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Root Causes of Islamist Extremism: Nine Years Later

by John D. Johnson

The 9/11 attacks showed to the world that Islamist extremism presents a significant threat to international peace and security. Following the attacks, the 9/11 Commission issued a thorough report that considered all aspects of attacks, tried to answer the question of why the terrorists conducted the attacks, and made many important recommendations on ways to improve U.S. security against terrorism.

Nine years later, the U.S. is probably safer due to the implementation of many of the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Report (e.g., the establishment of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the creation of a National Counterterrorism Center, and the improvement in interagency and international intelligence sharing), but it is not clear that our collective understanding of the grievances or root causes of Islamist extremism or that our counter-terrorism strategies have resulted in an environment where Islamist extremists are any less likely to attack the U.S., and the West more broadly.

This article considers the grievances of Islamist extremists involved in several recent terrorist attacks, presents an overview of the root causes of Islamist extremism and draws several analytical conclusions looking to the future.

Terrorist Attacks by Islamist Extremists: Before and After 9/11

The 9/11 Commission concluded that the 9/11 attacks were a shock, but not a surprise. The Commission's report listed several high-profile attacks conducted by Islamist extremists against the U.S. and its allies prior to 9/11 including: the 1993 truck bomb attack against the World Trade Center led by Kuwaiti-born Ramzi Yousef, the 1996 truck bomb attack against the Khobar Towers apartment complex in Saudi Arabia by Saudi Hezbollah, the 1998 Al Qaida truck bomb attacks on the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the 2000 Al Qaida motorboat attack on the USS Cole, to name just a few.

Yet, since 9/11, in spite of the best efforts in the U.S. and internationally by police, military personnel, diplomats, religious figures, communications specialists and others, the attacks continue. Some recent examples include: the December 2009 attempt by Nigerian-born Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to detonate explosives hidden in his underwear during a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit; the October 2010 attempt claimed Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to detonate explosive-laden printer cartridges on board cargo aircraft en route from Yemen to the U.S.; the November 2010 attempt by Somali-born U.S. citizen Mohamed Osman Mohamud to detonate a car bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland; the December 2010 attempt by Antonio Martinez (aka Muhammad Hussain), a U.S. citizen who recently converted to Islam, to blow up a military recruiting station in Maryland; and the

December 2010 suicide attack by Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly, an Iraqi-born Swedish citizen, in Stockholm.

Why do they do this?

To understand why Islamist extremists use violence, we often need to only look at the statements of the extremists themselves. The grievances offered by two recent attackers are representative of several of the root causes of Islamists extremists. In the case of the Maryland recruiting center, Antonio Martinez stated that his grievance was U.S. military operations in Afghanistan where Muslims were being killed. He also stated that his attack was justified by the Quran where it states one must “fight those who fight against you,” according to a December 8, 2010 FBI affidavit. Prior to his suicide attack in Sweden, Abdulwahab sent emails citing the presence of Swedish troops in Afghanistan and Swedish tolerance of an artist’s drawing of the Islamist prophet Muhammad as reasons for his attack.

Looking more generally at Al Qaida leader Usama Bin Laden’s statements over the years, he has articulated multiple grievances against the U.S. shared by many like-minded extremists including: perceived U.S. misdeeds against Muslim lands (e.g., such as in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Israel, Chechnya, Somali, Kashmir, Lebanon, and Afghanistan); opposition to Western culture, which clashes with many if not most of the precepts of Al Qaida’s worldview and conservative traditions; and perceived apostasy of the West’s separation of church and state (as opposed to the implementation of Sharia law).

Add to these statements the broader analysis, trends and conclusions from government and civilian experts, and seven general themes emerge for why Islamist extremists use violence. The grievances listed below are reasons extremists use to commit acts of violence. Most moderate Muslims do not subscribe to these views.

These themes are: historical grievances (the Crusades, the end of the Caliphate, the establishment of the state of Israel, imperialism/colonialism); extremist ideology (ultraconservative worldview, anti-modernity, use of Sharia law versus secularism, interpretation of offensive Jihad in the Quran and the negative view of non-Muslims); globalization (Westernization, Americanization, modernization, economic disparity, emergence of mass media, insufficient integration in Western societies); apostate or authoritarian Muslim governments (use of elements of secularism, failed political and economic models, support from Western governments, failure to achieve progress on Israeli-Palestinian issue, corruption, lack of good governance); non-Muslim rule or Western military presence in Islamist lands (Israel-Palestinian conflict, Afghan-Soviet War, the Iraq Gulf War 1991 and subsequent sanctions, U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, war in Iraq and Afghanistan); external funding of Islamist extremism (global funding of the conservative Wahabbi brand of Islam (fueled by petrodollars), radical madrassas in Pakistan and the growth of radical Islamist networks (to include on the internet)); and U.S. policies (support to Israel, the Gulf War and subsequent sanctions against Iraq, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, drone attacks in Pakistan, and the suspension of international legal norms (e.g., Guantanamo and the operation of secret prisons) and the perceived use of torture (e.g., water boarding and Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses)).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Islamist Extremists Are A Minority. Most moderate Muslims do not subscribe to the grievances identified above. Indeed, most Muslims are not extremists and it cannot be overstated that Islamist extremists are a minority in the Muslim world. Further, many argue that the principle fight against Islamist extremists should occur in the Muslim world between the minority extremists and the majority moderates.

Not Any One Root Cause; No Silver Bullet. Islamist extremism is not the result of any one grievance or root cause. Rather, what is a grievance for one person may not be for another; what is a root cause in one country may not be in another. Taken together, the root causes listed above constitute the body of issues that give rise to Islamist extremism across the Muslim world. Our collective understanding of the root causes of Islamist extremism should aid our efforts to develop strategy and policy to mitigate and contain the threat of extremist violence now and in the future.

Importance of the Israeli-Palestinian Issue. Some tend to downplay the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian issue when it comes to Islamist extremism. While true from the standpoint that no one issue is singularly responsible for the threat of Islamist terrorism, it is also true that no other issue is more commonly cited as a source of friction between the Muslim world and the West; a situation that is frequently exploited by Islamist extremists.

Iraq and Afghanistan: U.S. Foreign Policy and Perception Management. The presence of U.S. military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan is perceived by extremists as an attack on the Muslim world; these wars are important rallying events for the cause of Islamist extremists. And while the potentiality of that effect should not drive U.S. policy, how U.S. policy is perceived in the Muslim world should at least play into the cost-benefit-risk calculus of national policy formulation. Further, U.S. policy success against Islamist extremism could benefit from a more balanced employment of the elements of national power with less emphasis on the military.

Some Grievances Are Immitigable. Conventional wisdom suggests that if you can identify the root cause of a problem, then you can address the cause and solve the problem. However, while some root causes of Islamist extremism such as authoritarian Muslim governments and external funding of extremism can and should be addressed, other root causes such as nineteenth century European imperialism and the Crusades are difficult to mitigate. That said historical grievances tend to be cited less frequently by Islamist extremists than more contemporary issues.

External Funding of Islamist Extremism and Radical Education. The external funding of Islamist extremism and radical education continue to perpetuate extremism. The contributions of wealthy Persian Gulf-area citizens (not sanctioned by their governments) and radical madrassas in Pakistan are part of the problem. In order to curb external funding, we should continue to work with the governments of countries at both ends of the funding stream--the source and destination--to deny resources to extremists, conduct a review of intermediaries--banks and radical Islamist NGOs--who facilitate the flow of funds to extremists, and support moderate Muslim NGOs and international NGOs to provide an alternative for individuals in need of social services. To moderate radical education, we should increase financial assistance to moderate curriculum and leader training and education, work bilaterally and with international bodies to

review educational materials, and increase the number of educational exchange programs with Muslim countries.

Multinational and Interagency Cooperation. A challenge with identifying the root causes of Islamist extremism is achieving consensus. As a result, the U.S., its allies and international organizations differ in what they identify as the root causes of Islamist extremism and how best to approach defeating terrorism. We should intensify bilateral and multinational dialogue and cooperation with the UN, NATO, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and others to gain a common understanding of the root causes of Islamist extremism and to improve measures to prevent and combat terrorism. Within the U.S. government, we should reinvigorate processes where dialogue and cooperation between different agencies results in a common understanding and approach to dealing with the root causes of Islamist extremism. However, as important as interagency dialogue and U.S. policy are, it is worth reemphasizing that the principle fight against Islamist extremism should occur in the Muslim world between moderate Muslims and extremists themselves.

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(Note: This article is drawn from a larger study on the topic titled, *Analysis of the Sources of Islamic Extremism*, which is available online.)

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