

How to Cut The Roots of Terrorism

By Paolo von Schirach

November 27, 2007

WASHINGTON – Since 9/11 a cottage industry of theories about “*the sources of terrorism*” developed, trying to provide clear correlations between certain objective factors or conditions and the decision by some to engage in political violence and –much worse–in indiscriminate acts of terrorism that may cost the lives of hundreds or even thousands of innocent people, not to mention the additional economic damage caused by the disruption, chaos and confusion that usually follows a major act of terror.

Cottage industry

The latest contribution to this cottage industry has been presented by the November 25, 2007 cover story of The New York Times Magazine: “*Where Boys Grow Up to be Jihadis; How did one small neighborhood in a Moroccan city give rise to so many terrorists?*” by Pulitzer Prize winner Andrea Elliott.

This title would indicate that, by reading the account, one would get some answer to the question posited in the title: “How did a small neighborhood...give rise to so many terrorists?”

Well, if anybody is hoping to find this answer they will be disappointed. Nothing, absolutely nothing in this article on young people who lived or live in Jamaa Mezuak, a neighborhood of the city of Tetouan, in northern Morocco, illuminates this point. The very long account is replete with history, interviews, mountains of data and frankly a lot of trivia focused mostly on the Moroccan authors of the March 11, 2004

Madrid bombings that cost the lives of hundreds of Spanish train commuters, while injuring many more. (As we know, the political ripple effects of this tragedy were far reaching. The ruling conservative government that initially had blamed Basque separatists for the attack lost the elections that followed it. The winners, the anti war Socialists, withdrew the Spanish contingent from the Iraq theatre. The terrorists' objective, namely to force Spain out of Iraq, was accomplished). But there is no information in the article that can create a plausible cause and effect correlation between that "small neighborhood in a Moroccan city" and the terrorist adventure of some young people who grew up there. So much for the catchy title.

Cultural transformations

However, the article is not without value as it provides a fairly clear picture of the cultural transformation that has occurred within many Muslim societies. *The most important observation emerging from this article is that what used to be fringe radical ideologies, based on bizarre interpretation of Islam, have become mainstream, even in supposedly moderate Muslim countries like Morocco, up to the point of being used by many "normal", absolutely non violent people as "the accepted way" to interpret their history and their current conditions.*

Distorted history

So, it is really important to notice how a completely false, non historical, conspiratorial mythology has uncritically become the daily fodder of tens of millions as a way to explain any and all the world problems, (and especially those afflicting them directly), for which the Christians, the Crusaders, the Jews and renegade rulers of Islamic countries are the only culprits.

Unchallenged views

Given the practically unchallenged dominance of this political culture, grounded on an absurd demonization of history and politics, replete with calls to radical action to end the awful deeds of the (mostly Western) evil doers, it should not surprise anybody that at least some individuals, especially young people, who (thanks to the pervasive ideology) matured the perception of feeling chocked by the great injustice, at some point decided to take the teaching to the next level, plan terror plots and eventually engage in radical action.

Neighborhood not a hot bed of radicalism

As The New York Times Magazine article shows, the Moroccan neighborhood where these boys grew up was not a particularly well known hotbed of radicalism; thus not especially well suited to breed terrorists. But the major tenets of the radical thought(later on embraced by this youth) were easily available there via the internet, CDs and the preaching of the occasional extremist mullah.

No linear pattern to radicalism

The article also shows that even in an environment in which radicalism has made significant inroads, there is no linear pattern leading different individuals, with different personal histories, to embrace terrorist methods, including their own suicide, as a way to carry on their *jihad*. At the same time, there is no clear reason as to why thousands of others, exposed to the same culture and indeed subscribing to some or most of its tenets, do not become terrorists; whether we are talking about youth in Morocco, certain boroughs in London, Arab enclaves in France or Germany, large or small cities in Saudi Arabia or Jordan, Indonesia, Bangladesh or the Philippines. The reasons why in this environment some people decide to “go all the way” and become involved in terrorist groups has to do with circumstances specific to their lives that at some point convinced them to embark in this adventure.

So, those who are seeking a clear cause and effect theory that explains why some people and not others become terrorists will be disappointed.

Radical culture provides fertile terrain for political violence

Having said that, this Moroccan account reinforces the notion that the overarching issue at the source of the terrorism problem is the large corpus of radical doctrine, dressed as religion, that has become mainstream in Muslim communities around the world and is thus capable of influencing many, although we have no way to determine how many. Short of canvassing each and every individual to find out their beliefs at any given moment, it is impossible to measure the degree of penetration of this thinking and the degree of its ability to act as a trigger for some people convincing them to become radicals and then terrorists.

Provide credible alternatives to radical ideas

Still, this should be enough to make us broaden our focus about the terror problem, until now largely focused on chasing the terror cells. The root of the terrorist problem is in doctrines inciting violence as a proper way to advance a cause for those who proselytize in their name. These doctrines have become openly dominant, while they are condoned even by those who do not subscribe to them.

At the same time, no plausible alternative model seems to attract the same degree of attention. The inability to provide credible alternatives to radicalism has allowed the unchecked growth of these modern day millenarian ideologies that see a gigantic blood bath as the proper way to cleanse the world and have a fresh start. Until these doctrines will be in vogue, their ability to inspire people and to attract converts to their version of Jihad will continue, and we shall have to live with the consequences.

Radicalism in Europe in the 1970s

Another example from relatively recent history can provide an interesting and perhaps illuminating comparison about the rise and fall of terrorism. In the 1970s there was an explosion of political violence in Europe and to a lesser extent Japan. Some radicalized individuals created terrorist groups and conducted acts of violence under the banners of the Baader Meinhof Gang in West Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy and the Japanese Red Army, among others.

At the time, that form of terrorism, (while it produced a small fraction of the death and destruction caused in our times by Al Qaeda and affiliates), seemed to be extremely dangerous. For instance, in order to protect itself from the threat, The then West German Social Democratic government passed a draconian law, the *Radikalen Erlass*, or Law against the Radicals, that prohibited those suspected (just suspected, not guilty) of political extremism to get any public sector job. (Imagine passing such a law in America, even after 9/11).

Byproduct of a broadly accepted Marxist political culture

But what was that all about? Very simply, European terrorism was the byproduct of the prevailing Marxist-Leninist culture successfully promoted by the official and unofficial left in Europe, (established Communist Parties, plus Maoists, Guevarists and other ultra leftist movements), over many decades, before and after the Bolshevik revolution, and throughout the Cold War era ideological confrontations, up to the point of becoming part of mainstream teaching in most universities and the ideological vantage point of many media and other important cultural institutions.

Conspiratorial view of history

And what was the common thread of the Marxist-Leninist view of history? It was all about the vast conspiracy of international

capital aimed at the continuing and vicious exploitation of the masses around the world. To rise against this enemy and fight it openly was viewed by many as a necessary as well as laudable enterprise. This is what Lenin and the Bolsheviks had successfully done; this is what Mao had done; this is Che Guevara died for, this is what Ho Chi Minh did up to the final North Vietnamese victory in the Spring of 1975.

True enough, most of the official Marxist-Leninist culture or political messages coming from the established parties did not contain open invitation to violence. But it certainly extolled it historically as a necessary and moral means to win the fight against capitalism, the mortal class enemy.

Cultural climate favorable to radicalization

Given this cultural climate, it is no surprise that some people, at some point took these teachings literally and decided to give a head start to the proletarian revolution that all the texts and doctrines indicated to be historically inevitable, necessary and moral.

Very much like in the exercise in The New York Times Magazine, at the time, many analyzed the biographies of known European terrorists trying to find critical clues that would explain their conversion to terrorism. And the search was equally fruitless. Some terrorists were a little educated, some were very educated. While none of them would be classified as poor, their social background varied from lower to middle to upper middle class.

Common denominator: belief in the main corpus of Marxist doctrine

However, what they had in common was the non critical absorption of a revolutionary culture that had become mainstream and thus accepted wholesale by them, along with millions of others. The difference was between the many who uttered the anti-imperialist conspiratorial nonsense in

the classrooms, in street protests and in the media and the few who decided to take the teachings literally and engage in their version of a violent struggle against the capitalist system, with the distinct certainty that the masses would follow them.

The correlation between a prevailing radical thought as a motivating factor and some people taking it so seriously as to become terrorists is now obvious.

What is not at all obvious nor measurable or predictable is the degree of penetration of radical tenets in the psyche of any given person within masses of generic believers so that they, and not others, will become truly active in the struggle.

How terrorism in Europe ended

In hindsight, we know today that the main reason that led to the petering out of European terrorism, along with much improved law enforcement activities, was in the recognition by most participants in "the armed struggle" that, try as they may, this whole business of the global proletarian revolution was a dream that would never see the light. In other words, they became discouraged. The struggle would never succeed.

This led the former radicals to at least two quite different new paths. There was the path of reluctant conversion to a normal life within the system; and the path of true conversion to the values of the previously abhorred system. While there is significant qualitative difference between the two, (the latter being vastly preferable from the standpoint of the strengthening of liberal democratic values and institutions), either way terrorism as a preferred means to advance a political cause was abandoned because of the shared judgment that it was pointless.

Common thread: uncritical acceptance of radical ideas

It should be clear by now that the common feature between Europe of the 1970s and today's Islamic world is in the passive acceptance on the part of significant segments within various societies of anti-system, destructive ideologies whose open aim was an aim to destroy the existing order.

And here we get back to our current predicament with Islamic radicalism and its terrorist spearheads. There is no way that we can clearly identify all the places that act as terrorist incubators. There are just too many of them. There is no way that we can predict what it will take for the violent Moroccan drug dealer to have his conversion to the true faith and become the mastermind of the awful Madrid bombings.

But we do know that the mainstreaming of a conspiratorial, not even minimally factual, version of human developments that portrays the members of a faith as constantly victimized by arch villains is a potent and dangerous cultural drug. As the record shows, there are plenty of users of this drug. At least some of the heavy users among them will turn to terrorism and/or suicide mission as their contribution to a fight, which, in the absence of really believable alternative models, seems to them as the only way to attack what they mistakenly perceive as massive evil of global proportions.

How will this end?

As it happened in the case of the European terror groups, it is quite possible that, at some point, this enthusiasm for radicalism and for terrorism as its main byproduct will peter out. If the recent developments in some Sunni parts of Iraq where an outside al Qaeda model has gone out of fashion provide transferable examples, there is some hope.

Fanaticism will not last for ever

History shows that fanatical ideologies do not last forever. But it is impossible to say when the ideology will lose its appeal everywhere. In the case of Europe, there were and are

established democratic institutions that could provide a credible alternative. In the case of many Muslim countries there does not seem to be an alternative. Indeed, it is the perception of the iniquity and/or corruption of present day many regimes that contributes at least to some degree to steer people towards radicalism.

Create alternatives

This may appear like a banal truism, but the real fight for the hearts and minds begins with the spreading of meaningful ideological alternatives, (as opposed to bombastic propaganda), carried out by believable, locally grown messengers. Sustained work aimed at providing a credible world view whose main drivers are respect for all, dignity and hope should be the way to successfully counter an insidious doctrine that will continue to have appeal among those who look for a comprehensive theory, however flawed, that explains their supposed plight, be they in Morocco or elsewhere.

The American belief that its Western democratic model is immediately exportable to other cultures is highly questionable. Our Jeffersonian blueprints take a long time to resonate among non Western people. True, the record shows that they can work, at least in some places, eventually. In the case of a Muslim world in turmoil "eventually" may come too late.

In the meantime, the hope is in the emergence of a different, home grown and peaceful political model that could be perceived as vibrant and relevant, and not just borrowed or imposed from outside. But this may unfortunately not exist.