

The Novelty of Jihadist Terror

Peter Baehr

Published online: 27 March 2009
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2009

It is notoriously difficult to grasp the distinctiveness of one's own epoch. We lack distance from events, and hence a sober perspective on them. Intellectual laziness and wishful thinking may induce us to fall back on entrenched habits of mind. Another salient obstacle to creative thought is the inertia of our language. Terms well suited to past situations are often applied to radically different times; hence the reflex of modern commentators to label the jihadist radicalism of al Qaeda as “fascist,” “totalitarian,” or “Islamofascist.”

The first thing to note about such analogies is that, ironically, they provide a measure of conceptual solace by implying that we are in familiar territory. After all, we know what National Socialism and Bolshevism were. A second, less obvious point, is that the language of totalitarianism in the Islamic context inverts, rather than escapes, earlier simplifications. During the 1990s a host of self-styled American Middle East experts minimized the accelerating wave of Arab and Islamic radicalism by imposing on it a variety of consolations. We were told that the Middle East was undergoing a “Reformation” (the Tehran university professor Abdolkarim Soroush was briefly assigned the role of Martin Luther); that Fatah was a “democratic” or “progressive” organization of the Palestinians; and that the West Bank and Gaza were hotbeds of “civil society.” (Such wishful thinking is punctured in Martin Kramer's *Ivory Towers in the Sand*, available as a free download at http://sandbox.blog-city.com/ivory_towers_on_sand_download.htm)

Those depictions look rather silly now but even they might have become serviceable if their exponents had been willing to recognize that democracy can be repressive and that civil society is capable of assuming vicious forms. Most Muslims are not radicals, and militant Islamism is itself a large and heterogeneous set of movements, so it is useful to distinguish among

1. moderate, anti-Islamist and often pro-Western Muslims
2. violent Islamist groups, some now defunct or reconfigured, such as Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Salafiya Jihadiya Group [Morocco], the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat [Algeria], the Islamic Group [Egypt], Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, Hamas, Hezbollah, Moro Islamic Liberation Front [Philippines], the Taliban, Jemaah Islamiyah [Indonesia] and the al Qaeda franchise to which a number of these organizations are connected.
3. non-violent Islamists, such as the contemporary Muslim Brotherhood and its international front organizations, which “represent the murky in-between” of (1) and (2) (See, Daniel Pipes, “Letter to the Editor,” *Commentary*, May 2008, p. 12).

Naturally, the groups mentioned in (2) are diverse. Some, like Hamas, claim to pursue a regional agenda. Others, like al Qaeda, have explicitly global aspirations. Still others, like the Taliban, see themselves as the local organ of a global jihad. Militant Islamist organizations are also frequently daggers-drawn: Salafists treat Shiites as apostate scum; Hezbollah is wary of the al Qaeda presence in the Palestinian camps of Lebanon. Another source of rivalry within the violent Islamist movement concerns strategic priorities. Should jihad be waged principally against the “near enemy” (local apostate rulers) or the Crusader “far enemy”? Nonetheless many of these groups are capable of jihadist collaboration across sectarian

P. Baehr (✉)
Department of Sociology and Social Policy,
Lingnan University, Castle Peak Road,
New Territories, Hong Kong
e-mail: pbaehr@LN.edu.hk

divisions when it suits their purposes: a prominent example today is the Hamas (Sunni), Hezbollah (Shiite) and Iranian (Shiite) nexus. The Muslim Brotherhood, too, often provides succor, propaganda and funds for violent Islamist groups, providing a membrane of respectability through which radicals can pass and feel part of the normal world.

Totalitarianism and Radical Islamism: Affinities and Contrasts

The structural affinities of radical Islamism, especially the al Qaeda franchise, with twentieth century totalitarianism are obvious but ultimately misleading. Radical Islamism is a movement, championed by a “vanguard” of warriors, in which pluralism is anathema, and secular politics is derided as a sphere of venality. It is also a movement that reconfigures the capillary, de-centralized organization of its western precursors. (On the “school of individual jihad and small cells,” see Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, “The Military Theory of the Global Islamic Resistance Call,” pp. 363 ff, in Brynjar Lia (ed), *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri*. New York: Columbia University Press.)

Islamist militants combine the conspiratorial anti-Semitism of the Nazis (for whom they entertain a nostalgic admiration) with the pan-territorial ambitions of Bolshevik universalism. Bent on the purifying the world of Zionism, liberalism, feminism and Crusader (U.S.) hegemony, radical Islamist ideology articulates a mausoleum culture of submission, nihilism, suicidal martyrdom for the cause, and mythological appeal to a world about to reborn. That archaic demands for the reestablishment of the hallowed Caliphate are pursued with all the means modern technology affords is also consistent with the “reactionary modernism” of earlier totalitarian movements. (See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*.)

Such are the family resemblance of radical Islamism and twentieth century totalitarianism. But if we foreground such affinities we are likely to miss what is most original about the modern jihadist constellation. Bolshevism and National Socialism began life as political movements. They did their greatest harm, however, after they captured the Russian and German states in 1917 and 1933 respectively. Totalitarian governments then created empires through inter-state wars. When those empires were destroyed or when they imploded, their totalitarian project was over. It is sometimes said that, in contrast, radical Islamism is a de-territorialized phenomenon. That statement is only partly true because it has significant nation-state support from Iran (which, for instance, provides through its Qods Force and Ramazan Corps training, weapons and operatives to Iraqi Shiite

factions) and from Baathist Syria. Radical Islamism also colonizes spaces within under-regulated or broken nations and states. Al Qaeda and the Taliban take refuge in the tribal region north west of Pakistan. Hamas is in control of the Gaza Strip; the al-Qaeda affiliate Fatah al-Islam operates within its orbit. South Beirut and southern and eastern Lebanon are effectively under the domination of Hezbollah with Amal now taking up a secondary role. Parts of Africa, Indonesia and Thailand also provide sites of jihad. A geographical base is hence a major platform from which radical Islamism pursues its jihad. Seeing that, governments fighting the Islamist have fought hard, and often successfully, to shut down their spaces.

We should not, then, underestimate the territorial dimension of the new terror. But nor should we exaggerate it. Radical Islamism, in all its various manifestations, is a hydra headed antagonist, scattered, cellular, franchised and fuelled by a culture of martyrdom. Non-state actors have done, so far, its cruelest work. And while jihadism may often benefit from the protector states to which it is beholden no regime can appropriate it. Information technologies, especially the world-wide web and the internet, give it a cyber presence, and virtual tools of education, propaganda, conversion, and recruitment that twentieth century totalitarianism lacked. These instruments are novel, and effective, precisely to the extent that they are free of state control.

If *quasi-territoriality* and the corresponding primacy of non-state actors is the first significant way that radical Islamism differs from classical totalitarianism, the second is its location in what Samuel Huntington calls a *uni-multipolar world*: a world in which the United States possesses indisputable military and economic superiority. Below it, as secondary powers, are, notably, Russia, China, India, Iran and the France-Germany nexus; and below them, in a third tier, are states that include Japan, Great Britain, Ukraine and Pakistan. Let us not quibble over how precisely to allocate states to the second or third tier. Most pertinent is the fact that one power, the United States, is qualitatively more influential, and more globalized, than any of the others. That the U.S. is hegemonic in the global system is obvious, not least of all to terrorists. Its influence reaches—via multinational corporations, diplomacy, the military, NGOs—throughout the world making it a lightning rod for fanatics of all kinds. By contrast, totalitarian states arose within a period marked by European multi-polarity. No single state was preeminent in the interwar years (1919–1938); and when Germany emerged as a European hegemon in 1939, it met the combined balancing force of the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States. During the Cold War, and until 1990, multi-polarity succumbed to a bipolar system of alliances superintended by the Soviet Union and the United States. Our post 1990 situation is highly unusual and,

because of its concentration, highly vulnerable to orchestrated assault. Anti-Americanism is undoubtedly puerile. It is certainly dangerous, lending legitimacy to terror. But it is also inevitable so long as the United States remains the world's premier power, a magnet for every group that has a grievance and for everyone who nurses resentment against the current international order. Animosity towards America is thus a structural property of a globalized system in which one nation has pride of place. As other powers, notably China, extend the radius of their global influence, they too will attract the hatred of the injured and aggrieved.

Quasi-territorialized jihadism in the context of a uni-multi polar geopolitical order are, then, two characteristics that distinguish our situation from the period of classical totalitarianism. A third and, for our purposes, final element is the peculiar danger posed by the “commodification of weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) (See Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent* (New York: Knopf), pp. 9, 59, 98, 471): the emergence of a clandestine market of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons for sale to groups and states that lack the current capacity to produce them. WMD itself, of course, is nothing new. Huge stockpiles of such weapons were integral to the Cold War deterrence doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction.

WMD arsenals were jealously guarded by the states that manufactured and housed them. Today, however, a growing inventory of WMD is available to state and non-state actors for a price, and the price is getting cheaper. With good reason, many fear that jihadists and other terrorists will procure these weapons, an apprehension aggravated by the A.Q. Khan scandal that broke in the late 1990s. Khan was not merely the lionized father of the Pakistan bomb. He was also, over two decades, a nuclear entrepreneur selling plans, centrifuge enrichment technology, and materiel (probably uranium hexafluoride) to clients that included Libya, Iran and North Korea. To make matters worse, WMD knowledge and expertise is now readily available by virtue of modern media technology. The gene sequencing of viruses such as polio, smallpox, and ebola is no longer a secret; such information is, or has recently been, available, to anyone choosing to study it, including terror organizations salivating over the prospect of mass casualties.

The implications of WMD in the hands of non-state actors, immune to conventional modes of deterrence, are important to grasp. Britons knew who was bombing them in the Blitz. Americans knew who attacked them in Pearl Harbor or in the Korean peninsula. Russians knew who assaulted them at Stalingrad. The Cold War pitted against each other a recognizably stable group of countries, the Sino-Soviet schism notwithstanding. At the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the world understood that if Armageddon arrived, it would not have been initiated by Papua New Guinea. The possession of WMD in the hands of

terrorist organizations creates a markedly different threat environment and political atmosphere. A polio, smallpox, SARS, or avian flu outbreak, deliberately instigated, might be hard to trace to any known assailant; we have only recently discovered the source of the U.S. anthrax attack in 2001 that killed five people, injured seventeen others, caused widespread disruption, and is estimated by the FBI to have cost the American taxpayer 1 billion dollars. In turn, this opacity can quickly degrade from within a nation's ability to cope, as people demand security at any price, and as governments are only too ready to oblige. Inter-state wars of the totalitarian period generated their own kind of patriotic solidarity. WMD strikes within a state, prosecuted by shadowy forces, are likely to sow panic, fray social relations, and create the very coercion that terrorists wish most to provoke.

Future Dangers

Each of the items I have discussed—quasi-territoriality, uni-multi polarity, and the commodification of WMD—are factors that concern modern terror in general. Potentially, eco-militant, ethno-nationalist, and anti-globalization terror groups, as well as contemporary jihadists, are all perverse beneficiaries of this development. That is important to recognize because over-emphasis on jihadism can easily distract us from other enemies. I have focused on radical Islamism because it poses, as we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century, the most evident menace to modern civilization; its bloody record since 1979 is plain. Each of the factors I mentioned is a mutation of previous realities. Hence the commodification of WMD supposes WMD to begin with, quasi-territoriality builds on past communication networks, and a uni-multi polar world arose out of the collapse of a bipolar one.

If, however, we focus on the constellation itself—the precise combination of mutations described above—we are assuredly confronted by something radically new; the designation “totalitarianism” masks this reality. Granted, since 1979 modern jihadism has largely failed to overturn governments and win power from the “near enemy,” its own apostate regimes. Nor can it achieve its ultimate and fantastical objective, the global Caliphate, though demographic movements in Europe are likely to increase the areas under Sharia. It is certainly conceivable that Hezbollah will lose traction if Israel and Syria cut a deal on the Golan Heights; that Iraq will see greater stabilization; that al-Qaeda will increasingly lose support among its Sunni constituency; that the Iranian theocracy will be replaced by a more pragmatic Muslim administration. (Israel will, in that event, still be mightily endangered because Iran is a power with hegemonic, and not simply Islamic, aspirations.) But the real issue is not whether

radical Islamism will be victorious. It is what damage it can do along the way.

Social science has a poor predictive record, though academics and pundits alike have produced a well stocked dispensary of excuses to deny that fact. We are more likely to understand our world if we remain angular, passionate but self-critical, eclectic thinkers, foxes rather than hedgehogs. The greatest fox in social science was the French political and social thinker, Raymond Aron. What, from his Montparnasse resting place, is he telling us? “The destruction of our world is possible but improbable. The capacity of human beings for renewal, for surprise, for unexpected dialogue should never be underestimated. Islam is not monolithic and most Muslims

want to raise families in peace and prosperity. Still, a clear eyed appraisal of those who would gladly kill us and destroy the pluralist legacy is the sine qua non of any realistic policy today. Habitual condemnation of Western leaders is intellectually dishonest. Tell us what you would do—practically do—in their place and faced with their dilemmas. The predictions of doomsayers are usually wrong. Let us try, through our vigilance, to prove them so.”

Peter Baehr, International Advisory Editor of *Society*, is Chair Professor of Social Theory and Head of the Department of Sociology and Social Policy, and a Fellow of the Center for Asian Pacific Studies, at Lingnan University, Hong Kong.