Islamism and Terrorism: The Ideological Dimension

*C*URRENT *TRENDS IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY* is addressed to 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 off shoots of other radical organizations that were sometimes more violent in the past. Second, such organizations that today may espouse an agenda de-fined 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 that 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 democracy.

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 and serious 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 po-litically-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…

(From the introduction to the first volume)
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