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Terrorism as Therapy

The Obama administration is intent on downplaying the Islamic roots of contemporary terrorism.

By Victor Davis Hanson.

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

One common theme emerges from the hearings over the Benghazi disaster: The Obama administration is intent on downplaying the Islamic roots of terrorists who harbor an existential hatred of the West.

The killing of Osama bin Laden was supposed to have cut the hideous head off a mutant snake. His death officially destroyed the “core” of the aberrant al-Qaeda. The removal from power of the outlier Qaddafi was likewise to have put an end to the artificial obstacle to the natural evolution toward democracy in Libya. In those regards, an al-Qaeda-inspired, pre-planned hit on the American consulate, resulting perhaps in a full-fledged Mogadishu-like shootout, just was not in the administration’s pre-election cards. No one was disposed either to beef up security in the face of escalating threats, or to send in teams *in extremis* to save the besieged Americans, or to give an honest appraisal afterward of what had transpired.

Meanwhile, the opportunity to blame the entire mess on an easily caricatured right-wing Christian Islamophobe crackpot was too tempting — as Susan Rice, Hillary Clinton, and the president himself found as they serially damned the suddenly-to-be-imprisoned Mr. Nakoula. He was a con artist, but not the provocateur of the Benghazi violence — and yet he proved a perfect vehicle for showcasing the administration’s multicultural bona fides. In terms of explaining away the lapses in Benghazi, the challenge arose of how many ways top officials could damn the unfortunate Mr. Nakoula — as if each denunciation made it unnecessary to utter the word “terrorism” or “al-Qaeda.”

The fantasy that prior American policy was insensitive to Muslims and did not differentiate sufficiently between Islam and al-Qaeda has been an article of faith of this administration. Go back and review the initial Obama interview with al-Arabiya or the loud professions of CIA director John Brennan, who was Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser at the time of the Benghazi attack.

The corollary of this fantasy was also natural: The greater worry is anti-Islamic bigotry and prejudice, not heightened awareness of the propensity for certain people to commit terrorism in the supposed service to Islam. This odd mindset explains both the Orwellian euphemisms (overseas contingency operations, man-caused disasters, workplace violence, violent extremism, etc.) and the collective madness of some career-minded bureaucrats competing with one another in the public arena with their politically correct nonsense (cf. the Muslim Brotherhood as "secular," NASA's "foremost" mission as Muslim outreach, or jihad as a "holy struggle"). That groupthink was based on the flawed idea that the more we deny an Islamic catalyst to terrorism, the more there will be none. The problem was not just that elites seeking to ingratiate themselves with the Obama administration routinely indulged in such willful blindness, but that these absurdities filtered down to the day-by-day protocols of our intelligence and law-enforcement bureaus.

In almost every major recent terrorist incident in which Americans have been attacked, the question is not whether, but on how many occasions, American intelligence agencies knew of, and had good cause to detain, the eventual perpetrators, whether Anwar al-Awlaki, Nidal Malik Hasan, or Carlos Bledsoe. Those on the ground in Benghazi had warned their State Department superiors that American facilities were in danger from attacks by Islamic radicals. Tamerlan Tsarnaev was visited by the FBI and known to the CIA for his overt jihadist sloganeering. In each instance, the warning signs were ignored. These omissions raise the question: Why?

The anti-Bush narrative from 2003 to 2008 (spawned by the unexpected luxury of no further 9/11-like terrorism) was largely that reactionaries and bigots had cooked up a war on terror against nonexistent enemies. Or maybe these paranoid sorts had even goaded otherwise moderate Muslims into terrorism by their counterproductive anti-terrorism protocols: Take away the Guantanamo Bay “recruiting tool” or Iraq as a “provocation,” and, presto, Islamic-inspired terrorism itself wanes. In near religious fashion, almost every time Barack Obama traveled abroad in his first three years as president, he evoked Guantanamo. It became a sort of verbal tic, intended to denigrate his predecessor and showcase his own multicultural brand. Alas, for all the obsequiousness and cash, U.S. popularity in the Middle East is as low as it was under Bush.

Yet privately, Obama and his supporters hedged somewhat, in fear that the odious Bush might have been onto something about radical Islam. Thus, rather quietly, President Obama immediately embraced almost all the Bush-Cheney anti-terrorism policies and even expanded some of them, with the full knowledge that his own base would prove quite flexible now that he was president.

Yet to square the circle of killing ten times as many suspected terrorists by drones in four years as Bush had in eight, and to offer a fig leaf for keeping Guantanamo open and expanding renditions, the Obama administration kept emphasizing the decoupling of radical Islam from anti-American terrorism. So followed the euphemisms, the psychodrama over the Ground Zero mosque, the prohibition against using the terms Islamist, war on terror, and even terrorism itself, and Eric Holder’s empty boasts about trying Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in a civilian court.

Were these contortions also reflective of deeper ideological assumptions? The Obama administration felt that anti-Americanism must have some basis in fact, and thus Islamists, however repugnant their tactics, might at least reflect some widespread Islamic cause for complaint. By distancing himself from his predecessor (and indeed

sometimes from the main currents of American history itself), Obama sought to reassure the Muslim world that his newly transformed America no longer should warrant its old target status. In this therapeutic view, the more radical Muslims saw how well Major Hasan was treated, how careful we were not to associate his violence with radical Islam, how concerned we were not to imperil the Army's diversity program, the more they might desist — in gratitude for our liberality, if not for our Nobel Peace Prize-winning, post-national president.

Ditto Benghazi: A high American profile in “liberated Libya” would not create confident deterrence, but would rather only provoke resentments and invite reprisals. Deporting Islamic refugees like the law-breaking Tsarnaevs would only alienate Muslims, not impress them about an unpredictable and sometimes scary America's adherence to its own laws and sense of security.

Blow up ten suspected terrorists in Waziristan, and the incinerated do not even merit mention on MSNBC. But put one confessed terrorist in Guantanamo, and we have the potential for a televised hunger strike, a defaced Koran, or a mini-riot. If it is a choice between detaining a suspicious Major Hasan or deporting a jihadist like Tamerlan Tsarnaev, on the one hand, and pulverizing another thousand suspected terrorists in Waziristan on the other, the out-of-sight, out-of-mind latter alternative is preferable.

The Obama administration's therapeutic view assumes that the more we can ignore the radical Islamic roots of contemporary terrorism, the more such terrorism may diminish, as the vast majority of good-hearted and moderate Muslims will step forward in response to Western outreach and drain the stagnant waters that nourish their own dangerous Islamic piranhas.

There may be some small truth to the logic of such outreach — and it certainly has provided cover for drone assassinations, Guantanamo, and more renditions — but so far Benghazi, the Tsarnaevs, and

Major Hasan suggest a dangerous laxity. In contrast, the tragic view assumes that human beings simply gravitate to what seems easy, popular, and successful. To the degree that a Major Hasan is demoted in rank, watched, and perhaps detained, he and others are less likely to strike out; to the degree that even one Tsarnaev is deported or at least tailed, he and his copy-cats are less likely to blow up others.

Of course, the tragic and the therapeutic views of Islamic terrorism are not always so diametrically opposed. Each shares some assumptions about human nature with the other, such as that winning hearts and minds can be as much valued as deterring would-be killers by ensuring swift punishment and reprisals. But in general, since 2009, the United States has officially believed that much of the cause of Islamic violence lies in American history, American policies and attitudes, and American jurisprudence and military operations — all correctable, if not always in deed, at least in loud word. The therapeutic Obama believes that if Islamists just knew the “real” America, they would desist; most sober critics object that they know us all too well and hate us all the more for such intimacy.

One last observation: There is a hard and cruel calculus involved in the present administration’s anti-terrorism policy. Its therapeutic approach hinges on terrorism’s remaining “manageable” — Major Hasan killing 13, not five Major Hasans murdering 60; two Tsarnaevs maiming nearly 300, not ten of them killing 2,000; one obscure consulate attacked in Benghazi and four American deaths, not the Cairo embassy exploded with 500 dead.

When a far deadlier strike occurs — and it may well, if President Obama persists in the present suicidal course — then, out of nowhere, the tragic sense will reassert itself. And from then on, the next Tsarnaev or Hasan will be detained before he strikes — until, of course, such detentions make us safe and secure enough to deplore those who were so uncouth as to carry them out.

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