Analyzing the Mindset of Religiously Inspired Terrorists

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I appreciate this opportunity to describe my research on the spiritual wellsprings of religiously motivated terrorism, which addresses extremely difficult problems holding multiple implications for national security.

My research since 1985 has sought to conceptualize political violence of a particular sort, namely, the variety perpetrated by would-be world transformers. This set includes both 1) ideologically motivated secular activists (e.g., Marxists who seek something like earthy perfection by way of violent revolution and abolition of private property), and 2) religiously motivated sectarians and terrorists (who endeavor to purify the world by killing infidels and apostates, or by bringing forth an apocalyptic struggle by means of their preparatory actions in the world).

Since 2001, my work has focused more sharply on the second group, but their relation to those in the first remains important and merits mention. Although it might seem that atheistic Marxists and fervent religious activists are very different types of people engaged in widely disparate missions, my historical, political, and spiritual analyses indicate that this isn't the case. They differ dramatically on the superficial level of doctrine, but display a profile that is strikingly similar in character type, underlying motivations, patterns of thought and activity, sense of personal righteousness, and imperviousness to restraints usually imposed by common sense rationality and moral principle.

An important, related finding is that the commonalities in this profile are evident not only across the secular / religious divide, but also across historical eras and civilizational borders. Beneath the level of doctrines, common patterns of self-understanding and mission are evident among contemporary militants from multiple cultures and religions as well as individuals from earlier historical periods (see Cohn, 1970).

My work draws upon many sources, but the scholar who contributed most to this approach to violent activism is the political scientist Eric Voegelin (1901-1985). Voegelin's writings are notoriously difficult and very wide ranging (his *Collected Works* span 34 volumes), so they can't be addressed here. I've written more extensively on Voegelin's diagnosis of "spiritually disordered"

political violence than any other scholar, and though I'm critical of his analyses in significant respects, they open "breakthrough" perspectives regarding the peculiar spirituality of terrorists who kill innocents while believing sincerely that they are engaged in righteous activity.

Research conducted on this foundation can yield insights with strong significance for theory as well as operations. Specifically, the psycho-spiritual commonalities illuminated by this perspective greatly increase the scope and number of cases we can study profitably when seeking to understand organizations such as the so-called Islamic State. Organizations such as ISIS are neither as rare (nor as novel, nor as incomprehensible) as they are sometimes regarded by journalists or scholars who lack access to the spiritual analysis of terrorism made possible by Voegelin's work.

When indicating what my research can help explain, I should also specify what is beyond its range. I read and teach about terrorists of all types, but my scholarship is focused more narrowly on terrorists who are would-be world transformers. Those who detonate bombs in public places to achieve political advantages (e.g., prod the British out of Northern Ireland or make life dangerous for settlers in the West Bank) are not those whose motivations I analyze. Individuals who kill innocents to purify and perfect the world are fundamentally different from those who merely wish to alter existing configurations of power or territory, or who employ terrorist tactics simply for lack of more potent military options.

The importance of world-transforming terrorism stems less from its novelty (which is usually over-stated) or its rising prominence (which is lamentably obvious) than from its inner nature and dynamics. The terrorists I analyze are much more difficult to understand and counter than those from the 1970s who hijacked airplanes, issued demands, sought large audiences and negotiated with governments.

The *operational* difficulties are easily grasped. Those who don't seek tangible changes but rather a transformed Reality don't bother with negotiations or make demands of governments, and for good reasons: governments are incapable of bringing forth the anticipated apocalypse, which only God can initiate—once His Elect have set the stage by extirpating impure persons and practices.

The difficulties of *understanding* terrorists of the type I study are best expressed in the form of questions: How could individuals obsessed with purity and perfection become devoted to killing—and deliberately seek out innocents to kill? How can those who prostrate themselves before God then arrogate to themselves a role as His unerring agents, claiming to know whom He would smite and

killing in His name? How could apparently sane and pious people believe that flying a jet into a skyscraper is an act pleasing in the eye of God?

After years of multi-disciplinary work on these questions, I believe it is possible to specify the key peculiarities marking individuals who establish, animate and lead apocalyptic, religiously inspired terrorist organizations. Many of these same peculiarities are observable in *followers* as well, helping explain how terror networks populate their ranks.

The foregoing paragraph might prompt a reader to ask, *if this approach to understanding religiously inspired terrorists is so illuminating and useful, why is it not more widely known and utilized by social scientists, scholars of religion, and counterterrorism specialists?*

First, most social scientists are neither methodologically trained nor professionally inclined to address spiritual phenomena (disordered or otherwise) on specifically spiritual grounds, as opposed to considering such phenomena in relation to social causes or effects. Similarly, behavioral scientists prefer to address the phenomena through the lens of clinical psychology.

Second, almost all scholars of religious studies are drawn (quite understandably) to the more sublime and theologically sophisticated manifestations of spirituality than to its "lower" forms— much less to forms that are disordered or downright murderous. However, we must grant that a belief that seems theologically questionable or historically unsupported does not cease to be a belief for those reasons. Religious scholars may choose not to study the beliefs of Jihadis or violent Zionists or Christian killers of abortion providers, but those beliefs still trigger many terrorist killings, and we suffer from a dangerous blind spot because the spirituality of those beliefs is so distasteful.

Finally, specialists in counterterrorism operations are drawn to (indeed, charged with) finding and disabling terrorists rather than understanding the deep motivations that actuate them. Interest in the "why" of religiously inspired terrorism is increasing, but very few members of the armed services or intelligence organizations are trained to delve into the dynamics of disordered spirituality.

A reader might also ask, *how does this mode of analysis differ from other approaches to religiously inspired terrorism?*

This approach to apocalyptic terrorism differs fundamentally from those that categorize it as a manifestation of evil, or insanity as commonly understood, or simple immorality, or as a ruse intended to justify commonplace strivings for power or territory.

Those who intentionally kill innocents for instrumental purposes are fittingly labeled as "evil," but this is only a characterization or condemnation, not a content-rich analysis nor a finding with any

operational implications. It makes sense for political leaders to call terrorists "evil" or "sick" in the aftermath of attacks, but only because this expresses appropriate revulsion and stiffens the spine of the citizenry—not because the terms are meaningful for scientific or operational purposes.

Those who deliberately kill innocents are certainly "sick" in a sense, but most observers are mistaken regarding both the locus and the nature of their sickness. In the *majority* of cases, the locus of the disorder is not the mind, properly speaking, in the sense that *most* terrorists (especially leaders) are not clinically insane.

Generally recognized forms of insanity rarely explain the actions of important terrorists, as evidenced by the fact that most terrorist leaders (and many followers) function in consistent, disciplined and effective ways in operational, means-ends terms (even though we might abhor both their means and their ends).

It is true that some psychopaths and sociopaths also act in calculating and disciplined ways (e.g., serial killers or school shooters), but such individuals are generally disengaged from society and very rarely act in sustained cooperation with sizeable groups, as do most terrorists (other than some "Lone Wolf" outliers). Most terrorists are resolute rather than impulsive, joining movements in a deliberate and considered way over time, and rarely disengaging abruptly in a manner that makes them seem fickle or unstable.

Characterizations of terrorists as insane are conspicuous by their virtual absence from the growing body of terrorist interview accounts compiled by scholars (such as Jessica Stern) and journalists (such as Graeme Wood and Peter Bergen). At present, there is simply no reason to believe that any important terrorist would be neutralized by administration of a psychoactive medication.

Just as most terrorist leaders are not insane, neither are they simply immoral, at least in the commonly used sense of that term. Most terrorist leaders aren't insensitive to questions of justice and right, but rather are highly sensitive to them, regarding their actions as obligatory, self-sacrificing and even altruistic.

Shifting from the general, secular sense of morality to its specifically religious dimension, the evidence suggests that the vast majority of religiously inspired terrorists regard their actions as both divinely sanctioned and personally transfiguring. Stated simply, almost all religious terrorists believe their spiritual status is *enhanced*—not undermined—by killing. Consequently, any analysis of "holy wars" is woefully incomplete if it considers only the strategy and tactics of the conflicts but not the

self-understanding of the warriors, which almost always includes the belief that their actions absolve past sins and promise eternal rewards.

Finally, most religiously inspired terrorists cannot be "explained away" by arguing that their religiosity is a bogus smokescreen employed to conceal commonplace pushes for power. To be sure, few terrorists are disinterested in power. But with that granted, the evidence suggests that *most religiously inspired terrorists understand their worldly actions as being imbued with transcendent purpose*. Indeed, we might do well to capitalize the "P" in Purpose. Of the multiple attractions drawing individuals to "holy wars," the most salient is engagement in a sanctified role in a final, grand struggle of cosmic proportions, one that will immortalize the agents of righteousness in their permanent victory over all afflictions and imperfections.

Understanding and countering people who understand their activity in this way is much more difficult than dealing with people who are simply pushing for power, and hence we will never hear the end of the "smokescreen" hypothesis. But against this, I would cite with approval the observation of Graeme Wood that, "The notion that religious belief is a minor factor in the rise of the Islamic State is belied by a crushing weight of evidence that religion matters deeply to the vast majority of those who have traveled to fight" (Wood, 2017, 73). Most religiously inspired terrorists do indeed believe, and believe with great intensity. The problem confronting us as scholars, citizens or soldiers would be much more manageable if this were not the case. Regrettably, however, the problem posed by terrorists is not that they are in-authentically spiritual, but rather that their spirituality is disordered in character.

I'll close with two caveats. First, I am not asserting that *all* terrorists within ostensibly religious organizations are intense believers. Especially in the lower ranks, we know that some individuals feign religiosity, or are psychotically disordered, or are merely seeking adventure, social status, camaraderie, or vengeance. However, disordered spirituality is still extremely important, and its importance remains badly neglected.

Second, I acknowledge that anyone employing a concept like "spiritual disorder" is obliged to specify the symptoms of the "disorder." It is indeed possible to do this, and in a detailed way by reference to particular terrorists. It is also possible to suggest how specific symptoms and manifestations might be identified by those charged with profiling terrorists—or those susceptible to terrorist recruiting efforts. Unfortunately, constraints of space preclude me from undertaking these tasks here, though hopefully this paper will prompt requests for additional information.

Appendix: Key Works on the Spirituality of Religiously Inspired Terrorism

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