5 Ending Support for Terrorism in the Muslim World

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On September 11, 2001, I was finishing lunch in Cairo with an Egyptian friend when I received a call on my mobile phone with shocking news. As I relayed the news to Mohammed bit by bit, we both rose from our seats and fled—I to the U.S. embassy (where I was a political officer), and he to an office of the Egyptian presidency (where he was an adviser). After a few initial days of understandable security panic, the embassy opened a book of condolences. Soon Egyptians from many walks of life—diplomats and business tycoons, yes, but also entire classes of schoolchildren—lined up for days to sign that book, many of them weeping and bearing flowers.

At the same time, however, the international media conveyed images of Egyptians and other Arabs expressing joy, or at least grim satisfaction, at the attacks. Over the ensuing months, many Egyptians who professed to be friends to the United States said to me, in effect, "I'm sorry this happened, but you had it coming."

With this mixed picture as background, let us pose two questions: What is the problem the United States faces in the Muslim world? And what should we do about it?

Regarding what to do, as a start, I posit that the U.S. government, with all the many tools and vast power at its disposal, cannot directly change the thinking or behavior of Muslims who support the use of terrorism. Nor can the U.S. government directly alter the policies of Middle Eastern governments that acquiesce to terrorism, play double games with terrorists, or oppress their people in ways that feed terrorism. And clearly, the U.S. government cannot use, ought not use, and in any case has no intention of using military force against every country in the Middle East whose counterterrorism policies we find less than perfect.

It is equally important to know, however, what the U.S. government *can* do. It can put the tremendous power and influence it possesses to work in combating both the phenomenon of terrorism itself and the problems that give rise to support for terrorism among Muslims. To do this, however, the U.S. government would need to change the way it deals with governments of Arab and other Muslim countries. Doing so would require an integrated policy approach, not just military and law-enforcement efforts dressed up with public diplomacy.

To say any more of such an approach, however, requires us to first return to the problem.

What the Problem Is . . . and Is Not

In addition to the phenomenon of terrorist acts themselves—which has been the focus of intensive military, diplomatic, and law-enforcement efforts since September 2001—there is the nagging issue of why many (though by no means all) Muslims

in various parts of the world expressed the opinion after September 11 that the attacks were justified or at least understandable. American observers have suggested a number of explanations: that active or passive support for the use of terrorism springs from something endemic to Islam or to Arab culture; that such support springs from the perceived threat that American culture and globalization pose to Islam; that such support is a response to oppression by local rulers; that such support reflects strong objections to U.S. policies in the Middle East.

The fact that those who carried out the attacks of September 11 (and other Muslims who saw those attacks as justified in some way) came originally from countries where they were oppressed politically and otherwise, and that they nursed deep grievances against U.S. policies, is difficult to deny. Regarding the Arab countries in particular, I have often been struck by the difficulty of disentangling the various sources of grievance toward the United States. It is as if there were a deep well of resentment with various contributing streams—American policy regarding Israel and Palestine; the U.S. military presence on the Arabian peninsula and in the Persian Gulf; U.S. support for governments that oppress politically and that are inept or worse economically; and the resulting exclusion of many Arabs from the benefits of globalization, with which, of course, the United States is closely identified.

Anger toward the United States due to its support for Israel, which despite the many years of U.S. efforts for peace often redounds to the disadvantage of Palestinians, is an important factor, but by no means is it the only one. And it is a factor with symbolic as well as actual impact; the Palestinian issue feeds a feeling among many Arabs—and apparently many non-Arab Muslims as well—of humiliation by association.

Similarly, the presence of U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia (greatly reduced in the summer of 2003) and elsewhere in the region creates another source of humiliation for Muslims, who see it as demonstrating that they are unable to deal with their most basic problems, even the protection of their own sacred places. Needless to say, U.S. military action to remove Saddam Hussein's regime and the resulting occupation of Iraq merely point out one more glaring problem that Arabs have been unable to take care of themselves.

In addition to the more obvious problems of Palestine and Iraq, it is many Arabs' sense of helplessness in changing their own very difficult domestic political and economic conditions that fuels their anger at the United States. The United States is almost universally held responsible, whether fairly or not, for supporting the governments that perpetuate those terrible conditions. It is on this matter that I will focus in describing what the problem is and how to address it.

Arguably, grievances, however deeply felt, do not fully explain why horrific violence against innocent people is viewed as a legitimate response. But bitter feelings of humiliation and helplessness, spiked with the Islamic extremists' call to reject and attack the new global order authored by the United States, make a powerful brew. One way to capture this dynamic is through an economic metaphor: there is a desperate demand for solutions to desperate problems in the Arab world, and a well-funded supply of Islamic extremist ideas and groups rise to meet that demand.

The supply side of the question—namely, the funding and political support of Islamic extremist ideas and groups exported from the Arabian Peninsula to many other Arab and Muslim countries — is undoubtedly a serious problem. Cutting off funds and other forms of support to those who either commit terrorist attacks or justify them through religious or

political teachings is indispensable. It must be a top priority within the context of an overall strategy.

Dealing with the supply side alone, however, is not enough, because extremists in many countries have deep roots and can easily replace recruits who are captured or killed. The demand side is just as important. In other words, if Saudi Arabia (and Iran, for that matter) were to disappear from the face of the earth tomorrow, Islamic extremists would survive in many other countries, unaided from the outside, because miserable local conditions have created a demand (and a large pool of recruits) for the radical solutions the extremists feign to supply.

In thinking about how the United States should approach the conditions that generate a demand or support for terrorism, I start from the premise that American influence and resources in the Arab world have not been, are not now, and cannot be neutral. To quote Bob Dylan, "We're gonna have to serve somebody," and a serious rethinking of whom in the Arab world our policies and assistance programs are serving is long overdue.

There are two realities that we need to acknowledge before we can get anywhere. First, until recently, U.S. priorities in the region have been so narrowly drawn—security of oil supplies; guaranteed military access; a sometimes cautious, sometimes energetic pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace—as to cause the United States to bolster regimes whose domestic policies are economic and political disasters. Although not necessarily the intent of the U.S. government, it remains the case that Arab domestic issues were ignored for too many years. The Bush administration deserves credit for being the first to see things differently, and the president's National Endowment for Democracy speech of November 6, 2003, is by far the most dramatic presidential statement on this issue in more

than half a century. But it remains unclear how seriously and skillfully the issue will be addressed.

Second, the State Department has devoted far too little attention to managing diplomatic relationships in the Arab world, in many cases leaving that job to the Defense Department. One need only contrast the record of frequent, routinely scheduled travel by senior Defense Department officials to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other Arab countries in recent years (long before September 11 and the war in Iraq) with the infrequent trips of senior State Department officials. The huge imbalance of resources that the two departments have in hand, plus the absence of any State Department equivalent to the military commanders in chief who can operate on a regional basis, only compounds the implications of the lack of high-level State Department leadership.

One consequence of all this was that as long as our basic needs, narrowly defined, were being assured, little effort was devoted to all the other aspects of our relationships with these countries. We did not bother much to manage impressions, refute untruths, or pay close attention to political, economic, and social life inside these countries.

To sum up then, what is the problem? The problem, we now realize, is that what goes on inside Middle Eastern countries has important security consequences for us. Unfortunately, our ability to affect those goings-on has been compromised by the legacy of our attending exclusively to more traditional security problems—namely, those of the Cold War. What is not the problem? The problem is not proving whether everything the Arabs say about the United States and U.S. policy is true. We cannot escape from the fact that the conditions under which Arabs and many other Muslims live lead them to believe it is all true.

What to Do . . . and Not to Do

If the United States must now begin to concern itself with domestic conditions in Arab countries with which it has important relationships (and in some cases significant assistance programs), how should it do so?

American influence, though far from neutral, is also generally indirect. With few exceptions, we cannot directly change conditions in other countries, and in any case, we would not be willing to commit the resources required even to make a serious attempt. It is instructive to remember what any twelve-step program tells its participants: you cannot change another person or his or her behavior directly. What the United States *can* do is change its own behavior toward the governments in question, which in turn would change dynamics between the United States and actors (whether governments or not) in those countries, and which, in turn, may cause those actors to change their behavior.

It hardly wants emphasis that this process is unpredictable and not completely controllable. But it has the virtue of being based in reality and has a reasonable chance of success. Self-delusion or arguing about our ability to change things directly does not.

A policy review must also start from the premise that something is seriously amiss regarding any country where we have a significant relationship, but where there is nonetheless significant support for anti-U.S. terrorism. We need to understand which forces our current relationships are serving and how we would have to change those relationships so that they serve those inside and outside governments whose interests accord with ours and who will give their people a stake in a viable system: forces for liberal, market economies; for the rule of law and respect for women's rights; for accountable,

participatory political systems; for religious toleration and nonviolence. Nothing less will suit—not these days.

Any such strategy must involve all the tools at the U.S. government's disposal: diplomatic engagement, military relationships, assistance programs, public diplomacy, and engagement with American private enterprise and nongovernmental organizations. Public diplomacy efforts—glossy magazines for Arab youth, satellite television to compete with al-Jazeera, pop radio programs like Radio Sawa and Radio Farda, campaigns to show religious tolerance and diversity in the United States—are positive in their own way. But they have impact only if accompanied by a responsible reorientation of our policies and assistance programs. Arabs, Iranians, Pakistanis, and others are not stupid people; they will not buy rhetoric without a corresponding reality for very long.

Similarly, assistance programs to promote political and economic reform and to improve education or free media, for example, will fall flat or backfire unless they are part of an overall strategy of engagement with governments. Simply put, how seriously will any Arab leader take our assistance or public diplomacy programs to promote reform and moderation when those subjects are never on the agenda of high-level conversations?

For policy purposes, we need a country-by-country diagnosis of the nature of the problem—specifically, why people in Saudi Arabia or Egypt or Pakistan or Indonesia would support or sympathize with those who commit or advocate terrorism against Americans. The reasons need not be, and probably are not, the same in every case. Next, we need to look with fresh eyes at what the United States can do—and what the United States should urge the governments in question to do—to address the problems and grievances that have led to this sad state of affairs.

Following the diagnosis and a cold-eyed examination of our current relations with what involves twenty-two Arab countries and at least that many more majority-Muslim countries, the U.S. government should formulate policy to begin the long, messy, and uncertain process of using our influence to push things in the right direction. No doubt, we will need to work with other major donors, including international financial institutions, to multiply our efforts.

All of this will be difficult and will involve painstaking work. The furthest the Bush administration has gone in addressing underlying support for terrorism in the Arab world has been through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), announced by Secretary of State Powell in December 2002. The initiative seeks to use existing and new economic assistance to Middle East countries to promote economic, political, and educational reform and the empowerment of women. Although the initiative is undoubtedly positive and deserves support, it is not, or not yet, a comprehensive strategy. It is still divorced from U.S. military assistance, for example, and has little connection to public diplomacy efforts. Moreover, there is no parallel initiative for Muslims outside the Middle East in such important countries as Indonesia, Pakistan, or Nigeria.

So what to do? We need to take the domestic political, economic, and social dynamics of Arab and Muslim countries seriously, and we need to rebalance our overall policy objectives to reflect that reality. What not to do? We do not have to ruin existing relationships with the Saudi, Egyptian, and other Arab governments, or undermine Israeli security, or abandon our interests in the traditional objectives of oil, peace, and strategic access. The task is hard enough as it is without painting it as both impossible and ridiculous. What is needed is a filling out and maturation of our relationships with govern-

ments and peoples of the region to show that we believe domestic reform is badly needed in many countries, for their good and for ours.

Getting Organized

The Middle East Partnership Initiative offers a window on how the organization of the U.S. government affects its ability to deal with the Muslim world. Strict division of bureaucratic responsibilities along regional lines in the Departments of State and Defense discourages productive thinking about problems that cross regions. Bureaucrats in regional bureaus consider it not only a prerogative but also a duty to combat any transregional priority that might cut into their freedom to make decisions about policies and money within their narrow and short-term perspectives. (Readers who have not worked in the U.S. government might find this statement cynical; those who have are liable to find it a gross understatement.)

That is why there should be a designated high-level official, for example a special assistant to the president, to oversee the development and implementation of policy strategies on using our influence to help end support for terrorism in the Muslim world. The special assistant would coordinate with those working the supply side of the problem (intelligence and law-enforcement efforts to stop terrorist acts, as well as diplomacy to end funding and other forms of support to extremist Islamists), and those working the demand side (diplomatic assistance and public diplomacy efforts to address conditions that generate support for terrorism) to ensure that efforts are coherent and mutually reinforcing. The existing bureaucracy is simply incapable of changing course without strong leadership, and it will tend to cut initiatives (such as MEPI) down to a size that fits into the old scheme of priorities.

The reality is that if there is no one accountable for doing a difficult job in government, that job will not get done. Is it possible that, after the thousands of lives lost and billions of dollars spent on combating terrorism through military action and law enforcement, the U.S. government will fail to effectively combat the underlying sources of support for terrorism because it was simply too much trouble to ask the bureaucracy to operate differently? Yes, it is possible.