

# An Anatomy of a Terrorist's Mind: Analysis and Comments

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There is no dearth of articles in newspapers, news magazines, and learned journals that deal with the growing problem of global terrorism. Needless to say, after 9/11/2001 and

7/7/2005, our world has become a scary place. We would like to know why so many men, and even some women, engage in such destructive acts that cost them their lives as well as the lives of countless innocent people.

Specifically, I would like to ask: why is the Muslim world in turmoil, and why have most of the killer-terrorists of today, whether residents of Dar-al-Islam, or of the Western world, continue to commit such hideous acts? Lately, some general answers have been offered by such well-known experts as Bernard Lewis. You may like to consult his book,

**“What Went Wrong? *Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response.*”** It was published by Oxford University Press in 2002)

However, if we want to know what drives some Muslims to engage in terrorist acts, and what goes on in their minds as they prepare to perpetrate their crimes, we should listen to what some Arab Muslim writers are saying. This is very important since all discussions of this subject that go on in foreign languages have very little impact on the ever growing Arab and Muslim masses. As I glance daily at the content of some Arabic newspapers on the web, my attention was drawn to an eye-catching title that appeared on August 10, in the London-based Al-Sharq al-Awsat. It read: **“*Tashrih al-‘Aql al-Irhabi*”**

**“*An Anatomy of a Terrorist’s Mind.*”**

Having read it over several times, I could not help but admire the honesty and boldness of the author who chose to deal with this difficult topic. I wish more such writings would appear in the dailies of the Arab world, from Kuwait to Casablanca. I plan to give a brief analysis of the article and then add a few of my own comments.

The author began to deal with this disturbing phenomenon by referring to some recent terrorist attacks that were still in the minds of his readers. He wanted them to realize that these acts of mass and indiscriminate murder have a ripple effect that impacts the entire world. He is trying to draw to the attention of his readers in the Arab World that acts of terror, perpetrated by Muslims, end up by giving a very bad impression of Islam:

*“Every time a terrorist attack occurs, we are faced with several questions. They don’t seem to change, even after the suicide attacks at Sharm el-Sheikh, following the terrorist*

*bombings in London , or the abduction and murder of the Egyptian ambassador, Dr. Ihab al-Sharif, in Baghdad . Unless and until the Arab mind faces up to these questions and deals with them, the current situation dominated by such topics as terrorism, Islam, and Muslims, will add to strained international relations, and will continue to be extremely unsettling.”*

*“Why do some people engage in suicide attacks, killing themselves and countless human beings? The question remains very perplexing, especially when the killer makes no specific demands on society or the state. All we Arabs get is a list of general grievances, such as calling people apostates, or pro-Jewish, or pro-Christian! So we will never know what is required of us in order to satisfy their demands and convince them that the rest of us are [true] believers; or in what way we should conduct our international relations in order to win their approval!”*

It is interesting to note that the writer is deploring an almost pathological condition that affects not only the terrorists, but many within Islam. He refers to the habit of regarding any conciliatory move toward the other (i.e. the non-Muslim) as out of the question. So all who would initiate such an action must be considered **“as [being] apostates, or pro-Jewish, or pro-Christian.”** He goes on to explode any lame excuse that would attempt to give a rational answer to terrorist acts:

*“Thus far, all the answers we have received boil down to the following: ‘we face angry young men who point the finger to occupied Palestine where the Israelis commit atrocities against the Palestinians. They are angry because America occupies Iraq, and their anger has grown into a rage after the revelations of the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and the insults that have been hurled at Arabs and Muslims in Guantanamo.’ The list of grievances keeps on growing and stretches all the way back to the days of Western colonialism, as well as to the present situation in Afghanistan , the Philippines , and Chechnya .”*

Our writer goes on to show that such excuses are unconvincing:

*“These answers remain unconvincing. For example, why don’t all angry Muslims, (numbering more than a billion,) engage in killing [others?] Why don’t others as well, who number by the billions, and who have gone through similar experiences (as Arabs and Muslims) throughout their own history, engage in acts of terrorism?!”*

Not only are such lame answers unconvincing, but they are actually very dangerous. So, he proceeds to expound his thesis and demonstrates the absurdity of the line of reasoning offered by those who have pointed to the ‘grievances’ as grounds or motives for terrorism.

*“Actually, such answers that we have mentioned reveal that any attempt to explain ‘the motives’ for these acts of terrorism end up providing excuses for such crimes. This is so because in order to deal rationally with these motives or root causes that legitimize their fury, one would have to ask such simple questions: ‘what was the relation of the people*

*who were in Sharm el-Sheikh, or London, or Riyadh, or Cairo, with what was going on in Palestine or Iraq? It is certain that none of the [Egyptian] workers or [Arab and European] tourists at Hotel Ghazala [in Sharm el-Sheikh} had ever worked at Abu Ghraib prison! [So why did they become the target for terrorists?]*”

*“Thus to approach our problem by searching for the ‘motives’ of terrorism may give comfort to those who want to glorify terrorism by showing that terrorists are actually engaged in the defense of the Umma. [We are told that] while their means are rather disturbing and quite improper, nevertheless their motives are noble. Others who are sympathetic to terrorism want us to stop doing anything about this phenomenon, or dealing with it by asking such questions. They claim that terrorism is linked to the policies of the United States and Israel , so we can do nothing but fight them. And should we decide not to fight the US and Israel , we would then deserve the terrorists’ curse.”*

*“Anyhow, the theory of ‘motives’ or ‘root causes’ does not solve our problem with terrorism, or our duty to protect people from getting killed; a responsibility that is based on all revealed and unrevealed laws. Our question retains its urgency regarding the psychological, emotional, and rational condition of a specific person who undergoes such a radical change of mind. His transformation makes a normal person an abnormal one, ready to kill himself with tens or even hundreds of other human beings. One of the first changes that takes place in the mind of a would-be terrorist is an absolute belief that nowadays, Muslims the world over, are in a state of siege. They are besieged by Westerners, and Indians, and Buddhists, and Christians, and Jews, and Russians, and Serbs. Furthermore, he claims that the [rest] of the world is unconcerned about the tragedies that have befallen the household of Islam; and if there are signs for concern for the needs of Muslims, they have come too late. Thus his feeling of utter loneliness and of being the target of some oppressive global forces, form the terrorist’s state of mind. It makes him feel as an outsider vis-à-vis a humanity that has neither recognized nor accepted him.”*

The author points at this stage in his article, to a lack of an accurate and objective view of modern history, especially the history of European colonialism since the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

*“This state of ‘alienation’ is followed by a powerful conviction that the Muslim world has become the ‘victim’ of imperialism. [The terrorist] imagines that colonialism had simply targeted the Household of Islam and has not touched other lands. It is as if partitions [of lands or countries] occurred only in Muslim parts of the world, and nowhere else. Most likely, the terrorist knows nothing about the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan , or the spread of opium in China , or the partition of India , or of the Soviet Union, and all of Europe . He certainly has no knowledge about the leveling of the German city of Dresden in WWII, or the killing of 300,000 people in Nanking [during the Japanese occupation of China .]”*

*“Such a lonely and alienated individual is ready to take the next step, that of killing. So he engages in his murderous activities based on the hope of a coming salvation. This*

*[strong feeling] is coupled with a firm belief in his own spiritual, moral, and intellectual superiority over a corrupt, oppressive, and dissolute world. [However] this outlook reveals a wrong reading of Islamic history as well as [of a sound] religious knowledge. Furthermore, his warped view of reality transforms our man [who is suffering] from a state of utter humiliation into a 'superman.' He dreams of the possibility of changing the whole world, by upsetting its sinful values. And this will be achieved when a small group succeeds in terrorising the enemy and scaring [those within the Muslim community] that have gone astray. This lonely person [believes] he is carrying the right message to mankind by his supreme sacrifice that ends in mass killings. By resorting to terrorism, he does not only change history by putting it on the right course, but points out the way for the mujahideen to reach Paradise . Thus a suicide bomber leaves behind him an alien world, and [goes to a place of bliss] that no eye has ever seen, nor ear has ever heard of, nor entered into the mind of man. If this is the right answer [to the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism,] what is then the solution?"*

I have seldom seen such a candid analysis for the inner mind of a would-be terrorist. And to have that appear in print as well as in the web edition of a newspaper that is read by a good many people throughout the Arab world is a hopeful occurrence. The author's words as quoted above need no further comments, except one, and a very important point I would like to make. I trust that I have not misunderstood him when he wrote, rather early in his article:

***“These answers remain unconvincing. For example, why don't all angry Muslims, (numbering more than a billion,) engage in killing [others?] Why don't others as well, who number by the billions, and who have gone through similar experiences (as Arabs and Muslims) throughout their own history, don't engage in acts of terrorism?!”***

I read, and re-read his words in the original Arabic, and could not avoid the strong feeling that our author implies that all Muslims today are angry, one billion of them! Not only they are angry, but billions of others are equally angry! He did not specify who the objects of the anger of billions were, but one cannot escape the feeling that he was pointing to the West. Specifically, he had in mind European colonialism that began in earnest soon after the discovery of the New World , and reached its zenith during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Indeed, Britain , France , the Netherlands , and Spain did colonize most of the Muslim world. Other civilizations rooted in their own religious traditions, entered the European imperialist orbit. All that is now a thing of the past. European colonialism, with the exception of the French presence in Algeria , did not attempt to overwhelm the colonial lands with mass movements of Western settlers. The French experiment in Algeria ended after a bitter war with the nationals, and all of the Europeans settlers had to resettle in France .

In contrast with European colonialism, Arab-Islamic conquests had in most cases, a certain finality about them and makes them unique in the history of mankind. The very fact that historians, on the whole, seldom mention this topic is noteworthy. In Arab historiography, their conquests in the Middle East, in East Asia, in North Africa, and in Europe , are called ***“futuhat,”*** literally, openings! Indeed a strange word to use, when it

entailed a massive movement of Arab tribes, and their settlement in the conquered lands, turning the native populations instantly into “strangers” in their own homelands! In some parts of the conquered lands, such as in Persia , almost the entire population, while retaining their language, adopted the faith of their conquerors. In other areas such as Egypt , Syria , and North Africa , over the years, the majority of the native population gradually adopted Islam, leaving some native Jewish and Christian communities still attached to their faith, but no longer able to use their Hebrew and Aramaic. They all became Arabized.

I would love to find just one Arab writer who would acknowledge the fact that Arabs and Muslims did engage in imperialistic ventures. But I am still waiting for that confession.

Earlier in my article, I mentioned Bernard Lewis’ book, “**What Went Wrong?**” I could now answer the question he posed by saying that Muslims are not yet reconciled to the fall of their last empire in 1918. Six years later, a Muslim-born Turkish leader, Mustapha Kemal Ataturk abolished the Caliphate, and caused the Muslim world to lose its “center of gravity.” Just as the British, the French, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the Portuguese, have adjusted to the end of their empires, so Muslims must realize that in our globalized world where we have all become interdependent, all efforts for the restoration of an Islamic Caliphate are nothing but utopian dreams.

In the meantime, I would like to mention two authors whose books shed a great light on the impact of Arab-Islamic imperialism on the conquered peoples. One is Bat Ye’or.

Her books offer some valuable information about the plight of those nationals whose lands were overrun by the Arab-Islamic armies beginning with the 7<sup>th</sup> century. I mention two of her works: “**The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude**” published in 1996 by Associated University Presses, Cranbury , N.J. 08512

And “**Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide**” published by the same presses in 2002

The other author is V. S. Naipaul who wrote “**Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People.**” (Published by Random House, New York, in 1998.) Naipaul is a British author, born in Trinidad of Indian immigrant ancestry, and has authored another book on Islam entitled “**Among the Believers.**” The present work is its sequel. Here is a very relevant quotation from Naipaul’s Prologue to his latest book:

*“Islam is in its origin an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert’s worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop*

*fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of the converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil.”*

Muslim intellectuals must face up to the fact that there was such a thing as an Arab-Islamic imperialism, and that it was uniquely different from other types of colonial regimes. Until that happens, there can be no peaceful co-existence between Islam and the rest of the world.