**ISLAMIST TERRORISM: HOW GREAT IS THE DANGER AND HOW DO WE DEFEAT IT?**

1. The Nature and Scope of the Threat

Vice President Pence had it backwards, when he characterized Islamic terrorism as an existential threat and climate change as a matter of minor and exaggerated concern. For all its horrors, terrorism, Islamist or other, will not achieve the level of an existential threat unless the terrorists acquire nuclear weapons and effective means for their delivery, while climate change will cause progressively more destructive harm to the physical world and will continue to cause profound disruptions in human society, one of the principal manifestations of which is terrorism. We must acknowledge, however, that the danger from terrorism is very real and it will almost certainly be with us for a long time.

The growth of the number of terrorists is troubling. At time of the 9/11 attack, al-Qa’eda (AQ) had about 400 members. Six years after bin Laden’s death, there are many thousands in the organization, in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. As of the end of 2015, 38,000 foreigners had joined the many indigenous terrorists fighting in Syria. (There were about 8000 foreign mujahideen in Afghanistan to fight the Soviets in the1980s.) Currently, there are estimated to be over 5000 European and American fighters in Syria (overwhelmingly from Europe), and about 20 - 30% have returned home, suggesting a source of looming threat.

Capacity for surviving and evolving: Autonomous regional branches of al-Qa’eda pose a great danger. Al Qa’eda in the Maghreb (AQIM) is active in Libya and Tunisia. Al Qa’eda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQIP) represents the greatest danger of the AQ spin-offs. Al-Qa’eda initially took the long view that “apostate” regimes in the Islamic world had to be defeated, together with their Western supporters before the Caliphate could be re-established. The charismatic son of Osama bin Laden, Hamza bin Laden, is now being groomed as a new leader of AQ, and has urged lone-wolf attacks against a wide range of targets. Further, Hamza’s mother is a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed’s family, conferring a special status on him. [*The Washington Post*, 5/28/17.] ISIS (Da’esh) aimed at seizing territory and establishing a caliphate immediately. Each has adapted to changed circumstances, e.g. AQ has seized territory in southern Yemen to maintain a base, and ISIS, facing imminent loss of all its territory in Iraq and Syria, is now stepping up attacks in the Middle East and the West (in Egypt and the UK, most recently) and encouraging impressionable young people (many only recently professing Islam) to carry out attacks. Thus, each organization has the capacity to continue its terrorism by adapting to changing circumstances.

The challenge to the US is overwhelmingly from home-grown terrorist lone wolves. Since 9/11, every lethal terrorist act (Islamist and other) carried out in US has been by an American citizen or legal resident. As former FBI director Comey said in 2014, “We have made it so hard for bad guys to get into this country, but they can enter as a photon [via Internet] and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas.” Since 9/11 there have been no successful attacks against the US by Islamist terrorists from abroad. There were two thwarted efforts—the “shoe bomber” Richard Reid in Dec. 2001 and the “underwear bomber” Umar Abdul-Mutallab in Dec. 2009. They flew from London and Lagos, respectively, i.e. neither from a country among the six Muslim countries that would be affected by Trump’s proposed Muslim travel ban. Most of the US lone wolves are recruited by or drawn to Islamist terrorism because of something that has made them vulnerable to the allure of being involved in something bigger than themselves. ISIS has declared the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate, which lasted from the death of the Prophet Mohammed until its abolition by Kemal Attaturk, founder of modern Turkey, in 1924. [See p. 275 of Hugh Kennedy’s book, *Caliphate: The History of an Idea*.] This has great resonance for some Muslims as the only true and acceptable form of government—a government ordained by God not by man. Most recruits have little deep knowledge about Islam (with the exception of a few who have developed an impressive knowledge of Islam and of classical Arabic) and could be described as “losers,” the word used by the uncle of the Tsarnaev brothers to describe his nephews. They are susceptible to the appeal of remarkably well produced videos by ISIS. For us, the principal threat of Isl. terrorism is the capacity to exacerbate the already disturbing divisions and antipathies in US society. In recent years, especially following the 2016 presidential campaign, the level of attacks, verbal and physical, against Muslims has escalated alarmingly. This appears to be part of a right wing assault on Jews, Muslims, and blacks. [See the recent Anti-Defamation League report “A Dark and Constant Rage: 25 Years of Right Wing Terrorism in the United States.”] The general assault was given horrific expression in the May 27, 2017 attack by a right-wing extremist against train passengers coming to the defense of Muslim women against whom he was directing hate speech, with two deaths and a severe injury resulting.

II. How and Why Did Islamist Terrorism Emerge?

We need to escape the self-referential assumption that it is something that arose first and primarily against us. It is, in effect, a Muslim civil war between a small group of extremists and the overwhelming majority of moderate Muslims. Especially in the case of ISIS, it is part of a virulent anti-Shi’a dynamic in the Middle East. We are involved because of our engagement in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world; we are the defenders of the terrorists’ Muslim enemies. That they hate and despise us and our values is not a sufficiently compelling reason for them to attack us, although they do view us in that way.

Islam has a history of one and a half millennia, and fundamentalists have been part of the religion for almost as long. Why has Islamist terrorism surged to the fore now? In very large measure, the answer lies in the massive failure of governance in the Arab and wider islamic world. (Fawwaz Gerges has observed , p. 289 in *A History of ISIS,* “It is a result of decades of dictatorship, failed governance and development, and abject poverty, made worse by ongoing foreign intervention an the Palestinian tragedy.”) The secular regimes and the “new men” of the 1960s—Nasser and his Arab Socialism, the Ba’th in Iraq and Syria, he FLN in Algeria, etc.— failed to meet the needs of their people They left a legacy of wasted resources in conflict with Israel and each other plus massive corruption and the failure to develop a civil society to engage their populations actively in process of governance. Political and economic crises and instability opened door to religious forces including the Muslim Brotherhood and the terrorists. It is interesting to recall that there was a feared Marxist threat from the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (the PDRY or South Yemen) in the early and mid-1970s that supported a rebellion against the sultan in Oman and was thought to be close to overwhelming all the Persian Gulf Shaykhdoms. The possibility of Islamist terrorism was not yet imagined.

The failure of the Arab states to meet the needs of their citizens created a vacuum filled in part by Islamist organizations. That was particularly the case with the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. But even the extreme terrorists, ISIS, in particular, have played the part of a surrogate state, supplying economic and social services to Sunni populations neglected and repressed by the Shi’a government in Baghdad and the Assad (Alawi) government in Syria.

It is important to point out that all major religions have fundamentalist elements, but these are usually not physically violent unless provoked into action by political and social forces. One can find such instances with all religions. The US has experienced murders of doctors at US abortion clinics by fundamentalist Christians, though mercifully few. Serbian Christians carried out a genocidal slaughter of over 8000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebenica in 1995. Joseph Kony and the Lord’s Resistance Army, which presents itself as a Christian entity active in Uganda and its neighbors, has, over the past few years, murdered thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands. Anyone who watched “Slum Dog Millionaire” will recall the deadly riots of the opening scene, a fictional representation of part of the continuing, episodic Hindu violence against Muslims. Buddhist killings of Muslims (Rohingyas) in Myanmar continue today. Looking to the scriptures of Islam and other faiths to explain terrorism is a fool’s errand and leads to dangerously counter-productive actions.

US intervention in the Middle East, especially the invasion of Iraq in 2003, greatly exacerbated the problem. Desert Shield/Desert Storm provided a foreshadowing, when Osama bin Laden urged King Fahd to use his followers instead of the American unbelievers to defend Saudi Arabia from a possible attack by Saddam Hussein, the king unceremoniously dismissed him, and ensured bin Laden’s unremitting enmity toward the Al Saud. Al Qa’eda in Iraq (AQI) and ISIS, which emerged from it, have been intimately tied to the Sunni-Shi’a divide. ISIS sees the Shi’a as the primary enemy and has been especially vicious against them. US intervention in Iraq roiled the waters, as US was seen to be the supporters of the Shi’a govt. That led to the opposition of Sunnis to US and to the decision of many Sunnis, including former military men from Saddam’s army, to side with ISIS, for want of a perceived alternative. Indeed, many of the terrorist leaders in AQI and ISIS were former Ba’thist officers incarcerated at the US-run prison at Camp Bucca. The current leader of ISIS and self-proclaimed imam of a restored Islamic caliphate, Abdullah al-Baghdadi, was released from the camp after being assessed as a “moderate” by the US military.

The Arab Spring further advanced the cause of the terrorists. Those who demonstrated were not Islamist extremists, but the massive disruption caused by the risings and the severe repression of them created a new opportunity for ISIS. If the Arab Spring opened the door wider for the terrorists, there are underlying factors that should not be overlooked. Thomas Friedman has cited severe drought in Syria, where, “between 2006 and 2011, some 60 percent of [the] landmass was ravaged by the worst recorded drought in its modern history.” (In *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations,” p. 259.) The Assad* govt. failed to respond and half the population of Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers went to the cities. These destitute people, with no assistance from government, in large numbers. joined the various anti-government groups. Thus, there is a mix of underlying and proximate causes that underly Islamic terrorism.

III. What Can be Done to Combat Islamist Terrorism?

Since the causes of the phenomenon are both proximate and long-term, the remedies need to follow suit, and they must be tailored to the specific locales in question.

Military intervention:This is the obvious strategy where ISIS, AQ, or other terrorists have established a base. It is a necessary but not sufficient strategy and it inevitably comes with the downside of civilian casualties at the hands of US or allied militaries. Once Mosul and Raqqa are fully liberated, the fundamental problems that enabled the birth and growth of ISIS will remain—the Shi’a - Sunni divide, Iraq’s and Syria’s other sectarian and ethnic divides, disempowerment, alienation of large parts of the population, and economic failure of goivernments.

In Europe and US, the tools are those of law enforcement, politics, dialogue, and psychology. Post-9/11, law enforcement has grown more effective in countering plots. In the case of many successful plots, like the Manchester bombing and several attacks on the European Continent, the attackers were known to law enforcement officials, but lack of personnel led to prioritization of targets in law enforcement monitoring that left many potentially dangerous people unobserved. The US spends $125 billion annually on anti-terrorist measures, much of it wastefully. There is a great need for more trained people to track terrorist activity.

ISIS makes sophisticated use of social media. Efforts to counter this have been insufficient and unimaginative. We need to do a better job of exposing the essential cynicism and emptiness of its appeal. We need to hold out the possibility of a better future to those who are potential prey for the allure of Islamic extremism. There has been some success in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and elsewhere in using education and inducements like jobs and marriage to counter the attractions of extremism. (At the beginning of Ramadan 2017, the Kuwaiti telecom company Zain, launched a hard-hitting, three minute video that showed victims of terrorism confronting their attacker. It was immediately viewed by millions and may signal achievement of some success in countering the terrorists’ propaganda pitch.) One critical key is outreach to and involvement of the Muslim community in the US. Here, we have a great advantage over our European counterparts, because of the way the American Muslim community has developed. In contrast to the Muslims’ situation in France, US Muslims do not live in ghettos— they are the lawyer across the street, teacher in the next block, or mechanic at the local gas station. (Thus, absurdity of Sen. Ted Cruz’s campaign suggestion of monitoring Muslim communities, a reflection of the appalling ignorance of most Americans on the subject.) Peter Bergen has observed, in *United States of* *Jihad*, that Muslims in the US have successfully chased the American Dream and that there is no comparable French Dream for North African Muslims in the bidonvilles of Paris and Marseilles. American Muslims come from 77 countries, reflecting the international diversity of Islam, while French Muslims are overwhelming from North Africa. French Muslims are mostly poor, with high unemployment rates. American Muslims are as well or better educated than other Americans, and earn as much or more. It is interesting to reflect that the differences in the American and French experiences with Muslim immigrants, derive in large measure from the different philosophies that underly their constitutions. The US Constitution protects religion from the government, while that of the French is meant to protect the government from religion. France seeks to assimilate, the US seeks to integrate, a reflection of its founders’ belief in *e pluribus unum.* The Great Experiment was predicated on the embrace of diversity in our society from the start.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the US and Muslims have integrated themselves into US society faster and more effectively than previous religiously defined immigrations, viz. Roman Catholics and Jews. Like those previous groups, Muslims here are developing an American form of their religious practice which is very different from that of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Indonesia, or any other country. It offers an interesting parallel to Reform Judaism, a distinctly and exclusively American form of Judaism. In American Islam, as it is developing, there are enlarged roles for women, increasing intermarriage with non-Muslims, and other indications of the development of much more liberal norms of the practice of Islam than anywhere else. This helps explain why, as the FBI has testified, some 40% of all domestic Islamist terrorist plots have been thwarted by information from Muslims.

In the months after 9/11, the US government arrested more than 1,200 people and refused to release their names or places of detention. Almost no dangerous people were discovered in these secret detentions and proceedings. The New York Police Department carried out many highly intrusive acts of infiltration and surveillance against Muslims in New York City, engendering much fear and anger in the Muslim community. (However, over time, the NYPD began to recruit Muslims and moved toward active and effective engagement with the Muslim community.) Perhaps, the greatest danger to Americans with respect to Islamist terrorism is the level of ignorance and prejudice that informs American reactions to the threat. The proposed Trump travel ban would increase insecurity, not security. After the first iteration of the ban was announced, ISIS sent a mocking thank-you to the Trump administration, noting that its recruitment had surged. Muslim interpreters, translators, and others who had worked with American military and civilian personnel in the countries affected, who had put their faith in American promises that they could find a safe haven in the US, felt betrayed. Muslim Americans, already feeling under attack by Islamophobes, whose voices had grown more strident in the 2016 election, were shaken and, one must presume, less likely to stick their necks out to alert law enforcement to suspected Muslim criminality. The valedictorian of our class, my best friend at NMH and one of the smartest people I have ever known, would send me E-mail fulminations after each Islamist terrorist outrage, inquiring as to what I thought of “my Muslim friends now.” To these angry messages I would respond by trying to encourage him to inform himself with a bit of research on the subject. He replied that he had found a good source, which turned out to be the Web site of the notorious Dutch Islamophobe, Geert Wilders. To my response that my explanations for Islamic violence drew on four decades of interactions, many close and sustained, with hundreds of Muslims, including house servants, members of royal families, and just about every other imaginable individual, he informed me that I “must have met unrepresentative Muslims.” At that point, I slumped in defeat and reflected that when our best and brightest base their opinions concerning critical issues on a mix of ignorance and prejudice, we are in very dangerous territory.

To protect ourselves we must enable states endangered by Islamist terrorism to become stable and secure. Tunisia is a post-Arab Spring bright spot, but needs much more robust US support than it is receiving if it is to succeed. President Trump had the right idea in the abstract in engaging with Saudi Arabia, but rather than helping the Saudis to continue careless actions in Yemen that are causing grievous loss of life and massive physical destruction, we should encourage them to use their resources to help develop better governance at home, as they have begun to do, and in their neighborhood.

The issue of climate change, which is a direct existential threat for us is also a major driver of the instability that opens the way to Islamist terrorism and other forms of extremism. Thomas Friedman has referenced the vast numbers of desperate migrants coming in a swelling stream from southern Africa. Thus, a solution to the problem of Islamist terrorism depends as much on our will and capacity to address climate change and a range of other basic problems that have enabled ISIS, AQ, etc. to flourish as it does on directly confronting the terrorists, perhaps more.

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Remarks at Northfield Mount Hermon School

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