Worldwide Terrorism, Part I

By William R. Polk

U.S. President George Bush told his newly appointed senior officials at the first meeting of his Cabinet in September 2001 that the war on terrorism "is the purpose of this administration." Then in his January 2004 "State of the Union" address, Mr. Bush proclaimed success, saying that the world has become "a better and safer place" as a result of the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the clandestine fight against Usama bin Ladin's *al-Qaᶜidah* (commonly spelled Qaeda) organization. Just a month later, on February 24, however, his statement was contradicted by the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency who told the U.S. Senate that the world was at least as dangerous as before the two wars. Despite the deaths of thousands of Afghans and Iraqis, more American casualties in just a few months than the first three years of the Vietnam war and expenditures and obligations estimated to aggregate half a trillion dollars, the situation is probably worse than before.

What can we make of these contradictory statements on the results of vast and costly American programs?

At minimum, they show that the American and other governments are operating with little understanding of terrorism. Obviously, much is amiss in the identification of who the war is against and assessments of what motivates them, how they are being engaged, what constitutes "success" in this struggle and what are the alternatives to what is now being done. In this, the sixth of the series on terrorism, I will address these issues. In part I, I being with whom the war is against.

While most western governments speak of Muslim terrorists as *al-Qaᶜidah*, it is evident that there are a number of independent groups operating in a wide variety of societies. No one knows how many or where, but guesses range up to sixty or more. What they share is Islamic fundamentalism (*mutasallafiyah*); that is, they wish to turn back the clock to a mythical time of purity when God's law, as set forth in the Qur'an (Koran), governed society.

Western governments think of them as exotic, but they strikingly resemble movements among Christians, Jews, Hindus and Shinto Buddhists who assert that their societies have corrupted the divine order. Members of the 40 million Americans who consider themselves "born again" Christians would be astonished to find how similar their beliefs are to the Muslim fundamentalists. Neither is willing to tolerate those who do not accept the "true faith" which each believes it alone has and both want to dominate every aspect of society.

What differentiates the Muslim fundamentalists today is that they believe they cannot reform their own societies until they purge them of foreign sources of evil. For them, that means the West.

They blame the West because for most of the last two centuries, Western powers have dominated the Islamic world, installing throughout Africa and Asia governments they created in their images and made to dance to their tunes. These "Western puppets," the fundamentalists argue, have violated "God-ordained" laws and customs by allowing drinking, fornicating and ignoring religion. In the colourful Arabic expression, they have "turned on their heels" (*radda*) from Islam.

Demonstrating their lack of understanding of the fundamentalists, the "hawks" of the Bush administration imagined (and still assert) a link between Usama bin Ladin and Saddam Husain. But, to Islamic fundamentalists, Saddam's regime was precisely the secular, westernized system they sought to overturn. They point out that Saddam may have been helped to seize power and was certainly helped to fight fundamentalist Muslim Iran with battlefield intelligence and money by Presidents Reagan and Bush Senior. Usama bin Ladin actually offered to raise a force to fight Saddam in the First Gulf War.

To recapture God's way, true believers argue, they must first drive out the foreigners who prop up corrupt local rulers. Then they can purge the native apostates. That was the program of the *Taliban* in Afghanistan: first, drive out the Russians and then overturn their Communist puppets. Only then, they believe, can they return to "God's law." This has been the doctrine that has motivated Muslim thinkers for two centuries across Africa and Asia.

At its most evident level, *mutasallafiyah* or fundamentalism is a reaction against imperialism, but its roots go far deeper. Like Christian, Jewish and Hindu fundamentalism, it draws inspiration from thinkers who lived centuries ago.

The man we can loosely call the "Luther" of Islam was Ibn Taimiya who was born in Baghdad in 1263. A "nationalist," he opposed the then super power, Genghis Khan's Mongol empire, which, having conquered China and Russia, invaded the Middle East. Reacting to the Mongols' "shock and awe," destruction of Baghdad, Ibn Taimiya concluded that what made the Mongols' stunning victories possible was not only their own power but the decline of his society's moral fiber. Consequently, he spent his life

preaching against "innovations." To win, he sermonized, his people had to recapture their pure beliefs.

Ibn Taimiya was hunted down and killed, just as we are trying to do with Usama bin Ladin, but his enemies failed to root out the ideas he preached. In the 19th century, the cause Ibn Taimiya had espoused, ridding their land of foreigners, was taken up by men who thought that to get rid of Westerners, they had to westernize their societies. They adopted western law codes, wore western-style clothing, drilled their new armies in the western fashion, built industries, roads, dams, bridges in the western manner. In their schools and new universities, they imbued their students with western ideas. To be modern was to put aside the Islamic past and adopt the West.

But, the more western they became, the less real power the Asians and Africans seemed to have. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Britain, France, Italy and Holland turned most of the Muslim world into colonies. Each imperial power linked its colonies to its own economy, encouraged or forced the substitution of English, French, Italian or Dutch for Arabic, Berber, Kurdish, Urdu, Persian, Malay and Bahasa Indonesian. The generation who came to maturity by the middle of the 20th century was well on the way to "assimilation."

Then, partly because of American pressure, Britain, France, Italy and Holland were forced to relinquish at least the overt manifestations of their power. But a new western power arose: the Zionist movement that became Israel. This movement was both a threat and an inspiration to the Muslims.

The Zionists shared with the Muslims hostility to the imperial powers. The holocaust, after all, happened in Europe and anti-Semitism is a Western disease. It was

the local imperial power, Britain, against which Zionists had to struggle to win statehood. To do this, they organized themselves into a modern economy while moving to recapture their ancient culture, and, above all, they fought in the only way they could, through terrorism.

Today, most Israelis regard terrorism as an Arab or Muslim activity – alien and evil -- but they did not so regard it half a century ago. It was then seen as a legitimate means of resistance. As the Israeli journalist and former member of the Knesset, Uri Avnery, has written, "A whole generation of Israeli children were taught to admire the Irgun and Stern Group fighters…who blew up the installations of the British army and killed its soldiers." The leaders of these two terrorist organizations, Menahem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, went on to become prime ministers of Israel.

Israel won its war against the British, but groups in Israeli society continued to employ terrorism against the Palestinians. Beginning in 1984 and continuing up to the present, the Israeli security service, Shin Bet, monitored Jewish terrorists whom they accused of planting bombs on Arab busses, assassinating Arab officials and terrorizing Arab villagers.[i] One terrorist cell in July 2003 was caught preparing to blow up a Palestinian school in East Jerusalem.

Men do not generally adopt terrorism except as a last resort, and the Arabs were slow to do so. Most Muslims regarded their own radicals as *Mutatarrifin,* "those who marginalize themselves," extremists. It was not until the late 1960s that numbers of Arabs began seriously to experiment with guerrilla warfare and terrorism and not until twenty years later that they won a large degree of public support. In their beliefs and organization, many were inspired by the Israeli model; they were also aware of and often

in contact with such groups as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Basque ETA and less well known movements in the Caucasus, Central Asia and various parts of Africa.

Although small, little known and isolated from one another, Muslim organizations exist everywhere from Morocco to the Philippines and from India to Siberia.

While the underground achieved spectacular success in Algeria, elsewhere they did not. As they reflected on their lack of success, they identified two weaknesses: first, their nationalism was vague -- were they Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Egyptians, Chechens, Uighurs, Moros or what? Second, unlike the Israelis they were not driven by such a powerful and unifying memory as the holocaust. Secular nationalism was found wanting. Thus it was that the already existing Islamic movements took on a new lease of life: only in an Islam shorn of all its different innovations, some began to believe, could unity of purpose and real dedication be achieved.

Muslim "brotherhoods" had arisen earlier in the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Chechnya, Turkestan, Morocco and elsewhere, but all had failed to achieve their aims. Beginning in the late 1980s was a new attempt inspired by Abdullah Azzam and led by Usama bin Ladin.

It was Abdullah who gave the movement its name, *al-Qa^cidah.* Perhaps the expression that comes closest to catching the full meaning of the word is "foundation" or "basic principle." As Abdullah wrote, "Every principle needs a vanguard to carry it forward…this vanguard is the *al-Qa^cidah al-sulbah* [the strong foundation] of the society to come."

Taking up Abdullah's slogan, Usama bin Ladin and a dozen or so associates assembled in the winter of 1988-1989 in the northern Pakistani city of Peshawar to form

a "vanguard" to join in the attack on Soviet "atheists" across the frontier in Afghanistan. It was their anti-Communism that won for them thousands of tons of equipment and billions of dollars from the United States. Adopting them as its surrogate "freedom fighters," the Americans sought to turn Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

Ironically, given its inspiration, Usama bin Ladin's movement – like previous Muslim resistance movements, the Ansar in the Sudan and the Sanusiyah in Libya among others -- was willing to adopt Western "innovations" in the form of arms and tools.

Moving to Afghanistan, Usama bin Ladin attached his movement to the already dominant fundamentalist Muslim Taliban movement. The Taliban connection enabled him to gather Muslim dissidents from all over the Islamic world and to convert what was a small émigré movement into a world-wide militant organization. With the war against the Soviet Union and its puppets won, he began organizing for the dramatic attack he made on what he considered Islam's other major enemy, America.

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[i] Financial Times, May 4, 1984 and Chris McGreal, "Jewish Settlers on explosives charges," *The Guardian,* August 9, 2003.

[1,853 words]

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