INTRODUCTION

Islamism and Terrorism: The Ideological Dimension

This is the first in what will be a series of reports on the ideological dimension of America’s current struggle with its terrorist adversaries and its potential implications for the successful prosecution of that struggle.

As the 9/11 Commission said in its final report, the war that was inaugurated by the attacks of September 11, 2001 on New York and Washington is not best described as a “War on Terror.” Rather, it is a war with terrorists who have a specific origin and agenda. They derive from “a radical ideological movement (commonly known as Islamism or radical Islam) in the Islamic world ... which has spawned terrorist groups and violence across the globe.” As a result of this, it has become commonplace to say that the war on terror is also a war of ideas. This is a war that is being fought among Muslims themselves, as well as a war between the radicals and the non-Muslims upon whom they have declared war. This understanding conforms to that of the Islamist terrorists themselves. For as they frequently declare, they regard their enemies as both Muslims and non-Muslims, the “near enemy” and the “far enemy”—with the former often seen as the corrupt agents of the latter. This understanding of the two-fold character of the “enemy” was recently underscored by the leading terrorist authority Osama bin Laden. According to bin Laden, the current struggle is essentially a worldwide struggle between the ideas and principles of “heresy” and those of “the Islamic Nation.”

If the struggle with Islamist terrorism is in part a war of ideas, it follows that a proper understanding of Islamist ideology must play an important role in our prosecution of the war. In part this is because the objectives and tactics of the terrorists derive to some extent from their ideological orientation. In part it is because ideology plays a very large role in the recruitment and training of new members of terrorist organizations. This is true whether or not their initial exposure to this ideology comes through contact with terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, or with the much wider universe of
organizations that espouse a radical vision but do not directly engage in terrorist activities, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This is so for at least two reasons.

First, existing radical Islamist organizations have historically often been offshoots of other radical organizations that were sometimes more violent in the past. Second, such organizations that today may espouse an agenda defined by educational or political concerns often prove to be the entry point for young people who go on to join terrorist groups. Their ideological training in these organizations is what first points them towards this path. As Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld has observed, our current operations to defeat terrorist groups, which have enjoyed some considerable success, may well prove to be Sisyphean if the recruitment of new generations cannot be impeded. An understanding of the ideological dimension of Islamic terrorism is therefore crucial to any strategy that seeks to contain and defeat it.

There is an additional consideration which recommends a focus on ideology. The threat posed by Islamism or radical Islam to American interests is not solely embodied in the phenomenon of terrorism. Islamism or radical Islam poses to America a political threat as well. This problem has both a foreign and a domestic aspect.

The foreign aspect involves the potential radicalization of existing Muslim states as occurred in the case of Iran and obtained for a period in Sudan and Afghanistan. Such potential continues to exist in a variety of places in the Muslim world—for example, in Pakistan. There are a number of reasons for this, but among them is the fact that many existing regimes lack popular support and legitimacy whereas radical Islamist ideologies enjoy substantial sympathy. Within the Muslim world, the so-called war of ideas, an ideological war, is to date decidedly one-sided.

This is alas also the case for minority Muslim communities in Western countries, including in the United States. The potential radicalization of these communities would pose important political problems to the future of Western democracies.

Just how this war of ideas might issue in an outcome favorable to the United States and its interests remains an open question. However, any serious consideration of the issues and stakes involved in this war of ideas requires as thorough an understanding of contemporary radical Islamist ideology as possible. In general, this necessity has come to be acknowledged and has found some expression in studies and accounts of Islamist ideologies. What is still lacking, however, is a concerted and consistent focus on the ideological component akin to that which other recent ideological struggles solicited in
their time—for example, the struggles with Communism and Fascism.

This and future reports are intended to contribute to the remedy of these deficiencies. In particular, these reports will aim to provide an up-to-date accounting of the present state of radical Islamist ideology. For as in all politically-oriented ideological movements, Islamist ideology has a dynamic character. While certain premises of Islamist ideology do not change, certain conclusions have and may be altered in response to various events.

Of particular interest is the balance between the global and more local conceptions of Islamist ideology and the requirements of jihad. As a matter of necessity, all radical groups have had their origin in particular places and their concerns and conceptions could be limited by the character of their origins and their field of activity. On the other hand, it is also true that there is a certain “universalism” that is necessarily implicit in all forms of radical Islam. Thus there is always the possibility that groups will come to seek a more global perspective either on their own or in conjunction with other groups through coordination and even mergers. This has been especially true of the story of Al Qaeda over the past few years. In such cases, ideological changes and adaptations may be first the effect of various events—whether they be successes or failures—and then the cause of new events.

Accordingly, this report has attempted to cast a very wide net. It is comprised of contributions from distinguished students of radical Islam from its most eastern reaches in Southeast Asia through South Asia and the greater Middle East to Muslim communities in the West. We have asked our contributors both to describe the state of affairs in their region as well as its interrelationship with the wider world of radical Islam. For this inaugural issue, we have also asked our contributors to pay special attention to the history of current radical ideological trends in their respective geographical regions. Future issues of the report will address additional regions—such as continental Europe and Central Asia—as well as several critical thematic areas of contemporary importance, such as the Islamist discourse on WMD.

In this particular report, the editors provide a somewhat greater emphasis than is typical on the radical movements of South Asia and Southeast Asia. In the past, concern with radical Islam tended to focus on the greater Middle East, and especially on the Arab Muslim world. This was in accord with the fact that radical organizations and terrorist groups have enjoyed the greatest following and support in these areas. Moreover, it has been argued, with considerable merit, that the radical leadership even in non-Arab areas has often been of Middle Eastern origin with ongoing ties to the area—for example, Yemenis in Indonesia. In contrast, the Muslim communities of South
Asia and especially Southeast Asia have well-deserved reputations for greater moderation.

However, it has always been the objective of the radical movement to radicalize these communities. As our report indicates, this effort has had some success and has even accelerated over the past three plus years due to the impact of events, including both the 9/11 attacks and the Global War on Terrorism. To some degree, it may be said that the success of the latter in weakening Al Qaeda has even contributed to the growth of radicalism, as Al Qaeda has sought and found cooperative arrangements with radical groups in Southeast Asia.

More generally, and as has been sometimes noted, recent events have contributed to a transformation of Al Qaeda from a discrete terrorist organization, and only one among many, into a “movement.” This is as true today in Southeast Asia as it is in the Arab Muslim world, where certain originally independent organizations like that of Abu Musab al Zarqawi’s in Iraq have pledged their loyalty to the leadership of Osama bin Laden. It is also the case in Britain, where the al-Muhajiroun have affirmed his preeminence for them. Because of this, we have introduced our geographical reports with a discussion of the most recent pronouncements of Osama bin Laden and his newly acquired lieutenant, Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

--Hillel Fradkin and Husain Haqqani
Washington, D.C.
February 2005