



Ideological Foundations of Islamic Extremism

Critics of the Obama administration's confused strategy to confront global Islamic terrorism found further to complain about with White House deputy press secretary Eric Schultz's January 28 declaration that the Taliban should not be considered a terrorist group.

Schultz's remarks were followed by those of National Security Adviser Susan Rice in a February 6 lecture at the Brookings Institution stating that Islamic terrorism should not be seen as an existential threat. "Too often what's missing here in Washington is a sense of perspective," Rice told the audience. "Still while the dangers we face," she intoned, "may be more numerous and varied, they are not of the essential nature we confronted during World War II or during the Cold War. We cannot be buffeted by alarmism and a nearly instantaneous news cycle" (*Breitbart News*, February 6, 2015).

The White House's campaign to downplay the Islamic terrorist threat was further reinforced by President Obama's address to the National Prayer Breakfast on February 5 when he compared Islamic State (ISIS) atrocities to the medieval Crusades and slavery, which were justified in the name of the Christian religion. He lectured the audience not to get on a "moral high horse" in castigating current Islamic terrorism (*National Review Online*, February 6, 2015).

It turns out that Obama was not about to get off his own moral high horse. In an interview with Vox Media released in early February, Obama agreed with interviewer Matthew Yglesias that the media, driven by ratings, overstated the level of alarm about terrorism as opposed to a longer-term problem of *climate change and epidemic disease*. Global climate change, the president pontificated, might not be a "sexy" headline story, but Americans should be informed that "climate change is one that is happening at such a broad scale" that they should be concerned, even if the media does tell them this on "a day-to-day basis" (www.vox.com/a/barack-obama-interview-vox-conversation).

All of this left people's heads spinning, especially former military advisers such as Lt. General Michael Flynn, who recently resigned as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. He told Chris Wallace on Fox Sunday News that the administration lacks a coherent strategy to defeat Islamic terrorism, cannot even define what the threat is, and its strategy is basically like sending different sports teams to different stadiums to play after yelling "Break." He warned that the war against Islamic terrorism is being lost by the administration's inability or unwillingness to realize that Islamic terrorism is an existential threat to our way of life. This war, he said, will be a long-term struggle that must be waged militarily, financially and ideologically. As with the Cold War, the enemy won't be defeated overnight.

The Baleful Influence of Sayyid Qutb

The ideological war against Islamic terrorism is critical, in much the same way that anti-communism was during the Cold War. Scholars and a few popular writers have explored the ideology of Islamic extremism, but much of this work has not reached the larger public. Especially important in this regard are the many scholarly works by the esteemed historian Bernard Lewis (see *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity*) and popular books by Robert Spencer, most recently *Not Peace But the Sword: The Great Chasm between Christianity and Islam*. Maajid Navaz's *Radical: My Journey Out of Islamic Extremism* (2012) imparts a deep understanding of the extremist mindset, and Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (2007) traces the roots of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Any thorough understanding of modern radical Islam should begin with Sayyid Qutb, who is regarded as the founder of modern Islamic fundamentalism. His copious writings were translated into most of the languages of the Islamic world as well as those in the West. He was "the most influential

advocate in modern times of jihad, or Islamic holy war, and the chief developer of doctrines that legitimize violent Muslim resistance,” according to Robert Irwin, a veteran writer on Islamic culture (*The Guardian*, October 31, 2001). Qutb’s influence in the contemporary Islamic world is pervasive, directly inspiring modern-day jihadists and terrorists.

His call for radical jihad is found in *Milestones*, which was first published in Arabic in 1964. This book can be found in its entirety on the Internet and has been translated into languages across the world. “*Milestones*,” Paul Berman wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* (March 23, 2009), “is a shallow book, judged in isolation,” but read in the context of Qutb’s larger opus, *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, the pathological goal of an Islamic world order is all too evident. The latter book was translated into English and published by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, a suspected terrorist organization whose Washington office was run by a brother of Osama bin Laden.

Learning to Hate the U.S.

Qutb, born in a small village in Upper Egypt, attended a secular college and then went to work for the Egyptian minister of education. The turning point in his intellectual transformation came in 1948 when he was sent to study education in the United States. On his voyage to the States he decided that his salvation lay in an unswerving allegiance to Islam. Once in the United States, he developed a fierce hatred of Western and especially American culture. He was repelled by the prejudice against Arabs, but particularly despised the freedom of American women, Western materialism and the hedonism he saw. He described American churches as “entertainment centers and sexual playgrounds.” He returned to Egypt two years later imbued with a deep loathing of Western civilization.

He joined the Muslim Brotherhood, becoming a major ideologue of the movement. In 1954, Egypt’s Nasser regime cracked down on the Brotherhood, jailing its leaders including Qutb. In prison for the next ten years, he continued to write. Once released from prison, he was rearrested when the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Nasser. He was tortured in prison and executed on August 29, 1966.

Qutb’s major scholarly work is *In the Shadow of the Qur’an*, a 30-volume commentary. A major theme in this work is that all Christians and Jews are destined for hell. He polemicized against other Muslims who compromised with modernity or accepted the Saudi monarchy and Nasser’s secular government. He called for a global jihad to fulfill Allah’s promise of a holy reign on earth. His specific prescription

for rule under Islamic law in this new world order lacked detail. What is clear is his call for jihad to be waged against corruption of the Qur’an by apostates in Arab countries and the alleged Satanists in the West.

The Ideology of Radical Jihad

Qutb’s *Milestones* provides a lucid, engaging call for jihad that is intended for a popular audience. This 135-page book should not be lightly dismissed as incoherent religious fanaticism. It is that, but it needs to be directly countered by defenders of Western Judeo-Christian values if we are going to win this ideological and military fight to protect our way of life. There is no substitute for reading Qutb’s own apocalyptic words for insight into the irrational group-think of his followers.

Qutb calls for a new leadership of true believers in the Islamic faith to preserve and revitalize global civilization. *Milestones* opens by declaring that “Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice, not only because of the danger of complete annihilation ... but because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress. Even the Western world realizes that Western civilization is unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind.” He avers that “The period of the Western system has come to an end primarily because it is deprived of those life-giving values which enabled it to be the leader of mankind” (Internet translation, p. 3). The alternative to Western values is Islam, “the only system which possesses these values and this way of life.” He rejects the materialism of the West, democracy and communism.

He acknowledges that European “genius” created marvelous works in “science, culture, law and material production,” but today only the “revival of Islam and the attainment of world leadership” can spare mankind from apocalypse (p. 6). A revitalized and strict Muslim faith conserves the benefits of modern science and technology, but it offers more than “material progress.” He sees in the revitalization of Islam the only path to counter what he describes as a “rebellion against the authority of God,” which has led to communism and a capitalist system that is imperialistic and exploitative of individuals. Only through strict adherence to the Qur’an and the prescriptions of the Almighty Creator will the eventual annihilation of mankind be prevented.

The first step toward salvation is for true believers, the vanguard, to establish a new state to wage global war. Qutb does not describe what this new Islamic state will look like in terms of governmental structure, other than that it will follow

sharia law. Only through active struggle and in practice will rules and regulations of the Islamic state be realized.

Redistribution: The Totalitarian Promise

This Islamic revolution is a social movement that declares war against the wealthy by “taking away their wealth and distributing it among the poor” (p. 19) – an old, failed idea in new religious garb. The new society rests on “the Divine Law of moral principles,” while “regulations and laws are revealed” in the act of struggle and rule (p. 25). “People who demand from Islam,” Qutb writes, “that it provide a completed constitution for its system, and that it provide laws” show that they are “ignorant of the character of this [Islam] religion and the way it operates in life.” Only when such a society is actually realized and the strict teaching of Islam is its guide, will “it proceed to formulate laws and regulations” (p. 27).

For Qutb, jihad is a matter of living reality and not debate. “The requirement of Islamic belief,” he proclaims, “is that it takes shape in living souls, in an active organization, and in a viable community” (p. 30). Jihad is action, a military struggle aimed at conquest. Defeatists want only to wage a defensive war, but Islam is not “defeatist or apologetic” in its struggle to “annihilate all those political and material powers which stand between people and Islam” (p. 43). Furthermore, Islamic jihad is not “merely a declaration of freedom of the Arabs.... It addresses itself to the whole of mankind, and its sphere of work is the whole earth.” It must “strike hard at all those political powers which force people to bow before them and which rule over them, unmindful of the commandments of God” (p. 46). Jihad is “striving through fighting.”

No Nationality Except Islam

The Islamic vanguard knows no allegiance to family or nation. Instead, “a Muslim has no nationality except his belief, which makes him a member of the Muslim community . . . a Muslim has no relatives except those who share the belief in God” (p. 97). The author concludes that this is not “a political or an economic or a racial struggle,” but “a struggle between beliefs, either unbelief or faith, either Jahiyyah [paganism] or Islam” (p. 132).

Qutb’s death made him into a martyr and added power to his writings. Qutb’s brother, Muhammad Qutb, became a professor at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where “he collected, published, and disseminated his brother’s works and ideology” (Peter Farmer, *Family Security Matters*, September 13, 2012). Among his

students at the university were al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Anwar al-Awlaqi, the American-born Yemeni and al-Qaeda regional leader, a devoted student of Qutb’s writings who was later killed by an American drone attack.

As Paul Berman points out in his *New York Times Magazine* article, Qutb throughout his writings calls for the formation of a revolutionary vanguard to conduct a jihad to resurrect the caliphate and create a global world order under sharia law. Martyrdom is a consistent theme. His views about sharia law are no less harsh. He demands “a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear.” He calls for adulterers, men and women, to be stoned to death, and for unmarried men and women caught fornicating to be given a hundred lashes, even though such a cruel punishment is often fatal. For those “who threaten the general security of society, their punishment is to be put to death, to be crucified, to have their hands and feet cut off, or to be banished from the country.”

The followers of ISIS also prefer gruesome punishments, as witnessed in their crucifixions, beheadings and massacres of innocent young children, women and men. These Islamic radicals draw inspiration from their fundamentalist reading of the Qu’ran, but Qutb writings provide the intellectual and ideological foundation for monstrous acts.

The Ideology of Jihad Deconstructed

The ideology of jihad articulated by Qutb and his present-day followers presents a millenarian vision of a world dominated by fundamentalist Islam. Although fiercely anti-communist, this vision bears striking resemblance to the delusions of Marxism. It provides followers with a belief that they are part of a vanguard, rooted in an historic struggle to create what they see as a new world order. Both jihadists and Marxists are revolutionaries set on purging the existing world of corruption, class and racial conflict, and greed. They proclaim themselves as idealists on the side of light against the forces of darkness. While Marxists speak of “praxis,” jihadists such as Qutb speak of “method” that derives from active struggle.

Neither Marx nor Qutb spells out the details of what this new world order of theirs, after the revolution, would look like. The Marxist revolutionary and the Islamic jihadist act on faith. Marxist faith rests on dialectical materialism. For the Islamic jihadists faith rests on “Allah’s will.” Both, for all their self-righteousness, are moral relativists willing to kill innocent people, conduct any act of violence, do whatever is necessary to achieve their revolutions. Just as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and

Mao were willing to imprison, starve, murder millions of people in the name of revolution, so are the jihadists willing to crucify Christian children, rape and enslave women, and destroy entire communities.

There can be no compromise in this struggle against Islamic extremists. Any belief that once they seize control of a state they will become “responsible” leaders is naive. This foolish misconception led the Obama administration to support the since-deposed Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt. Any belief that accommodation with the jihadist is possible is as naïve as British prime minister Neville Chamberlain’s belief that Hitler would settle for less than world domination.

If jihadists take pride in videotaping beheadings of innocent people and the burning of a captured Jordanian pilot, does anyone believe that these barbarians would not use chemical or nuclear weapons to destroy Western civilization, if they could?

We are at war with an enemy that does not understand the meaning of religious tolerance, the rule of law derived from a constitutionally based government, civil liberties, and an economic system, capitalism, which for all its faults has brought prosperity and health to millions of people.

The first step to overcoming these forces of evil, as Winston Churchill understood so well, is to acknowledge that we are at war and there can be no appeasement of the enemy. It’s a lesson that our world leaders must take to heart if this war is to be won.

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