

Terrorism: A Many-Headed Monster

One of the twelve tasks of Hercules was to slay Hydra, a monster with nine heads. But whenever Hercules struck off one of Hydra's heads with his club, in the place of the knocked-off head, two new ones would sprout out.

This story from ancient Greek mythology reminds me of modern day terrorists. When we think that one terrorist movement has been conquered, another one raises its ugly head. Terrorists have mushroomed on all continents and claim dedicated supporters and sympathizers. We are now in an age of terrorism.

Definition of Terrorism

Terrorism, while difficult to stop, is an easy concept to define. It means deliberate, premeditated random violence against noncombatants intended to make the public fearful. It is done with the aim of advancing a political goal. Terrorists use the indiscriminate killing of civilians to undermine a nation's will to resist, and destroy its economic and social stability. And to achieve the desired instability terrorists will often target law enforcement agencies. (In a manual for revolution, a former official of the Brazilian Communist Party said that "every urban guerilla can only maintain his existence if he is disposed to kill the police.")

But despite the fact that "terrorism" is an easy term to define, the way some Western media report on terrorism, one might think that the term is veiled in uncertainty and ambiguity. Many journalists refuse to use the "T" word. For example, Canada's national public broadcaster, the CBC, is fond of using politically correct terms for terrorists. It refers to those who kill and maim innocent women and children and blow up buses and restaurants as "activists," "freedom fighters," "insurgents," or other similarly bland terms.

But terrorism is anything but bland. In terrorism we see the face of nihilism, and are confronted with the celebration of hatred, resentment, destruction and death. It is destruction of politics by all possible means. For example, to challenge the role of Israel in the Near East, terrorists have resorted to bomb threats, actual bombings, hijacking of international flights, the destruction of planes, and the ransoming of passengers, crews and planes.

In the immediate aftermath of the murderous attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington President George W. Bush declared that America was at war against "terrorism." But it is more difficult to cope with and longer lasting than a war. War is limited to geographical and time boundaries. Terrorism knows no boundaries. Terrorists can strike at anytime and anywhere.

Terrorist Groups

Terrorist groups are numerous, espousing various causes. Some are limited to nationalistic goals. Others operate on an international scale.

One of the better known groups, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), has often been in the news. This terrorist organization was originally formed in the early part of the 20th century to fight for Irish independence. Its main targets have been security forces and "soft" targets of propaganda value, although its members have also participated in sectarian violence against the Protestant community. For example, on November 8, 1987, an IRA bomb killed 11 people, and more than 60 were injured. The IRA acknowledged responsibility, but claimed that the bomb had been intended for army personnel rather than civilians and that it had exploded accidentally.

Another infamous terrorist group was the Red Army Faction (RAF), a German left-wing revolutionary group. It had close connections to the Palestinian revolutionary movement, and their exploits made headlines throughout the world, especially in the Middle East. Most of the members were well educated, and came from middle-or-upper-class families. Soon after their inception in 1970 they received some training in a refugee camp controlled by the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Jordan. On their return to Germany they began to rob banks. In December 1975, members of the RAF joined with the notorious terrorist Carlos Ilych Sanchez known as the "Jackal" in holding hostage eleven oil ministers from the OPEC oil-cartel at their meeting in Vienna. After a few hours Chancellor Bruno Kreisky gave in to their demand to be flown with their hostages to Algeria. There the hostages were set free and the terrorists were allowed to walk away even though three people had been shot in Vienna. The West German government responded to the RAF with increased security measures and surveillance. Many members were arrested, but sporadic attacks continued into the 1980s.

These two terrorist groups, which operated in late 20th century, did not resort to suicide missions. Suicide missions, in the strict sense of the word, seem to have been pioneered by Middle-East organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, who from 1982 onward carried out a number of such missions in Lebanon and Israel. A remarkable innovation was the use of female suicide bombers-by Kurdish terrorists in Turkey in 1996-1999, and by Palestinians from January 2002 onward.

Who are Terrorists?

Terrorists are hard to detect in a crowd. Unlike soldiers, they don't wear uniforms. They hide among hundreds of thousands of civilians. They can look like anyone and be anywhere. For example, in Israel they have disguised themselves in stolen Israeli army uniforms, as bearded Orthodox rabbis, even a sixteen-year-old punk rocker with hair dyed blond.

But terrorists share a number of characteristics: they are absolutely sure they are right; they do not practice self-criticism; and they are not interested in the subtleties of diplomacy or in compromise solutions. These days terrorism is mainly associated with radical Islamists. After the September 11 attacks strenuous efforts were made to represent terrorism as contrary to the teachings of Islam. Both the American government and the media have taken pains to emphasize Islam as a "religion of peace" and any civil or military response to 9/11 as a war on "terrorism." In his Ramadan message to Muslims in November 2002, President Bush said that, "Islam is a peace-loving faith."

This perception makes it difficult to criticize the Islamists, the Muslims who do support terrorism. Those who call them terrorists are accused of "Islamaphobia." This is a term coined in Great Britain. It describes "Islamaphobia" as "a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam - and therefore to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims." Are we negatively stereotyping Islam when we express our dread of the Islamists? We have every reason to fear the mindset of the Islamists. After September 11 many approving sermons were delivered from mosques throughout the vast Muslim world, while hordes of ordinary believers cheered and danced for joy in celebrating the terrorists as martyrs who would be rewarded with a special place in Paradise. In one article in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Arabi* a contributor wrote: "I am rejoicing over America's misfortunes. And I will be more frank and say that I am happy for this great number of victims."

As Paul Pillar notes in *Terrorism and US Foreign Policy* a majority of the Islamists terrorists are "world-wise young adult males, unemployed or underemployed (except by terrorists groups) with weak social and familiar family support, and with poor prospects for economic improvement and advancement through legitimate work."

Not all are young though. Muhammad Shaker Habashi, a well-to-do, middle-aged merchant with two wives and ten children blew himself up at a train station, killing three bystanders and wounding eighty more Israelis, including three Arabs from his own Galilee village. After the attack a video was released of the bearded Israeli citizen holding an M-16 and a Koran. "I am going to commit a religious self-sacrifice," he boldly explained.

While terrorist groups may differ in aims and motivations they are all interested in gaining publicity for their cause. For them the slaughter of innocent and uninvolved civilians is not "collateral damage," it is the prime objective. Thanks to the rapid development of the media, and especially of television, the more recent forms of terrorism are aimed not at specific and limited enemy objectives but at world opinion.

With the introduction of television even in the most remote and poor locations, more and more disadvantaged groups will become well acquainted with terrorists and their tactics and may well emulate them. For the Arabic-speaking world the most popular television station is Qatar's *Al-Jazeera*, the CNN of the Arab world, which broadcasts pictures of the Palestinian intifada from Arab perspectives, unifying Arabs behind the Palestinian

struggle. It tells the Arab world that they are innocent victims of a plot hatched by Jews and Christians, and their poverty, lack of freedom and weakness are not their own fault in any way. Al-Jazeera is freely available throughout Saudi Arabia and often broadcasts Osama bin Laden's speeches and "Islamic" decrees. Al-Jazeera has often been referred to by U.S. government investigators as "Jihad-TV"

Television gives terrorists an immediate and unedited platform. The competition between media organizations seems to bolster sensationalism in news gathering as opposed to the informational aspect of news reporting. Live reporting makes entertainment of public violence rather than performing a public duty to inform. Terrorists are aware of this phenomenon and consciously script what has been termed "live-action spectacles" - news events which cannot be ignored by the media. A leading American researcher has summed up the situation in the following terms: "There is no way that the Western media can ignore an event that has been fashioned specifically for their needs. Television terrorists can no more do without the media than the media can resist the terror-event." Television has been remarkably insensitive to the victims of terrorism, to the feelings of the hostages and their families. It has displayed a lack of taste in the way it has presented personal suffering as entertainment for a voyeuristic public. In *The Warrior's Honour* Michael Ignatieff comments, 'As a moral mediator between violent men and the audiences whose attention they crave, television images are more effective at presenting consequences than in exploring intentions; more adept at pointing to corpses than in explaining why violence, in certain places, may pay so well.'

What Provokes Terrorism?

In an interview at conference dealing with terrorism, Renato Cardinal Martino, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said, "We are facing a Fourth World War. We have to identify the causes. What provokes terrorism? Why? Until we have the answer, and until we try to address the causes, terrorism cannot be defeated." But we already know what causes terrorism. The root cause lies within the heart of human beings. The Bible says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). We should not be surprised, therefore, by the horrendous evil perpetrated by terrorists. We live in a fallen world. Violence among fallen humanity is inevitable. Human beings are tainted by original sin and the lust for domination.

While we know the ultimate cause for terrorism, Islamists have their own explanations. They blame the West and direct their anger there, perhaps never more explicitly than two days after September 11, in the Hamas weekly, Al-Risala: "Allah has answered our prayers." Many in the Middle East rarely missed the opportunity to point out that the Americans brought it on themselves. Even some Americans pointed to America as the root cause for Islamist discontent and terrorist attacks. A Yale professor opined that the "underlying causes" of the 9/11 attacks were "the desperate, angry, and bereaved" circumstances of the lives of "these suicide pilots," who were responding to "offensive cultural messages" spread by the United States.

But as Salman Rushdie, the Muslim writer against whom a fatwa ordering his death was issued in 1989, observed, "the savaging of America by sections of the left... has been among the most unpleasant consequences of the terrorists' attacks on the United States. . . A country which has just suffered the most devastating terrorist attack in history a country in a state of deep mourning and horrible grief, is being told, heartlessly, that it is to blame for its own citizens "deaths."

The state of Israel is the greatest bone of contention for the Islamists. They are strongly impacted by a deepening anti-Semitism among Muslims – hateful images of Jews are embedded in Islamic popular culture. They believe that foreigners [the Jews] are occupying the lands of Islam. They also point to American military support for Israel, which amounts to some \$3 billion per year. The events of September 11, and the reactions from the Arab world that followed, show how thoroughly America has become identified with the Jew of anti-Semitic traditions. Islamists exhibit unquenchable hatred of America and the only successful democracy in the Middle East, Israel. They believe that no peace or compromise with Israel is possible, and any concession is only a step toward the true final solution – the dissolution of the State of Israel, the departure of the Jews and the return of the land of Palestine to its true owners, the Muslim Palestinians. Norman Spector comments in *A War Foretold* that "a Palestinian state is not, as some believe, a cure-all for the ills of the Mideast. In fact, Islamic extremists do not want two states, with theirs beside Israel; they want one Muslim state to replace the Jewish one."

A Mixed Response to Terrorism

So how can terrorism be defeated? There is no consensus.

The great liberal hope is that the objective causes of terrorism will be attacked. They believe that if we can only remove injustices and end exploitation of the poor in the Arab world, the terrorists will no longer have any reason to fight. Thus their focus is on the redistribution of power and wealth, the provision of adequate social services and the settlement of just claims for ethnic, religious, and social rights. But these goals will not be achieved, probably never and certainly not quickly enough to suit those who are disadvantaged.

Some think that moral persuasion could lead to the end of terrorism. If only terrorist's could be persuaded to see "the light," the folly of their deeds, they will cease their barbaric attacks. The idea that "pure moral suasion could solve every social problem" may be a form of self-delusion. This kind of liberal idealism ignores the fall and the inheritance of sin and embraces an overly optimistic view of human nature.

In *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America* the British scholar Malise Ruthven argues that Muslims should privatize their religion, remove their faith from the sphere of social action into the realm of private, spiritual thoughts and experience. But the "naked public square" offers no solution. Secular fundamentalism will fill the void vacated by religious groups. British Muslim academic Ziauddin Sardar called for urgent recognition of a problem the Islamic community should address: "Muslims are in the best position to

take the lead in the common cause against terrorism. The terrorists are among us, the Muslim communities of the world." The United States is involved in seeking to exact a heavy toll from its terrorist perpetrators, protectors, and state sponsors - by military means if necessary. I agree with Norman Spector's comment that it will take a sustained campaign of intelligence, preventive measures and covert operations, including assassinations, to win the war against Islamic extremism. "And, if need be, it will take the use of overwhelming military force-potentially against other regimes."

But there is also a personal response needed. I believe we should show compassion for those responsible for terrorist attacks. These people are fanatically committed to a false belief. They are so filled with hatred and bitterness that they can willfully cause fellow human beings to suffer. They are people who need the Lord. The main task the Church has is to preach the Gospel of reconciliation. As peacemakers we should pray and work that these terrorists will hear the Gospel, respond to it and be reconciled with God. Reconciliation brings the fruit of peace (cf. Gal 5:22). There is no true or lasting peace in anyone's heart, or in the world, apart from being reconciled and at peace with God. If we believe in the Triune God, we can - and indeed must - accept that it is within His power to bring about the conversion and transformation of even the most hardened Islamists.

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