in Kenya. This turned female circumcision into a rallying point, and it became one of the sparks that fed the Mau Mau fires of rebellion. But on closer examination what else do we find beneath this grievance? We find factions.

Some Kikuyu were Christian and others were becoming Christian. Christianization clearly posed a threat to local healers and other purveyors of local traditions who had a vested interest in maintaining the old ways—so of course we would expect them to resist Christianity. Likewise we might expect traditionalists to make more of traditions, both to rally allies and to prove their own worth. However, digging deeper, the willingness of many Kikuyus to become Christian in the first place suggests that Kikuyu society was never completely united. The potential for factions to crystallize already existed; all the missionaries did was introduce a new issue over which factions could coalesce.

There were plenty of such issues at the time in Kenya. No less threatening than Christianization was how land was being commodified, the socio-economic differences introduced by money, and more besides. Change itself was not the issue, for that would suggest that Kikuyu society had always been as it was and had never adopted new practices—something that does not hold for any group of people anywhere. No; it was *what* was changing that mattered, which explains why female circumcision in particular came to be such a sticking point. Kikuyu traditions were critical to keeping Kikuyus Kikuyu because identity is always a matter of practices as well as beliefs. How else can people make beliefs visible? This is exactly what female circumcision helped do: It both literally and figuratively marked young women *as* Kikuyu and distinguished them from the uncircumcised, unclean members of neighboring tribes. Corporate integrity was thus tied to this rite, as was, Kikuyus believed, the long-term health and fertility of their society.

This is the pattern that produces traditionalists everywhere. When an outsider threatens a critical practice essential to corporate integrity, he not only directly threatens the group, but does so by making splits visible within the group over who values these things more. We see this not just in Kenya, but over and over

⁴A point made famously by E. J. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger in their edited collection, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).



©Betmann/Corbis

Kikuyu women forming a home guard to defend against Mau Mau terrorism, January 1955

again in our own encounters with American Indians.

Indian tribes were divided not just thanks to outsiders, but according to blood ties and family relationships. Some families stuck together no matter what, and continued to dislike others no matter what. The dynamic that unfolded with white encroachment was that whichever tribal faction decided to be accommodationist first guaranteed that its rivals would turn traditionalist or nativist. Obviously, those willing to abandon Indian identity were not particularly committed to tradition in the first place, which proved particularly ideal for outsiders since this made distinguishing between “friendly” and “hostile” itself congruent with acculturation.⁵ How this fanned the flames of nativism can be seen in the following description of the Iroquois in the early 1800s:

. . . emotion drove many of the members of the pagan party into extremely nativistic positions. Since the missionaries were demanding the abandonment of an Indian identity and calling the con-

servatives by the opprobrious term ‘pagan’, some of those who chose to retain pride in being Iroquois felt forced to oppose everything any missionary proposed—not merely psalm-singing and sabbath-keeping, but also secular schooling and even further material improvements.⁶

Or, to be schematic about it: Once accommodationists chose to abandon communal sensi-

⁵American authorities not only recognized the significance of intra- (and not just inter-) tribal factionalism, but used it to their advantage as often as they could. Whenever nativists attempted to organize any sort of pan-Indian movement, the U.S. government supported regionally or tribally-based movements in order to keep Indians divided. See Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

⁶Anthony Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (Vintage Books, 1972 [1969]), p. 331.

bilities, nativists were duty-bound to defend against accommodation.

These splits between accommodationists and nativists survive on Indian reservations in the United States to this day. We also see them at work abroad when, for instance, family or clan A in Iraq or Afghanistan wants democracy (or wants to “work with us”). This essentially guarantees that family or clan B, to oppose them, will reject democracy and everything associated with it (and us), and will turn increasingly nativist in the process.

Accommodationism and Nativism

Factionalism may be no less a function of being social than adolescence is a function of being human. The two, of course, are also linked since adolescents invariably get used by factions. Somewhat less clear is why adolescents would avow nativist *positions*, given their penchant for novelty and change. But here is where the Indian Wars again become instructive.

Young warriors never fought to become white, only to stay Indian. At the same time, Indian youth were not just fighting against change and for glory or immediate gratification. Often, even though they would not have put it this way, they were fighting for something larger and more noble than themselves. Leaders like Captain Jack of the Modoc or Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce said as much: Better to die as an Indian than live as a white man. In other words, it wasn't just a way of life nativists were fighting to preserve. From their perspective, what they were defending was the only right or true way to live.

We need to be clear: Nativism is not a reaction against change *per se*. It is a response to accommodationists within the nativists' own camp (however defined) whose willingness to change abrades on certain traditions and beliefs that threaten corporate identity and the way people *should* live. Preeminently, it is Westernization that detonates this sort of conflict within non-Western societies.

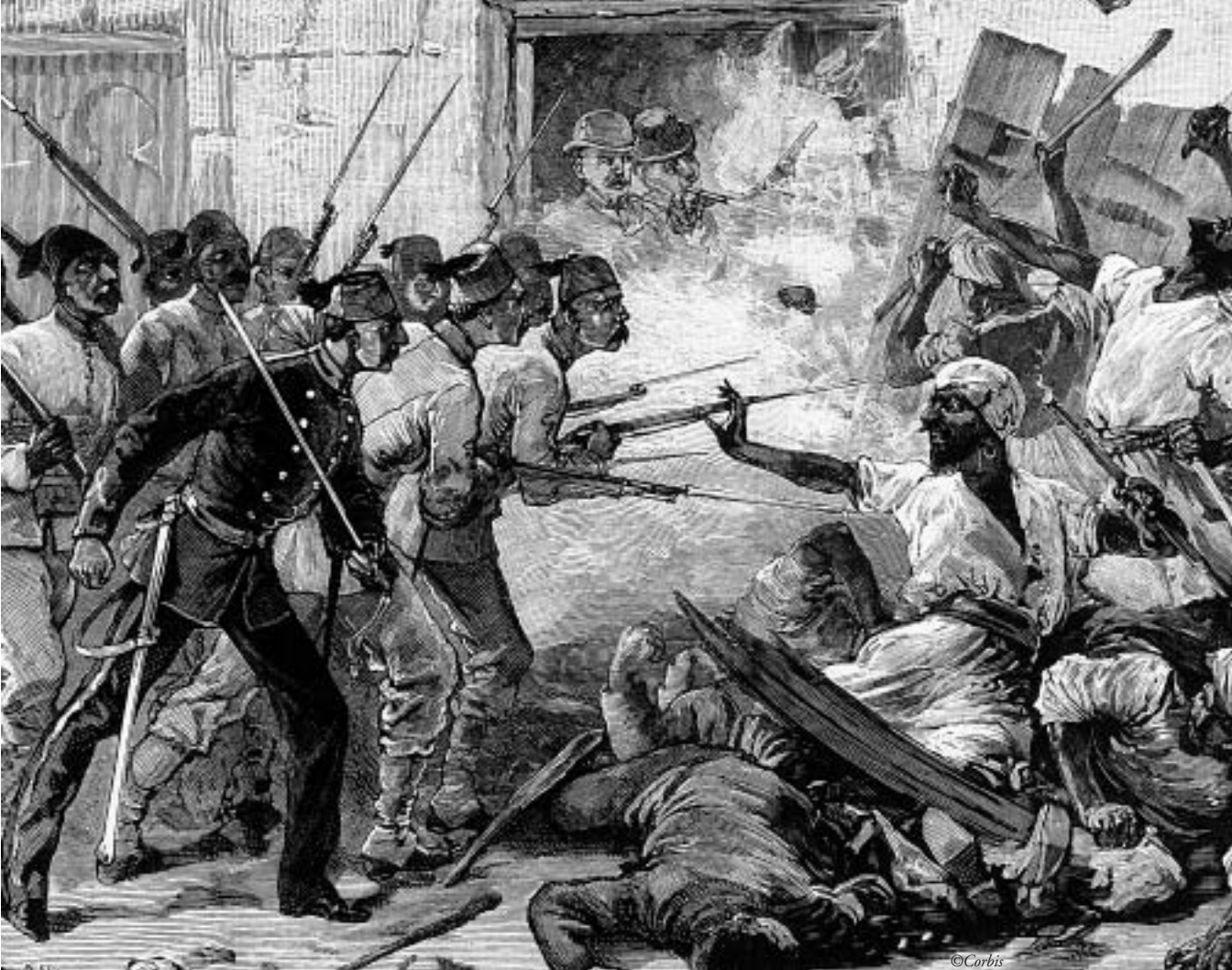
What we in the West tend not to appreciate sufficiently is that what makes us Western—democracy, capitalism, scientific rationalism, our

notion of *universal* human rights and so on—is historically anomalous. It is the exception, not the rule. Our notion that the individual should be the principal unit of moral and political account is the source of our difference. Exploration, science, none of the things we consider integral to the development of the West would have been likely had individuals not been encouraged to compete against one another. Nor could personal progress have become (somewhat ironically) our greatest collective ambition. But as David Gress points out in his history of “the West”, our individualism and the achievements it has made possible has a downside. What he describes as an “acquisitive mentality combined with the tendency to view everything through quantitative, economic spectacles” is completely antithetical to maintaining harmony, which is the preeminent goal in tradition-oriented societies.⁷ In Arabic, for example, there is a highly loaded and critically important term for the absence of harmony, a state of being Muslims seek to avoid at nearly all costs: *fitna*.

Even the most benign version of liberal capitalism generates problems for non-Western societies, where redistribution rather than accumulation is generally seen to be the highest good, where the conspicuous display of anything is frowned upon, and where individual well-being is secondary to the well-being of the group. Where harmony is the ideal, social relations matter. Contrast that with the West, where we may all be headed forward in the same general direction but do not feel tied together in nearly the same way.

We in the West, and particularly we in America, underestimate the importance of solidarity as an ideal—an ideal that, as the dynamics of factionalization suggest, will always matter to some members of the group more than to others. The great social scientists of Europe—Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Simmel, Tonnies—picked up on the radical disjunctions introduced by changes in scale, from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, or from village to city. Numerous others—Polanyi, Schumpeter, O'Neill—have charted the agonizing social adjustments and tradeoffs that the early modern West endured.

⁷Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents* (Free Press, 1998), p. 318.



Riot control in Alexandria, circa 1882

We understand something, too, of the social-psychological character of the romantic reaction to the early decades of the Industrial Revolution. We have an inkling of what Westernization did in and to the West. Why, then, are we so oblivious to what Westernization is doing in and to the non-West?

Though Westernization's effects vary according to place, the same overall principles apply: Generally speaking, people are much more likely to *absorb* Western practices piecemeal, at their own pace, so long as they can do so without feeling themselves *fundamentally* changing. This has several implications. For one, it means that entire societies do not acculturate all at once or on their own. Either some coercive authority from without, or alternatively some faction from within, has to apply pressure. But then, as soon as pressure to change is felt, and as soon as some portion of the community begins to change behavior in ways that seem to threaten the identity of the corporate "whole", tradi-

tionals react and people turn to them in order to help them resist.

Westernization, which represents the most consistently aggressive (but only fitfully violent) transformative force in human history, produces some variant of these effects everywhere. This means that the threshold for people recognizing that they have changed (or have *been* changed) too much—from what they were into what they now are—is hard to detect. Once begun, it cannot be clear in the slow process of acculturation when the point of no return is reached. As with the famous metaphor of the frog in boiling water, all societies recognize acute crises and have mechanisms for dealing with them; few have mechanisms for dealing with non-acute but prolonged disaster.

When people do finally recognize they are in serious trouble, they typically turn backwards and try to scabble back up the slippery slope. They also look outwards. Invariably, traditionalists will call for purification—of people, rites,

instruments, ideas—to restore what was. But at the same time, because the crisis is both new and ambiguous, there is always some degree of syncretism, or borrowing from without. Those bent on not changing will wind up changing certain things in order not have to change what they regard as most sacred or essential. Thus, what outsiders may consider hypocritical is not; traditionalists will not reject everything Western, but only those practices they believe disrupt social relations and thereby morally or spiritually endanger them—*ergo* the use of perfectly acceptable 21st-century weapons to restore 7th-century values.

As a process, acts of purification and restoration typically take time, and here is where traditionalists encounter difficulties: They run out of time. We see this especially clearly, again, in American Indian history. By the time nativist leaders rallied, splits among tribes and factions within tribes were already too entrenched. Also, whites kept pushing—demographically, diplomatically, militarily, economically, religiously. The onslaught was overwhelming. Given the realities of the day, complete Indian control over the conditions of their acculturation was impossible. Even so, they put up a considerable fight:

Indian prophets arose not singly but in groups, and in doing so they integrated dissidents of various peoples into far-flung and often militant networks. . . . The shared understanding, by peoples of widely separated regions, of symbols whose meanings sprang out of deeper understandings of the workings of the world, provided an essential principle for the pan-Indian movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The principle was that the power of the British and Anglo-American invaders could be met with sacred power.⁸

Why Islam?

This should sound familiar. It could almost be a description of al-Qaeda, except that al-Qaeda possesses advantages the Indians

never had (as we'll see). Between encroachment, forced assimilation, and conversion to Christianity, we basically forced Indians to fight. In the Islamist case, conversion is less of a worry than corruption and the irreversible diminishment of Islam, *as Islam defines itself*.

Islamists are loath to see Muslims treat Islam the way Christians treat Christianity. They fear that young Muslims will adopt the typical Western mode of thought toward faith, substituting mere religion for a way of life, and privileging materialism over spirituality. One way, then, in which Islamists fight the diminution of Islam is to make sure that Muslim faith, identity and behavior are indistinguishably intertwined. In this way they not only live up to and embody Muhammadan ideals, but help distinguish Islam from other social systems.

The French anthropologist Emmanuel Todd has explored the tightness of some of these linkages more boldly than most.⁹ As he puts it, “once removed from its anthropological vector, a religion loses its strength and its ability to resist other doctrines.” He identifies the anthropological vector for Muslims as “the endogamous community family.” While what he specifically refers to might be too much of an idealized type, extended families or lineages, not individuals, do remain the unit of account *and* accountability throughout the Middle East and beyond. Islam does nothing to break down communal bonds; instead it seeks to expand them to the entire *umma*, and the ubiquity of bloodprice, bridewealth, honor killings and other customary institutions bear witness to the power and pull of col-

⁸Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, p. xix.

⁹Todd, *The Explanation of Ideology: Family Structures and Social Systems*, trans. David Garrioch (Basil Blackwell, 1985). Todd argues, for instance, that “the Christian world embodied the ideal of exogamy, the Muslim world that of endogamy. Two monotheistic forms of universalism confronted each other, trapped by an anthropological difference.” Family structure and inheritance rules consequently have had all sorts of impacts on compatibility and incompatibility with different regime types. Essentially, he argues, the Western-style state cannot work well for Muslims.

lective obligations and responsibilities. From this perspective it should be evident that what threatens Islam's vector—the primacy of the group over the individual—is individuation, which is Westernization's vector.

Of course, Islamists do not explain their reaction to Westernization in quite these terms. But they do stress the superiority of their religious values and way of life over ours, and despite the almost endless Western commentary that emphasizes their hatred, hostility, disillusionment, humiliation, envy, fear and resentment, Islamist fervor is very much *for* Islam, not just *against* us. If we would only listen more closely to Muslims themselves, we would hear a different set of negative judgments than those we keep hearing from Western commentators (and their Freudian interpreters). Many of these judgments have to do with revulsion. Take our profligate Western practices and behaviors concerning human sexuality, for instance. Many Muslims consider them sinful, disgusting and an affront. It is not jealousy that they generate, but disdain. Unfortunately, because this does not square with what *we* think Muslims should feel, we miss why Islamists view us as corrosive agents, and a contaminant that demands removal.

Interestingly, the traditional method for combating evil, whether it comes in the form of temptation, corruption, contamination or pollution, is to exorcise and purify—exactly what nativists prescribe in order to revitalize society. It is no coincidence that the Ayatollah Khomeini spoke of the “de-toxification” of Muslim society from its Western habits. Revitalization itself is useful because it either helps unite large numbers of people or, alternatively, separates out those weak enough to succumb to acculturation from those strong enough to resist. This, in turn, can yield an increasingly self-righteous nativist core which, to prove its points, will engage in ever greater acts of cleansing, purification and self-sacrifice. In the current context this, too, helps explain suicide terrorism.

Over time, many Indian tribes also gave up on what Geoffrey Parker calls “the etiquette of atrocity”—and indulged in terror acts.¹⁰ Protestants and Catholics did the same in the Thirty Years' War. So did the leaders of the

Taiiping Rebellion. So did French and Communist revolutionaries. Indeed, the literature suggests that organized forces unleash terror and engage in atrocities for a range of reasons, most of them surprisingly specific.

Sometimes when one side cannot draw its opponent into the kind of battle where it can impose its will, atrocities occur. Atrocities are also likely at the hands of undisciplined or ill-disciplined forces that may engage in onepmanship among themselves. This would be more typical of gangs than armies. But militaries also tend to act restrained whenever there is the likelihood of negotiating an end to the war. Then it is better to be nice than nasty, not only because you want to negotiate from a position of moral strength, but because the fighting can always recur and you might end up on the wrong end of a bayonette.

**Islamist fervor is very
much *for* Islam, not
just *against* us.**

If, however, a war involves identity, and combatants fear that their whole community will be wiped out if they lose, distinctions between combatants and non-combatants not only become irrelevant to them, but everyone who represents the other side is presumed to pose a threat and has to be considered fair game. Not surprisingly, “no mercy” is exactly the attitude we see displayed in virtually all religious wars in the past, where the “polluting enemy” was considered “outside the range of human beings to whom one owes the slightest obligation as fellow creatures.”¹¹ This suggests that where notions of moral pollution loom large we should *expect* to see the dehumanization and demonization of enemies, atrocities and what we would regard as sickening cruel-

¹⁰Parker, *Success is Never Final: Empire, War and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (Basic Books, 2002).

¹¹See Barrington Moore, Jr., *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 57.



This al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia poster from this past winter's Iraqi election campaign links participation in Western-inspired democratic processes with apostasy to Islam. The banner across the top is the last part of a Quranic verse (Surat Al-Maida, verse 44), which translates, "Whosoever does not judge according to what God has sent down, those are the infidels." The four Arabic words on the roadway leading through the scorched landscape to the broken cross translate as "constitution", "democracy", "elections", and "unbelief."

come in the next issue) is that those who fought to stay communal and tribal in the prior centuries never had what they needed in order to prevail. Typically, they had neither the organizational capacity, pre-existing ideology nor unifying religion to quickly tie actors together across tribal and spatial divides. That, as much as anything, is what ultimately helped

ties. Terrorism, therefore, need not signal weakness, desperation or a lack of conventional capability only: It could instead reflect a deep-seated response to fears of contagion and pollution.

To the extent this describes nativist reactions and is one set of motives behind al-Qaeda (and who-knows-how-many enemies to come), we face a challenge we have met before—on our own soil, a long time ago. However, one critical difference worth remarking here (with more to

the West subdue non-Western peoples. It's what also helped Americans shatter successive pan-Indian movements in North America. In contrast, the Islamist enemies we face today not only have all of these means and more, but they also possess a sophisticated, even intimate familiarity with us. Couple that with the specter of their attaining weapons of mass destruction and this may not be just a long war, but an increasingly difficult one. 🌐

Nativists and Accommodationists: An Iranian Case

The state of Muslim society today is such that . . . false saints prevent Islam from exerting its proper influence; acting in the name of Islam, they are inflicting damage upon Islam. The roots of this group that exists in our society are to be found in the centers of the religious institution. . . . They will oppose anyone who tells the people: "Come now, awaken! Let us not live under the banners of others! Let us not be subject to the imposition of Britain and America! Let us not allow Israel to paralyze the Muslims!" . . . Do not keep silent at a time when Islam is being destroyed, Islam is being wiped out. . . .

—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini,

Program for the Establishment of an Islamic Government (1970)