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[Posted by Professor Juan Cole on his popular blog "[Informed Comment](#)"]

Foreign Occupation has Produced Radical Muslim Terrorism

Fareed Zakariya argues that Bush got one thing right. Zakariya writes:

" Bush never accepted the view that Islamic terrorism had its roots in religion or culture or the Arab–Israeli conflict. Instead he veered toward the analysis that the region was breeding terror because it had developed deep dysfunctions caused by decades of repression and an almost total lack of political, economic and social modernization. The Arab world, in this analysis, was almost unique in that over the past three decades it had become increasingly unfree, even as the rest of the world was opening up. His solution, therefore, was to push for reform in these lands."

I don't use the phrase "Islamic terrorism" because "Islamic" refers to the essentials of the religion, and it forbids terrorism (hirabah). But if Bush rejected the idea that radical Muslim terrorism came out of religion or culture, he was right.

I disagree with the rest of the paragraph, though. Let's think about terrorism in the past few decades in a concrete and historical way, and it is obvious that it comes out of a reaction to being occupied militarily by foreigners. The Muslim Brotherhood developed its Secret Apparatus and began committing acts of terror in the 1940s in Egypt, which the British had virtually reoccupied in order to deny it to the Italians and then Germans. The Brotherhood assassinated pro–British judges and pro–British politicians (the British installed the Wafd Party in power). The Brotherhood had grown to some half a million members by 1948. Some Brothers also volunteered to fight in Palestine against the rise of Israel, which they saw as a colonial settler state.

After the Muslim Brotherhood assassinated Prime Minister Nuqrashi in 1948, it was banned and dissolved. It was briefly rehabilitated by Abdul Nasser in 1952–1954, but in 1954 it tried to assassinate him, and he banned it again. There was no major radical Muslim terrorism in Egypt in the period after 1954 and until Sadat again

legitimized the Brotherhood in 1971, despite Egypt being a dictatorship in that period.

The intimate connection between foreign military occupation and terrorism can be seen in Palestine in the 1940s, where the Zionist movement threw up a number of terrorist organizations that engaged in bombings and assassinations on a fair scale. That is, frustrated Zionists not getting their way behaved in ways difficult to distinguish from frustrated Muslim nationalists who didn't get their way.

There was what the French would have called radical Muslim terrorism in Algeria 1954–1962, though the Salafis were junior partners of the largely secular FLN. French colonialists were targeted for heartless bombings and assassinations. This campaign of terror aimed at expelling the French, who had colonized Algeria in 1830 and had kept it ever since, declaring it French soil. The French had usurped the best land and crowded the Algerians into dowdy old medinas or haciendas in the countryside. The nationalists succeeded in gaining Algerian independence in 1962.

Once Sadat let the Muslim Brotherhood out of jail and allowed it to operate freely in the 1970s, to offset the power of the Egyptian Left, it threw up fundamentalist splinter groups like Ayman al-Zawahiri's al-Gihad al-Islami and Sheikh Omar's al-Gamaah al-Islamiyah. They were radicalized when Sadat made a separate peace with Israel in 1978–79 that permitted the Israelis to do as they pleased to the Palestinians. In response, the radical Muslims assassinated Sadat and continued to campaign against his successor, Hosni Mubarak. They saw the Egyptian regime as pharaonic and evil because it had allied with the United States and Israel, thus legitimating the occupation of Muslim land (from their point of view).

The south Lebanon Shiite groups, Amal and Hizbullah, turned to radical Muslim terrorism mainly after the 1982 Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation of South Lebanon, which is largely Shiite.

The radical Muslim terrorism of Khomeini's Revolutionary Guards grew in part out of American hegemony over Iran, which was expressed most forcefully by the 1953 CIA coup that overthrew the last freely elected parliament of that country.

Likewise, Hamas (the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood) turned to terrorism in large part out of desperation at the squalid circumstances and economic and political hopelessness of the Israeli military occupation of Gaza.

The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s was among the biggest generators of radical Muslim terrorism in modern history. The US abetted this phenomenon, giving billions to the radical Muslim ideologues at the top of Pakistani military intelligence (Inter-Services Intelligence), which in turn doled the money out to men like Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, a member of the Afghanistan Muslim Brotherhood (Jami'at-i Islami) who used to throw vials of acid at the faces of unveiled girls in the Kabul of the 1970s. The US also twisted the arm of the Saudi government to match its contributions to the Mujahidin. Saudi Intelligence Minister Turki al-Faisal was in charge of recruiting Arab volunteers to fight alongside the Mujahidin, and he brought in young Usamah bin Laden as a fundraiser. The CIA training camps that imparted specialized tradecraft to the Mujahidin inevitably also ended up training, at least at second hand, the Arab volunteers, who learned about forming covert cells, practicing how to blow things up, etc. The "Afghan Arabs" fanned back to their homelands, to Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, carrying with them the ethos that Ronald Reagan had inspired them with, which held that they should take up arms against atheist Westerners who attempted to occupy Muslim lands.

To this litany of Occupations that produce radical Muslim terrorism, Chechnya and Kashmir can be added.

In contrast, authoritarian governments like that of Iraq and Syria, while they might use terror for their own purposes from time to time, did not produce large-scale independent terrorist organizations that struck international targets. Authoritarian governments also proved adept at effectively crushing terrorist groups, as can be seen in Algeria and Egypt. It was only in failed states such as Afghanistan that they could flourish, not in authoritarian ones.

So it is the combination of Western occupation and weak states that produced the conditions for radical Muslim terrorism.

Democratic countries have often produced terrorist movements. This was true of Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States in the late 1960s and through the 1970s. There is no guarantee that a more democratic Iraq, Egypt or Lebanon will produce less terrorism. Certainly, the transition from Baathist dictatorship has introduced terrorism on a large scale into Iraqi society, and it may well spill over from there into neighboring states.

Morocco has been liberalizing for some years, and held fairly above-board parliamentary elections in 2002. Yet liberalizing Morocco produced the al-Salafiyyah al-Jihadiyyah group in Tangiers that committed the 2003 Casablanca bombings and the 2004 Madrid train bombings.

Moreover, if democracy means majority rule and the expression of the general will, then it won't always work to the advantage of the US. Bush administration spokesmen keep talking about Syrian withdrawal being the demand of the "Lebanese people." But 40% of the Lebanese are Shiites, and 15% are probably Sunnis, and it may well be that a majority of Lebanese want to keep at least some Syrian troops around. Hizbullah has sided with Syria and Shaikh Nasrallah has called for a big pro-Syrian demonstration by Shiites on Tuesday.

For true democracy to flourish in Lebanon, the artificial division of seats in parliament so that half go to the Christian minority would have to be ended. Religious Shiites would have, as in Iraq, a much bigger voice in national affairs. Will a Lebanon left to its own devices to negotiate a social compact between rightwing Christians and Shiite Hizbullah really be an island of stability?

I'm all for democratization in the Middle East, as a good in its own right. But I don't believe that authoritarian governance produced most episodes of terrorism in the last 60 years in the region. Terrorism was a weapon of the weak wielded against what these radical Muslims saw as a menacing foreign occupation. To erase that fact is to commit a basic error in historical understanding. It is why the US military occupation of Iraq is actually a negative for any "war on terror." Nor do I believe that democratization, even if it is possible, is going to end terrorism in and of itself.

You want to end terrorism? End unjust military occupations. By all means have Syria conduct an orderly withdrawal from Lebanon if that is what the Lebanese public wants. But Israel needs to withdraw from the Golan Heights, which belong to Syria, as well. The Israeli military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank must be ended. The Russian scorched earth policy in Chechnya needs to stop. Some just disposition of the Kashmir issue must be attained, and Indian enormities against Kashmiri Muslims must stop. The US needs to conduct an orderly and complete withdrawal from Iraq. And when all these military occupations end, there is some hope for a vast decrease in terrorism. People need a sense of autonomy and dignity, and occupation produces helplessness and humiliation. Humiliation is what causes terrorism.

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