



The Undercurrents Fueling Terrorism

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hachon

BESA Center Perspectives No. 592, September 19, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Despair and hope are the powerful forces that drive global terrorism. To better deal with this threat, the West must combine its counterterrorism efforts with harsher responses that will sow doubts in jihadists' minds about their chosen path.

In the wake of the recent ISIS attack in Barcelona, experts on Islamic terrorism were called on, as they so often are, to explain the phenomenon. This time the experts pointed to a radical imam who had incited second-generation immigrants, organized a terrorist network, and spurred the perpetrators into action.

One major question remains unanswered: Why? Generations of academic researchers have delved and will continue to delve into this issue. In the meantime, it is worthwhile to review some of the factors necessary to deal with the phenomenon of terrorism on a practical level.

As far as the immediate operational aspects of security and thwarting terrorist attacks are concerned, the question of why has no practical significance. It is similar to saving a person suffering from a heart attack. In such an emergency, the saving of a life depends on a series of technical, efficient, and immediate actions, not on inquiries into primary causes of the disease. But once the situation has stabilized, a comprehensive examination of the precipitating circumstances is necessary. One's way of life might need to change, and the question of "why did this happen?" becomes useful.

Dealing with the terrorist phenomenon similarly requires a two-pronged approach. The first is operational: the practical test of counterterrorism and

security responses. The second is more theoretical: the examination of the full range of sociological, economic, and religious circumstances that drive this phenomenon.

Some say terrorism is fueled by the perpetrators' sense of despair and alienation. To be sure, poverty and deprivation in many Islamic countries have prompted an emigration trend, and immigrant hubs often breed a sense of alienation. This is especially true among second-generation youths frustrated by the unbridgeable gap between their situation as immigrants and the established society around them.

But there is an additional hypothesis worth considering. Despair and alienation are not the only reasons for terrorism. Hope is also a motive.

Many times, it is precisely those who had hoped to integrate into affluent Western society who choose the path of terrorism. Some of the world's most notorious terrorists, such as those who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks, studied at leading Western universities. At a recent international symposium I attended, I learned from a Malaysian researcher that in his country, it is mostly outstanding students with exceptional prospects who choose to join ISIS.

Projecting despair and alienation onto everything may blind one to the existence of other significant motives no less essential to understanding this phenomenon. Understanding others means understanding that they are not necessarily just like us. Besides security and prosperity, people also seek meaning. This is the crux of the humanistic debate: can one be content simply with the gospel of prosperity offered by the West?

The rational fundamentalist

This is where religious fervor, the kind the modern West does not know how to deal with, rears its head. In his book *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, author Sam Harris discusses the challenge the Western world faces in the rise of religiously motivated terrorism. Harris argues that religion is an irrational factor – a "fountain of violence" – and believes it should be removed entirely from the political and public spheres.

Jihadist terrorism does indeed stem from religious fundamentalism, while modern secularism perceives religious motivation as irrational. But it is exactly here that a non-dichotomous understanding is necessary.

To intelligently deal with the phenomenon of terrorism, one should assume that the fundamentalist believes his conduct to be rational. For the most part, terrorists act from a point of view that is rational to them, at least with regard

to the link they seek to create between their actions and the causes they want to promote.

A terrorist seeks meaning for his life, which he expresses in the willingness to devote himself to realizing the vision of which his prophet spoke. But the prophet did not say when the time to act would come, and this is the point that needs thorough clarification. Has the time come?

We tend to say that a zealot who believes in the power of sacrifice is blind to reality. On the contrary: it is reality that teaches him that the time has come and encourages him to rise and act, empowered by his faith.

Here lies the element dividing radical jihadi organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. They differ in their interpretations of reality and over the question of whether the time has come. Al-Qaeda argues that optimal circumstances have yet to present themselves, while ISIS says now is the moment to act ("the gates of heaven have opened").

It is not religion, which is impractical and detached from rational considerations, but reality that tells them it is rational to act now. Contrary to popular belief, jihadists do value life, and they do not throw theirs away lightly. Their glorification of death stems from their perception of the magnitude of the hour.

Postponing the end

If we can sow doubt in jihadists' minds that the time has come, we may be able to thwart their plans. It is our duty to determine what fuels the jihadist belief that the time to act has come.

To a great extent, the sense of opportunity is rooted in the Muslim perception of Western society as decaying and declining. This perception stems first and foremost from the significant decline in birth rates in the West, which Muslims view as the sign of an ailing culture. No children means no future, no labor force, and no manpower pool to fill soldiers' ranks.

With their liberal aspirations and emphasis on human rights as a basic principle that trumps a state's authority, Western societies seem to have relinquished the need to exercise their sovereignty.

Most Western countries have abolished conscription and reduced their militaries to the point of compromising their military capability. Their growing reluctance to use force and preference for "soft power" (diplomacy) in the belief

that a positive outlook can solve any crisis are also viewed by Muslims as weaknesses.

In the clash between these contradictory cultural trends, it is the perceived manifestation of the West's weakness that sparks hope in terror operatives.

As in the treatment of heart patients who, following the emergency, must review their lifestyle, so too must we review our culture in our counterterrorism efforts. Western society must change its way of life in a manner that will make clear to its enemies that their time to act has not yet come. This will not change the vision of radical jihadists, but given their sensitivity to the circumstances of reality, it just might prompt them to postpone their violent struggle to another day.

This is an edited version of a piece that was [first published](#) in *Israel Hayom* on August 25, 2017.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family