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Reading Description:


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The Origins of Islamic Terrorism

During the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries terrorism in the Muslim and Arab world did not play a significant role. To be more precise, Muslim and Arabic terrorism was a localized phenomenon. It did exist but it was not predominant, nor did it differ essentially in its motivation and outlook from other forms of terrorism. Toward the end of the twentieth century, Muslim and Arabic terrorism became the most prominent component of world terrorism. How did this happen?

Its origins were in the emergence of the revivalist movements promoting a return to fundamentalist Islam, and those of its protagonists who wanted to impose their aims by force. Such movements appeared in several countries: In the Arabian Peninsula it took the form of Wahhabism, the teaching spread by an eighteenth-century sect that was little noticed at the time. On the Indian subcontinent, terrorism was connected with the desire to strengthen the identity of the Muslim minority vis-à-vis the Hindu majority; the founders of Pakistan had been secular politicians, but on the fringes of their movement, religious extremists were active. As time went by, they became more prominent. But the heartland of Islamic fundamentalism was Egypt, even though Salafism (as it was locally known) never gained a politically leading position. The term “Salafi” simply means early Islamic, referring to those who lived in the first centuries after Muhammad. In religious terms it means opposition to reform and the purification of Islam from alien elements. But Salafis were also a reform movement, a reinterpretation of the origins of a religion which as much as other religions (and perhaps even more so) were shrouded in darkness and uncertainty. With what justification could these modern advocates of a pure Islam claim that they were more knowledgeable and more faithful interpreters than those of a bygone time? Salafism opened widely the door to subjectivism. It meant in practice that everyone was, or at any rate could be, his own interpreter of the holy writ — except, of course, that the Salafis thought that they had a monopoly as far as truth was concerned.

Islamic fundamentalism in one form or another had always been present, just as in Christianity and Judaism there had been fundamentalist trends all along. If so, what was specific about the new Islamic fundamentalism? It preached that one should adhere very closely to the Koran; that Allah was the only true Lord, the only God worthy of obedience and true worship; and that one should believe in the uniqueness of the prophet Muhammad. But these basic tenets were common to every Muslim. What was really new was the conviction of the Salafis that they were Islam, not just one of several factions; that state and society should be based on the principles of the religious law, the Sharia, and not on secular law; and that this aim could be achieved most likely only by violence.

New also was the strong emphasis on jihad (holy war), even though its exact meaning was not always made clear. Many fundamentalists also believed in the necessity to reestablish the Khilafah (the unity of political and religious rule) which had vanished with the break-up of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. However, on this point there were differences of opinion, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for instance, which had first been in favor later dropped this demand. These basic beliefs were bound to collide with the existing order in the Muslim world and also with nationalism and the national states that had developed over time.

What were the roots of the rise of fundamentalism? They varied from religion to religion and from country to country. In Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries it was the general dissatisfaction with the prevailing state of affairs, the imperfections of politics and society, and fear of and resistance against Western ideological and material influences. The Muslim Brotherhood, the main agent of fundamentalism, which spread over the years to many countries, was never a monolithic political party. It changed its tactics and even some of its doctrine in the course of time. It engaged in many activities — educational, political, social as well as “military” (that is to say, terrorist). In this respect, the Muslim Brotherhood was not different from movements in other parts of the world: IRA had been part of Sinn Fein, a political party; ETA was in close contact with its political wing, Hizbullah in Lebanon has not only engaged in suicide bombing but also managed hospitals and schools. Hamas did the same.

This book primarily addresses the terrorist activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots. The terrorist acts have to be considered in a wider political context; the IRA and Hizbullah did not always follow the political leadership but slipped out of their control, and sometimes even turned against it. So did the armed wing of the Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was founded in 1928 in the city of Ismailiya. The original impulse for its creation came from a number of observant Muslims who were appalled at the actions of Mustafa Kemal, the ruler of Turkey who was transforming his country into a secular state. The Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al Banna, saw its main assignment as dissemination of religious propaganda. He created his organization to engage in missionary activities, acting not only through religious education and the building of mosques but also all kinds of social activities (including sports and youth clubs — among them ninety-nine football and
sixteen boxing teams) and even economic enterprises such as building firms and small banks—all in the spirit of Islam.

The history of the Muslim Brotherhood has been the subject of many Arab and a few English language studies. By the late 1930s the Brotherhood had established many local branches in Egypt and also initiated foreign contacts. It had also become more politicized and radical. As al Banna announced: Islam was both a religion and a state. The Koran and the sword were inseparable.

At about this time the "special unit" (also called the "secret apparatus") was established. This armed wing of the Brotherhood would buy (or steal) weapons, recruit new members from among the army and police, assassinate enemies of the Brotherhood, and eventually carry out a coup. The secret apparatus had in the early days a Mufti of its own to decide on the religious legitimacy of an assassination. On the eve of such an action there would be a ritual trial in the absence of the accused.

During World War II the British tried to persuade or bribe the Brotherhood to help them with the war effort, but without much success. The sympathies of the Brotherhood were with the Axis forces. They tried to establish contact with Rommel's advancing forces but nothing much became of these feelers. The secret organization engaged in attacks against Jewish citizens living in Egypt, trying without success to burn down the Jewish quarter of Cairo. The first great activist period in the history of the Brotherhood took place in the years between the end of the world war up to the revolution resulting in the deposition of King Faruq. The Brotherhood was in the forefront of the struggle against the British; it sent thousands of volunteers to join the war against the Jews in Palestine; above all the Brotherhood engaged in a campaign of terror against its domestic foes. Among the victims were two prime ministers of the day (1948) — Ahmed Maher and Mahmoud Fahmi en Noqrahi — but among those attacked were also foreign and domestic journalists. In retaliation, Hassan al Banna was killed by the police in a Cairo street in February 1949. Al Banna's antagonism vis-à-vis the West was profound and unshakeable. In an open letter to the heads of Muslim states in 1946, he called the West not only unjust and tyrannical but also very weak and decadent; one strong push by the army of the faithful, according to al Banna, and the whole world would find calm and peace under the banner of Islam.

There is reason to believe that al Banna was unhappy during the last years of his life about the activities of the special apparatus, which had become largely independent under Abdel Rahman al Sanadi. Al Banna did not want to burn his bridges with the leading political parties, such as the Wafd, or with the government. His successor, the judge Hassan Hodaibi, was even more moderate. As a result, a period of ideological and tactical confusion set in, with various factions pulling in different directions. The Brotherhood supported the Free Officers who had taken over power, but they also dissociated themselves from the new leadership; they bitterly opposed the godless Communists but also found at times common cause with them. Eventually one of the Brothers tried to kill Nasser as he made a speech in the city of Minya (the so-called "Minya incident"), whereupon four thousand members of the organization were arrested; thousands fled from Egypt, and a few were executed. The Brotherhood was effectively smashed and for the next fifteen years amounted to very little inside Egypt.

In 1964, Nasser granted a general amnesty to all members of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, while accepting the amnesty, the Brotherhood had no wish to collaborate with Nasser and immediately continued their own operations aiming to overthrow the government. The ideology was provided by Sayed Qutb, whose writings in prison became the doctrine of the militant wing of the Brotherhood in the years that followed.

About Qutb the theologian a great deal has been written; our interest in his teaching and influence is limited to Qutb as the philosopher and instigator of terrorism. Qutb was born in 1906 in a middle-class family near Assyut in Upper Egypt, the heartland of the radical Islamist groups. He was a literary critic, teacher, and school inspector in later years, and relatively late in life, following a visit to the United States in 1948–50, he became a convert to fundamentalism and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been in existence at that time for about two decades. Within a very short time he emerged as one of its leaders, the most radical and the most influential but also a very divisive figure. He taught that Islam was the only true religion; that all other religions and civilizations were barbarian, evil, and animal-like, and that any contact with them was to be shunned. The West was the enemy par excellence of the Muslims, afraid of Islam and aware of its spiritual superiority. As Qutb saw it, there could never be peace with the West. The struggle was not about territory but about truth and which truth should prevail in the world. All that is known about his life points to a fanatic, a man totally dedicated to the cause he thought right, a person beset with deep psychological difficulties. He did not have any formal theological education, and in the early years his books were banned as those of a deviationist if not apostate by Al Azhar, the leading religious study center in the Islamic world. He did have the urge to die a martyr to his cause, which, in the end he did.

Together with other Muslim Brotherhood militants, he spent many years in prisons and concentration camps under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and according to his sympathizers he was tortured. But conditions cannot have been too harsh, because while detained he wrote some twenty books. The most important of them, on top of a thirty-volume interpretation of the Koran (half of them written in prison), was a book entitled Milestones. Milestones amounted, no more and no less, to the ex-communication (taqfir) of all Muslims who did not agree with his brand of Islam. The book claimed that all existing Islamic states and their rulers were not true Muslims but pagans against whom relentless war should be waged up to their destruction. This claim was tantamount to a declaration of war, not just on the present rulers but on society
in general. This kind of radicalism repelled most of the older members of the Muslim Brotherhood, including those in prison, but it strongly appealed to the younger radicals. In 1964, trying to appease the Brotherhood and to induce them to join his Arab Socialist Union (the only existing political party), Nasser had most of the Brotherhood's leaders released from detention. But the Brotherhood had no desire to collaborate with Nasser, whom they considered an enemy. Following several more attempts on Nasser's life, the leadership of the Brotherhood was again arrested. Several ringleaders, including Qutb, were hanged. Thus he died a martyr and became a hero of the extremists who were attracted precisely by his appeals to violence.7

After his death, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of copies his works were printed throughout the Islamic world. While some spiritual leaders continued to reject his views, others accepted them, wholly or in part. In the canon of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb figures today as the leader and thinker second in importance only to the founder, Hassan al Banna. But since al Banna wrote much less than Qutb, it is safe to say that the latter has been the most influential thinker of the Brotherhood. He has certainly been the greatest influence as far as the Muslim terrorists in the Arab world and North Africa are concerned. As some observers have pointed out, many terrorists, including some of their leaders, never read Qutb, but his message of holy war, shorn of theological refinements, filtered down even to those who had never even heard his name. Not one of the reformist Muslim religious thinkers, nor all of them taken together, had even remotely as much influence as Qutb did.

Nasser's defeat in the war against Israel and his death a few years later gave the Brotherhood new freedom of maneuver, and Anwar el Sadat, who succeeded the "Rais" (as Nasser had been known), had another general amnesty declared. Sadat believed that he needed their help to purge the country from Nasserists and Communists. Thus the Muslim radicals received for a while a free hand to remove their enemies, who happened also to be the rivals of the new regime, from positions of influence in the field of education, the universities, and cultural and public life. But this fatal miscalculation on Sadat's part eventually led to his murders. The Muslim radicals considered the purge of the secular only the first stage of their fight for power which, as they envisaged it, should result in a coup d'état. For them Sadat, even though he was a practicing Muslim, was no better than Nasser.

Qutb's teachings inspired a variety of underground organizations. One of them was headed by Shukri Mustafa; it was the first to establish a guerrilla band called Taqfir va'l hejra (also called Jama'at al Muslimin, society of Muslims) in the neighborhood of Assyut.8 Shukri's group, active between 1971 and 1977, was a typical sect which, for all intents and purposes, established a religion of its own so ultra-orthodox that it turned anti-Islamic and rejected the teaching of all the ulema (religious leaders) past and present because they had been corrupted by the governments of the day and could not be trusted. Like Pol Pot, Shukri reached the conclusion that society in general was so corrupt that there was no way to reform it; it had to be destroyed. But since in contrast to Pol Pot the guerrilla group was too weak to do so, it decided in its early stages to withdraw from the sinful cities and their temptations to caves in remote hilly districts. However, they found life in these primitive conditions too difficult, so they returned to the cities where they attracted some new members.

Next, internal splits occurred in their ranks. Other, competing Islamic extremist groups tried to wean members over to their organizations, but since leaving the group was tantamount to treason (like apostasy from Islam), Shukri reacted violently.9 He also decided to put the finances of his organization on a more solid basis by kidnapping a prominent personality and asking for ransom. The best known victim was Muhammad al Dhabhi, a former government minister of waqf (religious properties), and when the authorities refused to pay the two hundred thousand Egyptian pounds that the kidnappers had demanded, the sheikh was killed by his abductors. This led within a few days to the arrest of most active members of this group, who had been under police observation for some time. Astonishing facts emerged in the trial such as, for instance, that Shukri could not quote a single verse from the Koran, and that in all probability, he would not have been able to understand it in any case. Shukri and some of his fellow conspirators were sentenced to death and executed in 1977.

The religious establishment regarded Shukri and his gang as marginal figures outside the camp of faithful Muslims. But at the same time they put the responsibility for the Taqfir va'l hejra phenomenon on the government which, it argued, was secular, not rooted in Islamic religious tradition.

This was not quite the end of Taqfir, which reemerged in 1985 under the name al Wawaqf wal tabayun, a terrorist group which tried to assassinate two ministers of the interior and also the editor-in-chief of Al Musawar, Egypt's leading illustrated weekly. Members of the group were duly arrested; one of the defendants in the trial claimed that they firmly believed that they would be the only ones to be saved from hell. Lastly, a local terrorist gang in Fayoum in 1990 also maintained that it was a successor of Taqfir. They were headed by a local militant named Shawqi el Sheikh; it is difficult to establish to what extent this group was motivated by religion or whether it was mainly criminal in character. It certainly raised funds by running protection rackets that intimidated local farmers. The farmers complained, the police intervened, and in the shootout that followed nineteen people were killed. At one time Shawqi almost succeeded in establishing in a village named Khak a "liberated zone" on the Maoist model. The social composition of his gang was interesting; its leaders without exception were local notables and men of substance, while their followers were farmers, seasonal workers, and fishermen. The group had local backing because of widespread antigovernment resentment, but it always remained restricted to the district where it originated.10
Several other terrorist groups emerged in the 1970s, some more or less spontaneous and short-lived, such as the gang headed by a Palestinian Arab named Salah Sariya. He had arrived from Jordan only a few years earlier and on the fringes of the Muslim Brotherhood recruited a group of students at the military academy at Heliopolis. In April 1974, they engaged in a highly amateurish coup, trying to gain hold of the academy and to kill Sadat. But they were overpowered by the guards; two were executed, more given lengthy prison terms.

Far more serious and long-lived were two groups that entered the history of Egyptian terrorism under the name of Jihad and Gama'a Islamiyya. They too derived their doctrine from Sayed Qutb and developed among students on the university campuses and the youth organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Qutb was dead and they needed a living guru. They found him in a blind sheikh named Umar Abdel Rahman who had been a professor in a religious institute affiliated with Al Azhar in Assut. Abdel Rahman had the reputation of an extreme fundamentalist, very critical of the government and in favor of the use of violence. According to some sources, Umar became the mufti of terrorist groups in 1980 (according to others in 1981), but he certainly did play for years a central role in Egyptian terrorism. There was a long theological discussion among his followers about whether he could ever be the official head or commander because of his infirmity, but he certainly was the power in the background. He issued the fatwas they needed, be it for robbing and killing local goldsmiths (usually Christian) or for launching war against America, which, according to him, was the source of all evil and the main enemy of Islam, responsible for the unhappy condition of the Muslim world. Every conspiracy against Islam, every bit of scheming emanated from America and the task of the terrorists was to strike terror against America, and not to be afraid of the "terrorism" label. This approach was what Jihad was all about: jihad with the sword, with the cannon, with grenades, and with the missile, jihad against God's enemies.

When most members of his group were arrested, the blind sheikh fled, or was permitted to escape, to the United States in late 1990. The circumstances are not clear why Washington would give exile to one so prominently involved in terrorist activities. Perhaps he was considered harmless. The Egyptian government later claimed to have asked for his extradition, but the U.S. government certainly did not respond and seems not to have paid attention until 1993, when the sheikh was arrested in connection with the attempt to bomb the World Trade Center as well as with other terrorist activities. Perhaps they thought him a lesser danger value at liberty, since his freedom made it easier to observe Muslim radical activities in the United States. If so, their judgment was not, as it later appeared, very sound.

The blind sheikh's connection was mainly with el Jihad, but he was by no means the terrorists' only inspiration. Another was an electrician named Abd al Salam Faraj, author of a book entitled The Hidden Imperative, which became the bible of the group that killed Anwar Sadat. Faraj's hidden imperative was jihad, armed attacks against the domestic tyrants (the "Pharaoh"); everything else — the building of mosques, religious education, and other religious obligations — was unimportant. Even the war against the Jews and Israel was subordinated to the supreme duty of "establishing the rule of God in our own country first."

Faraj's book became a cult book among radical Muslims and has been republished countless times. It is a bitter attack against all those who for one reason or another want to interpret jihad in a different, more liberal way or even postpone it. Faraj was particularly caustic about those refusing to fight because among those opposing them were Muslims too. Had not Muhammad said: Verily the killer and the killed will be in Hell Fire! Whence the scruples to kill fellow Muslims? The intellectual level of this tract is very low. To compare it with the writings of medieval Islamic jurists and philosophers of Baghdad or Andalusia is to invite ridicule. It consists of a string of quotations from the Koran and what certain interpreters (carefully selected by the author) said about them. However, the Hidden Imperative was not written for intellectuals, but for semiliterate young militants thirsting for violent action.

Sadat's peace initiative with Israel was anything but popular in the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood and allied groups, but it certainly was not the only reason for his murder; after all, they had tried to kill Nasser too, even though he had not wanted to make peace with the Jews. In any case, the first attempts to kill Sadat date back several years before a peace treaty with Israel was signed.

The circumstances of the murder of Sadat in September 1981 during a military parade emerged in detail at the trial of the assassins. It seems to have been a more or less impetuous decision by an army lieutenant named Khaled al Istambuli, a native of Minya district, following the detention of his brother in one of the periodic mass arrests of the local radicals. The plan was submitted to the Cairo leadership of the Gama'a, envisaging not just the murder of the president but a general revolution. It seems to have been a combined action carried out by Gama'a and Jihad of which the young Al Zawahiri, bin Laden's deputy in later years, was one of the leaders. While the first part of the plan was relatively easy — three of a tank crew would jump from their vehicle and open fire on Sadat — the second part, the general uprising, was in the realm of fantasy. Some of the more experienced and mature conspirators had their misgivings about it from the very beginning.

Istambuli and four other conspirators were executed after the first of several trials. Sadat was replaced by his deputy Hosni Mubarak, and the only tangible political result of the assassination was a split in the ranks of the radical Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood distanced itself from the murder. Some of the leading members of Gama'a who had escaped arrest left the group, and it took several years until the practitioners of violence in Egypt would be able to reorganize. Thus the murder of Anwar Sadat, far from bringing about the hoped-for revolution, merely ended a chapter in the history of Muslim terrorism in Egypt.
After the assassination of Sadat and the failed revolution of 1981, individual radicals continued their efforts to penetrate the army to gain new recruits among the junior officers and through them to obtain weapons. The authorities, though, were now doubly watchful, and some of these attempts at insurrection failed because of the presence of informers, others because of the inexperience of the plotters. One of their more successful ventures was the escape of Esam el Qamari, a former army officer, and a couple of his comrades from Tura prison, but he was apprehended soon after and killed in a shootout with the police. Next, the terrorists provoked clashes with the security forces in the al Shams quarter of Cairo, one of their strongholds. But this action again led to mass arrests and four executions. The terrorists retaliated by trying to kill the minister of interior and the information minister Sawfat al Sharif. A little girl was killed, but the minister escaped the ambush. The terrorists were more successful when they ambushed and shot Rauf Khairat, a general in the state security service. At one stage Gama’a declared several quarters of Cairo “liberated zones.” But the next ambush, the most ambitious, again ended in failure. The plan had been to kill President Mubarak in Addis Ababa, where he was participating in a conference.

Other operations included an attack against the U.S. embassy in Islamabad and a group of Israeli tourists in Egypt. By 1991 the movement was again wholly underground, and it had declared open war on the government; more than a thousand people were killed as a result of its attacks in the 1990s. But inside the Gama’a there was a feeling of lack of achievement. More than twenty thousand of its members and sympathizers had been arrested, various small groups still at liberty were acting without close coordination, and the leadership in prison seemed to have lost control over the militants outside. While the leaders in prison gradually came to consider a truce with the authorities, a small group of terrorists carried out the massacre of more than fifty Western tourists in Luxor in 1997, which had a very negative reaction both inside Egypt and even more outside.

By that time the leading members of el Jihad had moved to Afghanistan. Al Zawahiri, who served there with bin Laden, writes that the chance to transfer their activities to Afghanistan was a golden opportunity because in Egypt they had always been closely watched by state security. He quotes a friend, el Banshiri, a former military commander of el Jihad, who said that he felt as if a hundred years had been added to his life when he came to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan gave them security to plan their operations, the presence of volunteers eager to undertake missions, unlimited quantities of weapons, and money supplied by bin Laden and others. But the leaders of Jihad were not the only ones to go to Afghanistan; Kamal el Sananiri, the head of the Muslim Brotherhood “special organization” that had been revived, also went there. He later visited Croatia, and then was extradited to Egypt where he died (or was killed) in prison.

In brief, the terrorist scene had become more than somewhat chaotic in view of the spreading of various groups acting without coordination. Bin Laden tried
on several occasions to act as an honest broker and, without much success, to restore unity between the various groups. Incidentally, this situation also made it more difficult for the Egyptian authorities to watch the terrorists.

Al Zawahiri and those of his comrades who had gone to Afghanistan eventually came to be part of al Qa‘ida (about which more below) and thus lost contact with the militants inside Egypt. They strongly disapproved of the leaders in prison who had opted for a truce. The moving spirits behind this initiative were Khalid Ibrahim, a leader from Aswan, and Muntasir el Zayat, who had acted as the lawyer of the various Islamic groups and was an active sympathizer if not a member. Zayat, who later wrote a book about his efforts to reunite the Islamic groups, also contacted Sheikh Umar, who was now in an American prison but still enjoyed more difficulty for the Egyptian authorities to watch the terrorists.

Incidentally, this situation also made it more difficult for the Egyptian authorities to watch the terrorists.

Zayat, who later wrote a book about his efforts to reunite the Islamic groups, also contacted Sheikh Umar, who was now in an American prison but still enjoyed authority among the terrorists in Egypt. 22 He too was in favor of a truce as far as terrorist operations in Egypt were concerned. But some of the brothers in exile, especially those in Afghanistan, proved to be intransigent. El Zayat noted that while violence was sometimes justified, it had no justification if it was no longer rooted in sound judgment and turned into an indiscriminate strategy directed against innocent people, as in the case of the foreign tourists in Luxor.

Al Zawahiri gave his reply in a book in which he bitterly attacked the Muslim Brotherhood leadership in Egypt which, as he claimed, had become tame and reformist, unwilling even to avenge their comrades who had been executed or killed in prison. 23 This did not do Zawahiri’s reputation in Egypt any good; who was he, living in relative safety abroad, to teach those in Egyptian prisons?

If the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood had changed its strategy in the meantime, it had good reasons to do so. While the authorities did not permit it to participate in the elections under their name, it could join the Labor Party, which was headed by a former Communist turned fundamentalist. Above all, the Brotherhood correctly recognized the political vacuum in the country that could be filled by them and which would give them a position of crucial importance. This refers to the labor unions and the associations of the free professions such as the engineers, the physicians, dentists, pharmacists, and so on.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Brotherhood took over the leadership of all these groups. The last bastion to fall was the association of lawyers that had earlier been a stronghold of the secular society and liberals. The Brotherhood also strengthened its influence in the private mosques as well as in Al Azhar. Whereas the terrorists had planned to impose Islamization from above, the leadership of the Brotherhood was exceedingly successful with their policy of Islamization from below. 24

A new type of leadership had taken over, Westernized in many respects, disposing of considerable sums of money (mainly from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states). They were modern orthodox (to use a term from Israeli society) rather than radical fundamentalists of the old style. Yet they also stood for making Sharia the state law.

All this belongs only indirectly to the history of Egyptian terrorism but it explains why the terrorist trend in Egypt was weakened, at least temporarily. It is quite possible, and indeed likely, that the new leadership of the Brotherhood envisaged a double strategy: They wanted to exhaust the legal possibilities fully and at the same time keep the military (terrorist) option open, so that if the authorities would change their relatively liberal attitude the Brotherhood would be in a position to continue their struggle by other means. The Mubarak government was quite aware of this, hence the new wave of arrests (mainly among professional people) and trials in 2001–2.

Terrorist activities in Egypt throughout the 1990s were as uncoordinated as before: Gama’a, like the Muslim Brotherhood in former years, had been engaged in all kinds of activities, educational and semilegal as well as terrorist. It was stronger than Jihad but its strength was in southern Egypt rather than in Cairo, where their influence was limited to some popular quarters such as Imbaba and Ain Shams in Cairo, where many of the recent arrivals from Upper Egypt had settled. When they tried to extend their activities in the capital, the security forces warned them, and when they did not heed the warnings, some seventeen of them were shot in Cairo streets whereupon the other militants fled to Afghanistan, Britain, and other countries. Gama’a would organize social services such as a soup kitchen for the poor, summer camps for the young, and some cultural institutions, but at the same time they engaged in terrorist activities such as the murder of Rifaat Mahgoub, the speaker of the parliament; the attempted murder of some other ministers; the assassinations of policemen and intellectuals, including the killing of Farag Foda, one of their chief intellectual adversaries; and the attempted murder of Neguib Mahfouz, the writer and Nobel prize laureate. A new, third group of terrorists based in Assyut also planned attacks against foreign tourists and embassies, but their leaders were arrested early on and sentenced to death. Jihad continued to be active, to be sure, but mainly within the framework of bin Laden’s new umbrella organization and their terrorist operations now taking place outside Egypt.

Two questions remain to be addressed. One concerns the sources of attraction which the terrorist organizations had inside Egypt. Gama’a invested many of its efforts in gaining support among the urban poor in Cairo, whereas Jihad was an elitist organization that never aimed at mass support and attempted to win over students, young professionals, and, above all, army and police officers. But the leaders and militants of Gama’a too came predominantly from the educated middle class and upper middle class. According to a breakdown concerning social origin and status, about two-thirds of Sayed Qutb’s original group were young people with a university education. In the case of the Taqir it was 85 percent. In the trials of the Jihad organization (1981) of 326 members, at least half had a university education and the majority had a modern education. They were students not of Islamic theology but more often than not science and engineering. 25 Some
of the leaders came from very prominent families; al Zawahiri was an example but there were quite a few others.

What attracted them was certainly not class interest or commiseration with the poor peasants and workers. It was the restlessness of the young who were dissatisfied with the government and the quality of politics in their country, who wanted quick change and who fifty years earlier would have joined fascist or Communist organizations. But the fascists and the Communists were no longer around, so there was an ideological void that the military rulers certainly did not know how to fill. This is where radical Islamism entered the scene.

A revealing autobiography describes the conversion of a young boy to Islamism. Khaled al Berry grew up in Assyut and joined the Gama'a because so many of his football-playing friends belonged. A charismatic sheikh paid close personal attention to this promising recruit and had an answer to all his questions. There was no sudden, harsh indoctrination but pleasant conversations, and gradually Berry understood that he should no longer watch television and that his cassettes with songs of Arab singers should be destroyed.

During the next three years, al Berry learned the Koran by heart as well as many other religious tracts and became, in his own words, a little replica of Sayed Qutb. He became a leader at school. Though not yet sixteen, he was deemed dangerous enough to be relegated from school and sent to another one, far away. But he remained a militant even as a student of medicine dressed in the uniform of the radicals—a gellaba and the obligatory beard. He felt himself on top of the world, a rebel against bourgeois society, a young person who felt that he was not only virtuous but infallible. He felt at peace with his fellow human beings, who respected him in view of his piety and dedication to his cause. To be a young Islamist in these circles was the fashionable thing to do; it was a rebellious act (against the despised secular government) and at the same time a manifestation of obedience—to religion, to tradition.

Al Berry relates that he spent a great deal of his time in prayer. But how deep did religion go apart from observing the rituals, or was the ritual the religion? They discussed jihad at great length, but did they want to carry out their Islamic revolution merely so that political power should pass into the hands of the religious dignitaries? They were idealists, to be sure, in the same sense that their spiritual leaders had solved all crucial questions once and forever. Everything had been laid down in the holy books, and their job was simply to obey. They were willing to sacrifice and even to give their lives in the pursuit of their ideals.

But there was also a dark side on which little has been said and less has been written. Khaled ("La terre es plus belle"), who was not physically strong, was never asked to take part in punitive expeditions against deviants and enemies, but he was repelled by the cruelty shown in the maiming and killing of opponents or homosexuals or Copts who had been dating Muslim girls. The lynching of homosexuals among their ranks reminds one of similar practices by the SS in the Nazi era.

Generally speaking, a veil of discretion has been drawn over homosexuality (and sexual practices in general) in the Muslim world. This is not the place to enter a discussion on this subject, even though the role of sexuality among males is not a subject to be suppressed and excluded from the debate on Islamism. It is certainly a topic to be studied; all that can be said with reasonable certainty is that there seems to be a considerable distance between religious commandments, resemblance, and reality.

Walid Nafa, the hero in A quoi revent les loups?, an Algerian novel about young Islamist terrorists, is sent out to assassinate an intellectual just to find out whether he has what it takes to become a real killer. Later on, a member of Walid's gang stabs Walid's sister to death because her dress was not modest enough. There was certainly more hatred in these young people and their mentors than love of their fellow human beings, even their fellow believers. How to explain the murder of tens of thousand of fellow Muslims, especially in Algeria—children, old people, women who were in no way their enemies? A theological justification was available: the regime was un-Islamic as were the people connected with it, and it could be argued that the masses were equally guilty, so norms of elementary humanity and pity did not apply to them. This was known as taqfir al gumhur— the branding of the masses as apostate pagans. If so, everything was permitted as far as their treatment was concerned including, for instance, rape; sexual license coincided with great sexual frustration among young men who were not permitted to mix with the other sex, or, in theory, even to look at women.

It could be argued that Algeria was an extreme case, but many instances of extreme acts of cruelty took place elsewhere: not just murdering the enemy (who often was not an enemy at all) but systematic torture. Cases of dismembering the victims, cutting off his or her genitals, gouging the eyes, and other such practices...
were reported from Kashmir. The Turkish Hizbullah (also called Ilim) kidnapped their victims in the late 1980s and submitted them to systematic torture — which was videotaped. One of the victims was a Turkish feminist, Konca Kuri, who had pleaded on television that women be permitted to pray alongside men at Muslim funerals. She was tortured for thirty-five hours before being killed, and it was all recorded on videotape. Most of the victims were not even political foes but Muslim businessmen who had discontinued their financial support or even simply innocent bystanders.31

Consider another example not atypical for the situation in Algeria in the 1990s. On June 25, 1993, Dr. Hammed Boukhobza was killed by a group of Islamist terrorists in the city of Telemly. He was the head of the national institute of global strategic studies, and there was nothing personal in this attack. It was simply part of the general campaign against intellectuals — physicians, teachers, et al. He was not just killed in his apartment, but his wife and children who wanted to escape were forced to watch how he was literally cut into pieces, his entrails slowly drawn out while he was just barely alive. The terrorists obviously liked to watch the suffering, and they wanted the family to share their enjoyment.32

In the winter of 1971, the Japanese “Red Army” purged and killed fourteen of its leading members in a mountain chalet in Northern Japan. What was so remarkable about the murders were not so much the paranoia that had caused them but the fact that the victims had to undergo days of unspeakable tortures.33 But in retrospect the Nagano murders and the sadism with which they were carried out were not the rule in Japanese terrorism; they caused a shock as far as public opinion was concerned from which the Japanese left would not recover for years.

Why the proclivity toward torture and sadism? It was more than the mere brutalization that occurs in every war. There was the lust of killing, of inflicting pain, of seeing people suffer and slowly die. There was nothing specifically Algerian in such actions; it was frequently said that the Afghan Arabs had been those who had brought along these practices. British tourists who had been kidnapped by Islamic militants in 1994 were told by Ahmed Omar Sheikh, a young British Muslim who had attended the London School of Economics, that they were going to be beheaded, and in the words of the intended victims, “he was laughing, the prospect excited him.”34

There were reports about similar behavior by terrorists in other places; there were more than a few sadists among them thirsting to “drink the blood of their enemies,” eager to kill people and not necessarily in the quickest and least painful way. The underlying motives and urges belong to the realm of psychopathology. The hero (not a Muslim but a pagan Aryan) of The Turner Diaries, the bible of American neo-Nazis, certainly belonged to this species; with great relish did he slit the throat of fat Niggers and Jews and also stupid Aryans. Their agony was described lovingly, but The Turner Diaries was a book of sick, literary fantasy, not reality.35

There were some incidents of sadistic, Charles Manson-style cruelty in Europe (the Balkans) and Latin America, and even more in African civil wars such as in Sierra Leone or in East Africa (God’s Army) where rebel groups raped women, amputated the limbs of women and children, and forced young girls to engage in prostitution. But there were far more such incidents in Muslim countries, and the question arises, How could this be squared with the strict Islamic moral code with regard to sexual affairs? Female survivors reported that those raping and later killing their victims (the sabaya sex slaves) would take time off to pray five times daily. They were convinced that everything was permitted to a mujahid, and in any case they were observing the legal niceties such as entering a short-term marriage contract (zawaj al mutaa — marriage of pleasure) in conformance with Islamic law for the duration of the rape.36

These cases of mass rape, killings, and keeping young girls in sexual slavery seem to have occurred less frequently in other Arab and North African countries. But another aspect of this behavior has been largely overlooked as far as the terrorist mental makeup is concerned: the repressed sexuality traditional in modern Islamic societies, which led quite often to homosexuality (banned by Islam) and, of course, to masturbation (which was also banned).37 Despite all the admonitions of his Sheikh, young Khaled spent hours at the window of his room trying to catch a glimpse of the Copt girls undressing in the house opposite. This, in turn, led to guilt feelings and greater aggression. An Algerian psychoanalyst (a Jungian) has argued that in Islamic culture the sadist, anal phase is extended over a much longer period than elsewhere; religious individuals invest much of their libido in God, and the importance of the ego shrinks. This is reinforced by a rigid education that puts the stress on the acceptance of established norms, not on the individual and independent thinking.38

Yet another factor remains to be mentioned affecting the conditions that lead to the spread of radical Islamic terrorism: the reaction, and often the ineptitude, of the governments.

Measures taken against the terrorists, especially in the early years by the Egyptian authorities, were harsh and often indiscriminate. Among those arrested, often for years, were not only those whose guilt had been proven but supporters and fellow travelers of the radical Islamic groups. Some of them died in prison from the treatment they had undergone. Prison was a school of radicalization. There is reason to believe that some of those who became terrorists did so because of their experience in prison. For many years there was no attempt on the part of the authorities to reeducate prisoners, to show them that they had been misled by demagogues and that the Islamic lessons they had been taught were by no means the only and the most authoritative interpretation.
If the authorities treated the terrorists harshly, they would face condemnation by human rights organizations and risk having their misdeeds listed in the annual reports on human rights issued by the U.S. Department of State. In response, the Egyptian government would argue that the terrorists had declared a dirty war on them. They were systematically killing prominent and not-so-prominent personalities of government, literature, and the arts. Furthermore, as in Algeria, or Afghanistan, people were abducted or killed at random to terrorize society; in the circumstances the only way to combat this dangerous challenge seemed not to pay too much attention to legal niceties. The onslaught of the terrorists was most ferocious in Algeria where the terrorists tried to kill whole sections of the population (such as the local intelligentsia in small towns); not surprisingly, the response by the Algerian authorities was quite brutal.

The Egyptian response to terrorism was equally brutal and quite effective. In the 1980s there seem to have been at any given time ten thousand radical Muslims, terrorists, or potential terrorists in state prisons or concentration camps. In later years there may have been even more. The Egyptian authorities did not want to add to their numbers, and many of them were therefore permitted (indeed encouraged) to travel to Afghanistan to enlist in the war of the mujahedeen. Among them was Zawahiri and perhaps six thousand to eight thousand other Egyptian radical Muslims. But as the war in Afghanistan ended, many of them tried to return to Egypt where they were anything but welcome, especially if they intended to resume their terrorist activities.

The Egyptian security forces acted harshly against them, and there was a second wave of emigration—some went back to Afghanistan where bin Laden had set up his new organization, others went to the Balkans to fight, and yet others to Western Europe. London became the unofficial capital of Egyptian (and Middle Eastern) terrorism, and Egyptian demands that the ringleaders should be extradited were always refused; for Britain (“Londonistan”) these were political refugees, and in any case, even those convicted for murder in their homeland could not be sent back to a country in which they might face capital punishment.39 In brief, the Egyptian government was certainly guilty of having exported its terrorist problems to both Southeast Asia and Western Europe, and it came to regret this policy years later.

The policy of the Syrian government vis-à-vis local Islamic radicals was equally uncompromising. The history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is long and very complicated in view of endless internal disputes not only between conservative and radical Brothers but also because of splits for other reasons. Suffice it to say that at a time when the Brotherhood was banned in Egypt, it transferred some of its activities to Syria, where even though it was officially banned it seems to have enjoyed greater freedom of action. It had a terrorist wing consisting of groups named Fighters of Hizbullah and Muhammad's Phalanges, headed by Isaac Farhan and Marwan Hadid, which challenged the ruling Ba'ath party in a struggle for power. Ba'ath was secular, extreme nationalist, and in fact semifascist. The Brotherhood was looking for a confrontation through general strikes and riots but also massive terrorist action such as the massacre of cadets at the Aleppo military school in June 1979 and an attempt to assassinate Asad, the Syrian dictator.

The Ba'ath leadership vacillated between a policy of reconciliation, legalizing the Brotherhood and releasing its members from prison, and adopting harsh measures such as killing radical militants quite indiscriminately, including those detained in prison.40 Matters came to a head in the northern city of Hama, in the Orontes valley, a traditional stronghold of the Brotherhood. Following a number of terrorist attacks (including the attempt to assassinate Asad), Syrian armed forces tried to enter Hama to arrest leading terrorists and to seize their arms. But the Islamic terrorists were prepared. They declared a jihad and the government forces had to retreat. But they came back in February 1982, systematically flattening the center of the town, killing between five thousand and twenty-five thousand people in the process (some estimates are higher).41 This was the end for many years of terrorist activities on the part of the radical Islamists in northern Syria. The organization continued to exist, but it no longer constituted a threat to the government. The Hama massacre entered the history books as one of the worst civil rights violations in modern history, but there were no protests in the Arab or Muslim world. Many years later, when Rifa'at, Asad's son, received an American congressional committee soon after September 11, 2001, he introduced his remarks with the words that America had something to learn from the Syrian experience of dealing with terrorists. What he meant was that massive repression worked, whereas half-hearted repression did not.

Terrorism in Egypt ended (for the time being) with the appeal in 1999 by Mustafa Hazan, the leader of the largest still-existing terrorist group, to stop hostilities on Egyptian soil. The sensation of the literary season of 2002 was a four-volume series of books written by the leaders of the Gama'a (most of them still in prison) about their past mistakes.42 They admitted in retrospect that their extremism had not been in accordance with religious law. It had been wrong to attack politicians and policemen who were, after all, fellow Muslims. The Luxor attack on tourists was condemned because it was wrong to kill civilians; foreigners who had come to Egypt were entitled to safe conduct. They regretted the attacks against Copts who in accordance with the constitution should enjoy equal rights. They conceded that no practicing Muslim should be considered an enemy, and even those who did not observe the religious commandments should be persuaded rather than physically attacked. The Gama’a leaders distanced themselves from bin Laden and al Zawahiri and declared that their members had been forbidden to join al Qa’ida and its front organizations. In a long interview in June 2002 with Egypt’s leading illustrated weekly, Karam Zuhdi (serving a life sentence in prison) and other leaders of Al Gama’a, also in prison (some under sentence of
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dead), went one step further and declared that they owed an apology to the Egyptian people. ⁴³

The Egyptian government was not altogether certain how sincere these admissions of guilt were, but they did not want to miss a chance to reintegrate the ex-terrorists and facilitate their contacts with the media. ⁴⁴ The ex-terrorists did not forswear jihad and violence altogether, but the real enemy for them was the West and Zionism, not fellow Muslims.

Those who have given up domestic terrorism in Egypt are now in their forties and fifties; whether the radicals in the generation after them will follow in their footsteps remains to be seen. In the meantime, terrorist action had shifted from Egypt to other places, and we turn next to the new forces in radical Islamism.

Terrorism became truly global for the first time in history in the 1990s, as local conflicts turned into a worldwide campaign. The war in Afghanistan had lasted for about ten years; radical Islamists, flush with enthusiasm, thought that it might take only another decade to overthrow the present Arab and Muslim governments and yet another few years to defeat America and the West. For at long last, as they saw it, the young generation in the Muslim world was coming out of its stupor. In the heady days after the Soviet withdrawal (1989), almost anything seemed possible. The fact that Afghanistan entered a period of bitter civil war that led to Taliban rule did not unduly bother the victors. On the contrary, it opened up new possibilities for them, even though Afghanistan was clearly only a sideshow and the main action in years to come would be elsewhere.

There had been cooperation between terrorists in past ages, but by and large it did not go very far. The anarchists were too individualistic and too disorganized to establish an international organization of their own, nor did they need one for limited operations by single individuals. Indian terrorists active early in the twentieth century admired their Russian colleagues and tried to learn from them, and there were connections between various Balkan terrorist groups such as the Macedonian IMRO and the Croatians. But communications were not as yet very developed, and these technical aspects also limited the scope of collaboration.

A change set in after World War II. The German terrorists of the 1970s (Baader-Meinhof and especially their successors, the Revolutionäre Zellen) had connections with comrades-in-arms in other Western European countries. When the situation in Germany grew too uncomfortable, they would move for a while to Holland or France. Above all, they worked closely with the more extreme Palestinian groups such as the various Popular Fronts for the Liberation of Palestine, which at the time subscribed to Marxism-Leninism. German terrorists went to training camps in Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab world, receiving and other help from these quarters and engaging in common operations such as the hijacking of airplanes.¹ They planned to blow up a Jewish meeting in Berlin in commemoration of the Nazi pogrom in November 1938, but this operation failed.

The most important precursor of contemporary international terrorism was Illich Ramirez Sanchez, better known as Carlos the Jackal, a Venezuelan, the
son of a millionaire lawyer who began his career with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Ramirez Sanchez had contacts in many countries, and his main sponsors were various Arab intelligence services (Syria, Iraq, Libya), for whom he acted as a contract killer — not necessarily of Jews and Israelis. He also had the support of various East European espionage organizations but was a source of exasperation to the East Germans because of his lack of self-discipline and luxurious lifestyle. Ramirez Sanchez had originally become a terrorist because the Communists were not radical enough for him (because he liked the excitement of life as a hired gun). In later years his support (ideological and financial) came mainly from leading Western European neo-Nazis such as François Genoud.2 Carlos the Jackal was sentenced to thirty years in prison for multiple murders by a Paris court in 1997, but his international network had disintegrated even earlier.3

By and large, such alliances were of short duration and affected few people. A closer parallel to the Muslim International of the 1990s was the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. It consisted of antifascists from various countries; there was also a fascist international brigade fighting on Franco’s side, but it was much smaller and militarily insignificant. However, the aim of the Interbrigadistas was limited in scope. They wanted to stop the advance of fascism in Spain, hence their slogan no pasarán (“they will not get through”). It was defensive in character and it had no ambition of extending the fight to other countries.

Underlying the new globalization of terrorism was the concept of jihad; in its present form, this was a loose federation of terrorist groups that had developed in the 1970s and 1980s. These decades were not a good time for Muslim and, above all, Arab radicals. The Arab countries were ruled by military dictators, and attempts to establish truly Islamic regimes were ruthlessly suppressed precisely in the most militant Arab countries such as Libya and Syria. One light of hope was the overthrow of the Shah and the coming to power of Khomeini and his supporters. Here at long last was a movement that took Islam seriously and introduced a regime based on the religious law, the Sharia, and also actively supported the aspirations of Muslims in other countries. Iran was the most active country at the time as far as the export of violent religion and terrorism was concerned. But it was, alas, the wrong sort of Islam; the differences between Sunnis and Shi’ites were too deeply rooted in history to make close cooperation possible.

Then, with the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan a new window of opportunity suddenly opened up, and militants from all over the Muslim world were not slow to make use of it. The first ideologist and organizer of this new jihad arising out of Afghanistan was Abdulla Azzam, a cleric born in Palestine where he studied agriculture before receiving an Islamic education in Syria and Egypt. He also received a doctorate in Islamic law. He held a lecturership at a Saudi university, but his heart was not in an academic career; while in Egypt he had become a radical Islamist partly, apparently, under the influence of the brother of Sayed Qutb. Azzam wanted to dedicate his life to jihad, which he considered the duty of every Muslim. He thus decided to move to Pakistan in the early 1980s, where he founded the Bait al Ansar, later called the Maktab el Khadamat (Services bureau) in Peshawar, which for many years served as a liaison office for the recruitment of volunteers from many Muslim countries. Though he had participated in the war of 1967 against Israel, Azzam was not primarily a military leader even though he took part in military actions, but an intellectual and certainly a political leader with a vision. He was a man of boundless energy who traveled near and far trying to mobilize the young generation all over the Muslim world to join the armed struggle against the infidels and to establish Khilafah, God’s rule on earth. He was also a very pious person, performing rituals (such as fasting every Monday and Thursday) that were over and above what religious tradition demanded.4

As he saw it, the liberation of Afghanistan was not the aim but just the first step in the coming jihad. The real aim was to restore to Muslim rule all the territories that had once been theirs, from Southern Spain to the Philippines, Central Asia, India, parts of Europe and Africa.5 He believed in something that could be defined as a Muslim Brezhnev doctrine — if the Soviet leader had stated that every country that had become Communist at one time was to remain Communist forever, Azzam argued that all countries that had been occupied by Muslims at one time or another were to be restored to Allah’s fold. But why only Spain; why not France, the rest of Europe, America, and Asia? Azzam believed that jihad should continue until Allah alone is worshiped by all mankind. If the Communists had believed in the final and total victory of world revolution, Azzam believed in the final (and near) victory of Islam. Some of his successors, as will be shown, were even more outspoken in this respect.

Azzam’s greatest contribution was undoubtedly the creation of a mystique of Muslim invincibility. On one occasion he said that he felt that he was nine years old: seven and a half years in the Afghan Jihad, one and a half years in the Jihad in Palestine, and the rest of the years had no value. The message he preached was that the jihadists, having defeated the strong Soviet army, were bound to triumph over all enemies. As his biographer writes, the gun became his preoccupation and recreation, and his slogan was “no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues.”6 If only the Muslims obeyed the command of jihad and would all go to Palestine to do battle for a single week, Palestine would be purified of the Jews forever.7 Azzad was, however, a practical man and seems to have reached the conclusion that one ought to do one thing at time: first victory in Afghanistan, later the export of the Islamic revolution.

This was the message broadcast at the time in leaflets, audio and video cassettes, and booklets. But they were published in Arabic, and those who supported the recruitment of Muslim volunteers such as the CIA probably did not read Arabic: Pakistanis and the Saudis simply did not care and even welcomed it up to a point. In Peshawar Azzam first met a young Saudi named bin Laden who became
were quite often recent converts to radical Islam and had been indoctrinated by his follower and main financial supporter. Azzam was killed, together with two of his sons, in 1989 in circumstances that have not been clarified to this day. His car was blown up outside Peshawar, a short time before there had been another attempt on his life. Who wanted to kill him? According to persistent rumors, bin Laden had been involved but there was no evidence, and bin Laden in later years always referred to the Sheikh with reverence and admiration. His murderers were never found, and apparently there was no great effort to find them.

Who were the volunteers from abroad who came to join the jihad in Afghanistan? They arrived from all parts of the globe, including the United States, Britain, the former Soviet Union, and Australia. But the biggest contingents came from Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Some came while the war against the Russian army was still going on and they received their training in the Ansar or Faruq camps in Afghanistan or at a base in Pakistan. The Pakistan Intelligence Service (ISI) was their main sponsor, and among its commanders were leading jihadists such as General Hameed Gul. Other volunteers arrived only after the war had ended to receive training mainly in sabotage operations. Those from the West were quite often recent converts to radical Islam and had been indoctrinated by fiery preachers in their local mosques. There were adventurers among them and unstable young men with psychological problems. But most were earnest idealists who had been told that everywhere in the world Islam was under attack by the infidels and that their persecuted coreligionists had to be helped according to the commandments of the Koran. Those who came from countries like Egypt were often radicals of long standing who were released from prison on condition that they would continue their jihad in Afghanistan rather than nearer to home.

Russia had been the immediate enemy of the Islamists in Afghanistan but once the Russian army withdrew, the strategy was bound to change. The Arab Afghans had no particular wish to become prominently involved in the civil war that ensued after the withdrawal of the Russians, but they owed a debt of gratitude to the Pakistanis. When did America become the great Satan, the chief enemy? After all, the United States had provided decisive help to the Afghan resistance, albeit for reasons of its own. Different answers have been given to this question, but it probably was a gradual process. But also the radical Islamists had always been anti-American and had regarded the alliance as merely tactical in nature.

When the Taliban first appeared and quickly conquered almost the whole country, the foreign volunteers were among their early supporters; the Pakistan ISI encouraged the volunteers. The Arab Afghans’ main interest was to gain a secure basis for their future activities, and as far as bin Laden was concerned this was his best bet after the Sudanese government had asked him to leave.

The story of bin Laden is of course very well known and needs to be retold here only in briefest outline. One of the many sons of a leading Saudi entrepreneur, he had not enjoyed an Islamic education but during his student years became converted to radical Islam and volunteered to go to Afghanistan to coordinate Saudi unofficial help to the jihadists. His family was immensely rich but originating from Hadramaut, considered one of the less savory parts of the kingdom, it was considered socially somewhat inferior; bin Laden certainly did not belong to the inner circle of Saudi policy makers even though he seems to have had powerful protectors such as Prince Turki, head of Saudi intelligence. His resentment against the Saudi establishment was reinforced by the Gulf War; while bin Laden opposed the Iraqis, he thought that inviting American soldiers (including female soldiers) to take part in the defense of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia was quite inexcusable. It was blasphemous, a desecration, and this complaint figured very high in his political agenda. The religious justification was not quite convincing, because it is a moot point whether the Koran makes the whole territory of the Arab peninsula a holy place. True, according to Muslim tradition the prophet is reported to have said on his deathbed: Let there be no two religions in Arabia. But this referred to Mecca, Medina, and the Hejaz in general, and the U.S. forces were stationed far away from these places. Whatever the reason, the presence of infidels certainly became a central motive as far as bin Laden was concerned.

Bin Laden had taken over Azzam’s organization and greatly enlarged it. In 1988, al Qa’ida (the base) was founded, according to some sources because the liaison office had been infiltrated by agents of Arab governments and was no longer deemed secure; a more conspirational group was needed. At this time, probably even before the final withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan, this group and its allies were planning new attacks against new enemies. Since 1985, when Gorbachev had first mentioned that a diplomatic solution of the Afghanistan problem was desirable, the end of the war in Afghanistan seemed only a question of time. Al Qa’ida was looking for a new base nearer the new targets as the war in Afghanistan drew to its close. They found one in Sudan. Sudan is one of the poorest African countries and certainly the most backward Arab country; whether it can be considered an Arab country in view of its ethnic composition, especially in the south, is another moot point, but its government certainly participated actively in Arab politics.

In 1989, power in Khartum passed into the hands of military leaders who were fundamentalists, and the power behind the throne was Dr. Hassan Tourabi, an intellectual and one of the most articulate spokesmen of radical Islamism. Tourabi had made it known that the government would be interested in playing host to bin Laden, who was in search of a new base. Some doubts were uttered: Tourabi had studied at the Sorbonne and had been to the United States — could someone like this be trusted since he had been exposed to Western influences? These doubts were interesting inasmuch as the psychology of the radical Islamists were concerned because they remind one of similar misgivings in the Soviet Union in the Stalin era vis-à-vis those who had at one time or another lived in the corrupting climate of the West.
However, the misgivings were overcome, and after a stay in his native Saudi Arabia (where he was not yet persona non grata), bin Laden relocated to Sudan together with many of his close collaborators. During the period that followed, he invested heavily in the Sudanese economy, establishing various factories and a bank and helping develop Sudanese agriculture. In conversations in later years, he spoke with great optimism about the economic possibilities that existed for the Sudanese economy; something of the business acumen of his father, who had established a great building empire, seems to have been inherited by him.11

At the same time organizational and terrorist preparations continued, the base in Sudan provided considerable advantages — travel to almost any part of the world, money transfer (and laundering), and acquisition of weapons and training camps. Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were established, such as the Muslim World League and the International Islamic Relief Organization. There respectable bodies were recognized by the United Nations and given legal status in many countries while serving at the same time as a cover of the jihadists.

From this Sudanese base, various terrorist operations were launched throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The impact of the bin Laden organization was still limited. The base of the group was too narrow, and bin Laden was no more than one player among several on the terrorist scene. Some of the more striking terrorist operations that occurred during this time were launched by independent cells, such as the attempt to blow up the World Trade Center in 1993. Terrorism sponsored by Iran was far more important at the time; bin Laden's main interest was then in the Balkans and in East Africa, and his other plans were long-term.

The Sudanese interlude lasted up to 1996 when Western (and Arab) pressure on the Khartum government to get rid of their dangerous guest had grown too strong. Even Tounabi could no longer help, and thus by May 1996, bin Laden and his retinue were back in Afghanistan where the Taliban, who had come to power, were playing willing hosts. Within the next three years, bin Laden would establish himself as the chief coordinator of the major radical Islamic forces and declare war on the rest of the world.12

After Azzam's death, bin Laden had come under the influence of Aiman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian terrorist leader, who had settled in Afghanistan in the 1980s. While Zawahiri in contrast to Azzam was not an ideologue, while he lacked a thorough Islamic education, while his books were not widely read, he was certainly a person of very strong convictions — in brief, a fanatic.13

Zawahiri's outlook, which became that of bin Laden, had been formed in Egyptian prisons where the leaders of Gama'a and Jihad had spent years and had sufficient time to work out their basic ideological orientation. In their papers — which later appeared as pamphlets, legal and illegal, both for wide circulation and for a limited circle only — they were dealing with the confrontation with the West. This, as they saw it, was the crucial issue, for there was no chance to build a society based on truly Islamic principles unless the power of the West was broken. The rule of Islam, peace and general well-being, could be established only by means of jihad, of holy war. The crimes of the West, the exploitation and the massacres committed by colonial rule, had to be avenged. But even if there would have been no colonial heritage, the West would still be the main obstacle on the road to the global victory of Islam — Western demoralizing cultural influences as much as Western economic predominance. Clearly this struggle would not be easy, but the jihadists believed that it could and would be won. Many signs pointed to the weakness of the West, particularly the mortal fear of the spiritual superiority of Islam and the unlimited willingness of its believers to fight and to die for Islam's principles.14 This strategy had to proceed simultaneously on different levels, such as with propaganda (to strengthen the belief of fellow Muslims). Not only should Western power be destroyed, Western ideas and concepts had to be decisively refuted.

These were the basic tenets of the jihadist ideology as formulated first in Egypt and later adopted by the Arab Afghans. They were the basis of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the crusaders and Jews, which was founded in early 1998. Signatories were bin Laden, Zawahiri on behalf of the Egyptian Jihad, Abu Jasir on behalf of the Egyptian Gama'a, Sheikh Abu Hamza al Misri on behalf of Jamiatul ulama (Pakistan), and Fazlul Rahman, leader of the Jihad movement in Bangladesh.15 The pillars of the new organization were the Egyptians and bin Laden; it was a loose linkage of several Afghan groups held together by bin Laden's funding.16 Earlier meetings between leaders of these organizations had taken place during bin Laden's Sudan stay.

One would have expected among the signatories also the Algerian GIA and some smaller Egyptian terrorist organizations, but they were probably not consulted. The presence of the Pakistani Sheikh was needed in order to give religious-legal sanction to the fatwa issued by bin Laden and Zawahiri at the end of the meeting. Neither had sufficient religious standing to make a fatwa on his own. This was a declaration of war on the United States occupying the holiest of territories and plundering its riches; the manifesto also denounced the continued aggression against the Iraqi people. While the purpose of the Americans in these wars was economic and religious, they also served the petty state of the Jews to divert attention from their occupation of Jerusalem and their killing of Muslims in it. In this situation the Islamic religious authorities had ruled that when enemies attack Muslim lands jihad became every Muslim's personal duty. The ruling was therefore to kill Americans and their allies, both civilians and military. This became the individual duty of every able-bodied Muslim until the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the Haram mosque in Mecca were freed from their grip and their armies shattered and broken, until they would depart from all the lands of Islam, incapable to threaten any Muslim.17 These ideological guidelines were frequently repeated even after the defeat of the Taliban and the dispersal of al Qa'ida. Thus Suleiman Abu Gaith, spokesman for al Qa'ida, writing in June
Many came from neighboring Pakistan and belonged to one of the local tribes. Only after the war against the Soviets was over.

Main enemy, but he seems to have reached the conclusion that the struggle at home was considerably less popular than the jihad against outside enemies for twenty to thirty thousand, with a considerable percentage drifting in and out.20

Beliefs vary widely—the number of those who came from Algeria was thought to be close to five hundred by some, roughly three thousand by others, and there are similar wide discrepancies in the number of those who came from Yemen and Egypt. They began to leave Afghanistan after the exodus of the Russians and the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul (January 1992).21 On the other hand there was a renewed influx of Muslim terrorists from the Middle East who arrived only after the war against the Soviets was over.

It seems certain that relatively few volunteers were killed during the war, and hardly any were taken prisoner. Some joined al Qaeda, the majority probably did not; but many were willing to continue their struggle even after their return to their native countries or to the new theaters of war to which they were sent. According to Egyptian statistics, there were toward the end of 1998 some 2,800 fighters in the bin Laden camps in Afghanistan, including some 600 Egyptians, 400 Jordanians, 300 Yemenites, 250 Iraqis, and so on.22 But more were stationed in Pakistan even though Pakistan had committed itself earlier to close down the places where the Arab Afghans were staying. When the American offensive against the Taliban regime began in October 2001, there were thought to be 7,000 al Qaeda fighters on the ground.

Many members of the Arab Afghan units had returned to their countries of origin, in some cases by way of infiltration. But they weren’t welcome anywhere because the governments were afraid of the potential of violence constituted by these veterans, who had been indoctrinated by the gospel of jihad and knew nothing but fighting. Their situation was similar in some ways to that of the militants of the extreme right in Europe after World War I, veterans who did not find, or did not want to find, their way back into society but established free corps in Germany and the Baltic region and the squadristi in Italy, engaging in terrorism. They became the nucleus of the Fascist parties in these countries.23

Again, there are only rough estimates regarding the eventual destination of the Arab Afghans. Some disappeared without a trace, while others went on to fight in different parts of the world. It is thought that up to four thousand went to the former Yugoslavia to fight on the side of the Bosnians, and to Kosovo and Albania. The main camp of these mujahedeen was in Zenica, and they engaged in both terrorism and guerrilla warfare against the Serbs. Some seem to have had more ambitious plans, wanting to prepare Bosnia and Kosovo as a new base for al Qaeda operations in Europe for operations such as attacking Western military installations and embassies in Germany, France, and elsewhere. Many of them were given Bosnian passports, but as the fighting subsided there was growing Western pressure on the Bosnian government to get rid of them. The Bosnians complied up to a point, but several hundred terrorists remained in the country. Some returned to Algeria where they had originally come from and joined the GIA, the most radical terrorist organization responsible for the massacres of the 1990s. One cell relocated to France and Belgium where it engaged in both terrorism and banditry in the vicinity of Roubaix (in northern France) and in Belgium.24

Other Arab Afghans had proceeded directly from Pakistan to Algeria where terrorism was rampant and took more victims (at least a hundred thousand) than in any other country at the time. The GIA also established active cells among Algerian emigrants in France and in other European countries. It had more international contacts in Europe than any other Islamic terrorist group, and this
infrastructure proved to be of great help to al Qa’ida once it began its operations worldwide. Another sizeable group went to Yemen, where it collaborated with political and tribal groups in opposition to the local government. They were joined by a group of Islamic terrorists from Britain and specialized for a while in kidnapping foreigners to finance their operations.

A considerable number of Arab Afghans went to Egypt, some voluntarily, while others were extradited by Albania, Pakistan, or other countries where they had overstayed their welcome.25

The Arab Afghans were involved in many terrorist activities in Egypt up to 1998, when under the influence of bin Laden and Zawahiri there was another change in strategy inasmuch as all the energies were to be devoted from now on to attacking American interests worldwide. In the spectacular attacks against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Egyptian terrorists were involved, and the other attackers also had been connected in one way or another with al Qa’ida.

The Egyptian government had taken strong measures against the returning terrorists by staging a number of mass trials. Among those sentenced to capital punishment (mostly in absentia) were Zawahiri, as well as his brother Muhammad, and Istambuli, the brother of the terrorist who had killed Anwar el Sadat. Some interesting facts emerged during the trials about the inner workings of al Qa’ida: the attempts, which were not very successful, to establish closer relations between various terrorist groups; the attempts to expand Islamic terrorist activities to the Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan); and internal differences of opinion whether to adhere to a truce with the government in Egypt and Algeria.

What did not emerge from these trials and interrogations were the most ambitious plans engaged in by al Qa’ida: the attacks in the United States in September 2001. This was no accident because those involved in the events of September 11 were not Arab Afghans but were members of another group of recruits who belonged to the Arab diaspora in Europe or had been educated in Europe and America. The Afghan veterans were seasoned fighters, and they were quite capable of continuing the jihad in the Arab world, North Africa, and the Balkans. But for operations in Europe and America, different background and training were needed from the one received in the Pakistani and Afghan camps: a higher education, a working knowledge of languages, and some experience with how to behave in alien societies.

Looking back in 2000 to achievements attained so far, al Qa’ida had some ground for satisfaction. While Western and Arab governments had become aware of its existence and were taking countermeasures, these were as yet not very effective and did not seriously threaten its operations. The fame of bin Laden and his organization had spread through the Muslim world and al Qa’ida had no difficulties attracting new recruits. But on the other hand its potential was as yet limited. It could give only limited help to Muslim brethren in the Balkans and even less to those in the Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan). It could not or would not send help to fellow Muslims in Palestine. Most resources were concentrated on the main blow against the great Satan.

**European Islam?**

If Sudan and Afghanistan were one pillar of the new Islamic revolution, the other was Western Europe where few had suspected it. Not many Muslims lived in Europe prior to World War II, except in the Balkans, which had for centuries been part of the Ottoman Empire. During the 1960s and 1970s, many millions of Muslims streamed to Western Europe to escape the grinding poverty of their homelands and because Europe offered employment as the result of the longest boom in the history of the continent. They came from North Africa (mainly to France, Spain, and Italy), from Turkey (to Germany), and from South Asia (to Britain). By the year, 2000, some 4 million Muslims lived in France, some 2.5–3 million in Germany, and less than 2 million in Britain. But there were sizeable colonies even in the smaller countries — more than one million in Holland and Belgium, and even in Sweden Islam had become the second most numerous religion. Many hundreds of thousands lived in Spain and Italy, where even rough estimates were impossible because the number of illegal immigrants was probably much larger than that of the legal residents.

Relations with the host nation were fairly smooth in the early years; most immigrants had come to make money and after a while to return to their native countries. But in the great majority of cases they did not return, partly because they had grown roots in their new homes and had become accustomed to the higher standard of living. True, they were hit hard by the economic downturns of the 1970s and 1980s, but social security payments provided a safety net such as did not exist in their countries of origin. Unemployment, especially among the second generation of immigrants (called beurres in France), was certainly considerably higher than among the rest of the population for yet another reason: many immigrants had settled in the centers of the old, traditional industries (especially in Britain and partly also in France), which were in decline and gradually phased out.

The new immigrants were concentrated in quarters of their own in the major cities — the Paris banlieue, London, and the Midlands. Such settlement had been the case also with earlier immigration waves, but earlier immigrants, in contrast, had fairly quickly become integrated into local society and had broken out of their ghettos. Assimilation had been expected from them, and they were only too eager to comply. Such willingness to become integrated did not exist among the Muslim immigration of the post–World War II period, less so than among the immigrants from India or Africa. They wanted to keep their way of life, which in the new age of multiculturalism was considered perfectly natural.
Cultural assimilation did take place, manifesting itself above all in fluency in the new language, which the second and third generation spoke without an accent, or to be precise with a local accent. As the North African writer Tahar ben Jelloun put it with regard to the second generation of immigrants living in France, they will eat French food, sing French songs, and frequent discotheques, but they would still not feel French. When France played Algeria in a soccer match, the immigrant population would try to drown out the “Marseillaise.” Social mingling, let alone intermarriages, occurred only slowly, a little faster in France than in Germany and Britain, which also affected social mobility. Whereas earlier immigration waves had been deeply motivated not just to better themselves but to be well educated, this motivation was not the case with the Islamic immigration after World War II. It was not a matter of class; 25 to 30 percent of the children of French workers went on to higher education, while only 4 percent of the North Africans did. As a result, many of the young people were not just unemployed but considered unemployable. They became or rather remained the new proletariat while only a few made a breakthrough.

Did this happen because of a deliberate intention to keep them down, or should one look for the reasons somewhere else? Naturally there was the inclination among many immigrants to make a “racist” government and society responsible for their misfortune. But this was certainly not the whole truth, or even a half truth. The French government, as many argued, had made greater concessions to the Muslims as a community than to any other religious group. Nor does it explain why members of this radicalized younger generation joined the ranks of the terrorists, for among the recruits were relatively many who were neither poor nor uneducated.

Most of the immigrants to Western Europe had been observant Muslims at home, but not ultraorthodox let alone radical. The Turks who came to Germany were more religious than mainstream Turkish society; they did not come from the major cities, largely secular in character, but from rural Anatolia where Islam was still more deeply rooted. The same was true, mutatis mutandis, with regard to the Pakistanis who settled in Britain.

Then, in the 1980s, radicalization set in with the influx of a new generation of young radical preachers paid for mainly by Saudi money. They were pupils of Sayed Qutb and Maulana Mawdoodi; they established new mosques and cultural centers. In Britain alone, fifteen hundred new mosques were built and some five thousand Koran schools established, as well as cultural centers and radical students’ associations. They taught their followers that according to Islam they were first and foremost Muslims; they had to fight for Muslim rights and interests everywhere, and they owed no allegiance to the infidel country in which they happened to live. Democracy was an evil political system, and freedom and tolerance were ideals alien to their religion. As Imam Fazazi of the Hamburg mosque was preaching, Christians and Jews should have their throats cut. They established publishing houses such as Azzam in Britain, named after the guru of jihad mentioned earlier. The message was that all Muslims were or should be extremists because the prophet Muhammad had been one; he had, after all, seven hundred Jews in Medina beheaded, and he engaged in constant fighting.

According to the same message, a long war was ahead that would take several years, perhaps decades, but end with the victory of the believers. In this war, Muslims were always right, for their war was a jihad and one must never give any support to the disbelievers fighting the Muslims. Muslims and Islamic organizations which tried to project a moderate image were traitors and apostates: “There is no such thing as a moderate or liberal Muslim.”

The British government granted unlimited entry permits to these new religious dignitaries without checking whether their main occupation would be political propaganda rather than religious education. If a neo-Nazi group had called for killing all the blacks in England, they would have run into difficulties under the Race Relations Act, but the Islamist preachers of hate were considered religious dignitaries and therefore immune to prosecution. The Turkish government was certainly not too happy about the political propaganda that was carried out under the cover of religion, but the German authorities thought they could not intervene, for the constitution granted freedom of religion. The attitude of the Algerian government was similarly negative toward the indoctrination to which the Algerian colony in France was exposed. But the British and French governments were not inclined to interfere in what they considered the internal affairs of religious communities, which enjoyed full freedom under existing laws. Even collaboration between Britain and France as far as terrorism was concerned was far from harmonious. Britain steadfastly refused to extradite Rashid Ramda, one of the leaders of a terrorist campaign in France that caused the death of eight and injuries to two hundred. According to Irene Stiller, chief prosecutor in Paris, while cracking down on the IRA, the British were turning a blind eye to terrorist activities on its soil.

The indoctrination would not have been successful but for the fact that the social and psychological conditions were ripe for the growth of extremism. Mention has been made of unemployment among the young, which in turn reinforced already existing trends of alienation from society. Higher education was free in Western Europe, but not many young Muslims availed themselves of these chances; those who did were not exempt from the general radicalization. In one famous case in liberal Sweden in 2002, a young Kurdish woman was killed by her own father for attending a university and thus dishonoring her family. The family had lived in Sweden for many years and was believed to be well integrated.

Many young Muslims came into conflict with the law. Ethnic breakdowns of the prison population were considered politically incorrect and inflammatory and usually not published, but according to many reports the Muslim contingent
among young offenders was up to 80 percent in parts of Britain and France. A considerable number of Western European militants of al Qa'ida had been converted to radical Islam while in prison. In France, the correlation between crime, mainly petty crime, and terrorism in the immigrant neighborhoods was even more glaring.32

Many signs were pointing to an explosive situation in the Islamic ghettos all over Western Europe. When Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced his fatwa against Salman Rushdie, calling the faithful to kill the blasphemous writer, not a single Islamic preacher in Britain dared to dissent in public. Some Muslim public figures declared their intention to establish separatist institutions, even a separate parliament in Britain, and young radicals repeated in front of British television what their preachers had told them: that they would not desist from Jihad until their black flag would be hoisted over 10 Downing Street and presumably also on Buckingham Palace. In the summer of 2001, gangs of mainly Pakistani youth were attacking the police in Midland towns such as Oldham, torching shops, and attacking the police as well as Indians and Sikhs in riots which lasted several days and caused massive damage. The far-right British National Front seems to have played a minor part, but most locals believed that tensions were such that they would have led to violence even without any provocation. As an Asian observer commented after interviewing young Muslims in Oldham: “They said Western civilization deserved to be destroyed. Asked where they would start they replied: Everywhere. The riots had no target symbolic or strategic. They did not seem to protest against unemployment. The riots were swagger and mayhem, and the rioters in various towns vied to outdo each other.”33

The authorities were shocked but by and large saw no reason to take an alarmist view. Only a small percentage of young Muslims had rioted; the majority of mosques were not dominated by the extremists. (It was the same in France — if the imam of the Lyon mosque sympathized with the radicals, the imam of the Marseilles mosque was considered a liberal.) There seemed to be no reason for undue worry in Britain. When a group of young radicals went from Britain to Yemen to take part there in the terrorist struggle, and when they were captured, a considerable number of Western European militants of al Qa'ida had been involved in terrorist activities. But as Judge Beghal, or Kemal Daoudi had no criminal records. They came from middle-class families. Moussaoui became a jihadist only in the course of a long stay in London where he frequented Brixton mosque and became a member of a radical circle. Yet others such as the brothers Courtailler were not of Arab but West Indian origin and had only recently converted to Islam; they too had not grown up in the violent slums. They seemed to be well integrated into French society, but this was an illusion. They had been top students, well adjusted and quiet. After their arrest, their families genuinely refused to believe that their sons or brothers had been involved in terrorist activities.

In France, violence had occurred even earlier. In 1994–95, armed gangs in the Paris banlieue and the north of France had engaged in the robbery of supermarkets and shops, killing a few of their countrymen and also acting as runners for the drug trade as well as smuggling stolen cars from Marseille to the north. Among their leaders were the brothers Chalabi. They were certainly not very religious; all had long criminal records and some were converted to radical Islam in prison. Most had come from North Africa, but some were of Arab origin. The most prominent gang was in Roubaix; it engaged in daring robberies, and its leading members were killed in a shootout with the Belgian police.34 The experts do not agree to this day whether the criminal element was stronger than the political

as far as their motivation was concerned. They had close connections with the Algerian GIA, but they certainly engaged in the robberies also for their own profit. There was nothing novel in such combinations. Some of the terrorist gangs in France prior to World War I were both anarchists and bandits; in Latin America, according to a time-honored tradition, horse thieves would claim political motivation because thieves would be hanged whereas politicians were not. The section in the French police dealing with them and some of their offshoots was not the political police but BOB, the brigade for the repression of banditry.35 But some terrorist operations, such as in the Paris metro, were political in character. Altogether several scores of French citizens were killed and wounded in these attacks between 1993 and 1995.

According to some commentators, the violence in the banlieue and the great enthusiasm for bin Laden after September 11, 2001, was a revolt against an unjust and racist society.36 That racism existed is beyond doubt, but it was not a one-sided affair. Angry young people from the Maghreb (northwestern Africa) hated Jews, Gypsies, Africans, and Asians. They burned synagogues and attacked neighbors belonging to other ethnic groups. They felt excluded even though the most popular person in France was Zinedine Zidane, the Algerian soccer star who had decisively helped France win the soccer world championship.37

As so often, poverty and social injustice did play a role but did not provide the main key one is looking for. Most of the leading terrorist figures, such as Zacarias Moussaoui (the “twentieth 9/11 hijacker,” arrested in the United States), Djemal Beghral, or Kemal Daoudi had no criminal records. They came from middle-class families. Moussaoui became a jihadist only in the course of a long stay in London where he frequented Brixton mosque and became a member of a radical circle. Many signs were pointing to an explosive situation in the Islamic ghettos all over Western Europe. When Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced his fatwa against Salman Rushdie, calling the faithful to kill the blasphemous writer, not a single Islamic preacher in Britain dared to dissent in public. Some Muslim public figures declared their intention to establish separatist institutions, even a separate parliament in Britain, and young radicals repeated in front of British television what their preachers had told them: that they would not desist from Jihad until their black flag would be hoisted over 10 Downing Street and presumably also on Buckingham Palace. In the summer of 2001, gangs of mainly Pakistani youth were attacking the police in Midland towns such as Oldham, torching shops, and attacking the police as well as Indians and Sikhs in riots which lasted several days and caused massive damage. The far-right British National Front seems to have played a minor part, but most locals believed that tensions were such that they would have led to violence even without any provocation. As an Asian observer commented after interviewing young Muslims in Oldham: “They said Western civilization deserved to be destroyed. Asked where they would start they replied: Everywhere. The riots had no target symbolic or strategic. They did not seem to protest against unemployment. The riots were swagger and mayhem, and the rioters in various towns vied to outdo each other.”33

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Who had recruited them? According to close observers of the scene, the recruiters were preying on the psychological weaknesses of bright young men.38 But there must have been a disposition to move in this direction — perhaps the desire to give their empty life a new meaning or the attraction by adventure and a thirst for action.

Most of the militant cells existing in France were North African by origin, and they collaborated in later years with the al Qa'ida network. But as Judge Bruguyere, the chief of antiterrorism in the DST (the French equivalent of the FBI), pointed out, many of the cells were autonomous and did not get their orders from bin Laden. If, for instance, they planned to blow up the U.S. embassy in Paris and various locations in Strasbourg (including the local Christmas market),
it could well have been that bin Laden did not even know about this except perhaps vaguely, and that his participation in the venture was limited to financial help. But there was certainly coordination between the autonomous groups and also mutual help: The group in Milan would be in contact with their friends in Paris and Frankfurt and ask for specific assistance.

The most important base was London, simply because the terrorists enjoyed greater freedom there. Most leading terrorist figures such as Zacarias Moussaoui spent some time in London or frequently visited there. It has been mentioned that Moussaoui became a jihadist only in London; the terrorists could be reasonably certain not to be extradited from England even if in their country of birth they had been sentenced for murder. British security forces were not very well informed about happenings on the terrorist scene, and even if they had known more, they would have been powerless to intervene. London ("Londonistan") had become the center of radical Arab politics in Europe and also of radical Islamic terrorism.

The leading gurus of the jihadists in Britain were Sheikh Omar Bakri, Abu Qatada, and one-eyed and hook-handed Abu Hamza. Bakri was the head of two religious political organizations called Hizb ul Tahrir ("Liberation Party") and Al Muhajirun ("the emigrants," referring to the companions who had gone with Muhammad from Mecca to Medina). These were the most extremist groups outside Afghanistan. In an interview with Le Monde, Bakri declared that he and his men would not rest until the flag of Islam would be high over the Elysée and Downing Street. He wanted Britain to be the first country to become truly Islamic, in contrast to some of his colleagues who maintained that the Islamic revolution should begin in countries such as Yemen. Bakri's appeals were not limited to calling for killing the Jews and Christians; he also called for the murder of all the rulers in the Muslim world, who were without exception creatures of the West. In an interview with an Arab language newspaper, Abu Bakri said that what mattered was not bookish knowledge but action.

He was not always consistent in his pronouncements. Earlier on he had not attacked Britain and was asked for the reasons of this curious omission. He said he had had in earlier years an understanding with the British authorities, but gradually changed his opinion. In 1998, he was interviewed by the British security forces for having allegedly called for the murder of Prime Minister John Major. (He had said that Major would be a legitimate target if he would visit an Arab or Muslim country; he later said the same about Blair.) He called for jihad against Britain as well, and said that all Jewish and Christian targets were legitimate.

Before September 11, 2001, Bakri had claimed that he was bin Laden's personal representative, but after that date he argued that there was spiritual identification but no organizational ties. He called his fellow clerics in the Muslim world asses and dogs, and said that what mattered was not bookish knowledge but action.

He had posters printed that read "Kill the Jews" and he said that no Muslim was bound by phony British democratic rules which had been passed by monkeys in Parliament. These and other sayings could be found on Bakri's Web site, in brochures on jihad, and in the many interviews he freely gave to the media.

From time to time a question would be raised in Parliament or the press about the inflammatory speeches of the radical propagandists; after all, foreign visitors had been denied entrance to Britain for making far less extreme statements, but the British authorities thought they could not prosecute the Sheikh under existing laws. Perhaps they did not think him sufficiently influential and did not want to make him a martyr. In fact, Bakri's activities were indirectly financed by the state, as he received social welfare payments of about two thousand dollars a month, for himself and his five children. When asked about this by a British newspaper, he replied that it was difficult for him to get a job and that most of the leadership of the Islamic movement in Britain received social security benefits. Mainstream Muslim spokesmen called him a clown and said that he was in no way representative of British Muslims, but most were still reluctant to speak out openly against him.

Some of Bakri's claims regarding his achievements were certainly exaggerated, sometimes grossly so. It was not true that he had recruited many thousands, or even hundreds, of young Muslims in Britain to fight in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries. The number of young Muslims who went to fight is not known, but it was certainly quite small; two were killed in Bosnia, one in Chechnya, a handful were taken prisoner in Afghanistan. But there is no doubt that recruitment was going on. Eight British Muslims who had volunteered to fight in Yemen had been sent by Bakri's colleague, Abu Hamza al Misri. There was a division of labor; another Sheikh named Yussef el Qaradawi located in West London was in charge of electronic jihad, raising funds and laundering money. Abdulla el Faisal was a leading speaker, Jamaica-born, and his cassettes were sold in front of many mosques. A central figure was Abu Qatada, located at the Finsbury mosque and several London Islamic cultural centers. Al Qatada did not speak English, and European police forces suspected him rather than el Bakri to be the main figure of al Qa'ida in Europe. He also lived on state support, as did Omar Othman, a cleric originally from Palestine who had been named as accomplice in the U.S. trial against the plotters who had blown up the African embassies in 1998; Othman went to court to have his social benefits reinstated. When the police came to search al Qatada's home, they found several hundred thousand dollars. A few hours before the British parliament passed legislation according to which al Qatada could have been arrested, he disappeared. This raised questions in the media as to whether he had been a MI5 agent all along. Young Muslims were given instruction how to use a Kalashnikov in Finsbury Mosque and several London Islamic cultural centers. Al Qatada did not participate in the venture.
sabotage training. Bakri said that the duty of every able-bodied young Muslim over the age of fifteen was to go through such training.

The origins of the Hizb ul Tahrir are discussed elsewhere in our study. Its branch in Britain certainly remained a mystery for friend and foe alike. Other Islamic and Islamist organizations were annoyed that it attracted publicity in the media out of proportion to its numbers. They were said to make false accusations against sincere Muslims. It was said that no one really knew who its leaders were and where they were hiding. Hizb ul Tahrir came under attack for its diversionary tactics in trying to break up the meetings of other Muslim organizations, and suspicions were voiced that it somehow served the interests of the Zionists by its very radicalism. Yet few dared to speak out in public against the jihadists even if these were only a vociferous minority. They had followers not only in London but also in places like Liverpool, Leicester, and Maidhead; their booklets and cassettes were sold not only in their own mosques but also in front of the London Regents Park mosque. They were attracting hundreds, perhaps thousands of the young and most active Muslims; thus they had access to a formidable reservoir of potential fighters. After September 2001, attacks against capitalism became prominent in Hizb ul Tahrir propaganda, which made British capitalism responsible for, among other things, the horrible sex crimes committed in Britain. What caused this ideological turn is not entirely clear: genuine conviction or the belief that such “anticapitalism” could broaden the appeal of the jihadists.

English authorities were frequently criticized by their European colleagues and the Americans for not collaborating in combating terrorism, London having become the haven of Islamic radicals. The British refused to extradite militants with a terrorist record to countries where they might be condemned to death, but they also refused extradition to other European countries. This situation began to change only after September 2001 when new antiterrorist legislation was adopted. The German situation differed from the state of affairs in France and Britain inasmuch as it was made very difficult for the immigrants from Turkey to become German citizens. On the other hand, enormous efforts were made by local governments and especially the churches to enter a dialogue with the Muslim communities. The attempts by Catholic as well as Protestant churchmen and women were based on a great deal of naiveté and ignorance about Islam and its attitude to ecumenical initiatives. The church people furthermore concentrated their efforts on the more radical elements among the Turks, such as Millî Guerües, which represented about 3 percent of the Muslims rather than the more moderate elements. The most militant group was the one headed by Metin Kaplan in Cologne, also called the Kalif von Köln, with some eleven hundred members who fought for the restoration of the Khilafah and global power to Islam. These extremists engaged not only in indoctrination but planned terrorist action mainly against the secularists in their native country.

Terrorist organizations from Muslim countries were all, represented in Germany; this refers, for instance, to the Algerian, Egyptian, and Palestinian groups. However, there was relatively little violence, except among ethnic groups such as radical Turks and Kurds of the PKK. The militants probably feared that if arrested they might not only lose their considerable social benefits but be expelled from Germany.

Germany was important for the Islamists for the same reason as Britain: as a safe haven and a base of operation in other countries. Several suicide bombers had studied in Germany in cities such as Hamburg. They had been attending the prayers in the local Al Quds mosque but had refrained from engaging in violent action. In fact they had been given instructions not to be politically active so as not to attract the attention of the authorities, thus endangering their terrorist missions. But with all this, the radical Islamists had their mosques, political and cultural centers in which anti-Westernism, anti-Semitism, and the use of violence were preached, and in which the members were taught how to make maximum use of the benefits offered by democratic societies while rejecting the principles such as political freedom, tolerance, and secularism on which these societies were based.

Spain and Italy were also considered “safe havens” by the terrorists. In Spain, a restaurant near an American base had been bombed in 1985 and eighteen Spaniards had been killed there, but since then there had been no such operations. The Spanish police were preoccupied with the struggle against the Basque ETA; they observed Muslim radicals but did not want to open a second front against potential Muslim terrorists. Among the six hundred thousand Muslim immigrants mainly from North Africa, there were thought to be several hundred militants of al Qa‘ida, but they came in for closer observation only after September 2001 when several arrests were made.

Many of the Muslims who went illegally to Italy came from Albania; their interest was not primarily in politics but the smuggling of drugs and prostitution. A majority went on to other European countries, and they resented the political activism of some of the North Africans which made all illegals suspect and intensified police control. Italian police did succeed locating and ultimately arresting an important terrorist cell in Milan well before September 2001. This group had connections all over Europe and was scheduled to play a crucial role in the general terrorist offensive that was planned for late 2001, which should have included attacks against American embassies in Paris, Rome, and Tirana (Albania), as well as other targets.

The history of radical Islamism and the terrorist cells in Western Europe remains to be written. While conditions varied from country to country, it appeared that there were greater difficulties as far as the integration of the immigrants from Muslim countries was concerned than with any earlier immigrant group. Many had no wish to become part of society but wanted to maintain their
traditional way of life. This stance made their economic and social integration
difficult, condemning many of them to a proletarian or subproletarian existence.

The idea that over time a European Islam would develop that was more liberal
and open seemed to have been premature at the very least. As a result a new
generation grew up who were superficially assimilated and in large part deeply
disaffected. Among these sections the preachers of jihad found their followers.

All this is not to say that social and cultural integration was doomed and would
never materialize, but that it would take much longer than originally anticipated:
three or four generations rather than one. The impact of modernity and the
Western way of life was much slower than many had thought, but it was still strong
and pervasive. The corruption (as the preachers saw it) was everywhere, and there
was no escape except absence of any contact with the outside world, which was,
of course, impossible in the long run. These were the sociological prospects; the
terrorist leaders, to repeat once again, were not out to attract millions of votes,
because they did not believe in democracy and majorities. Their aim was to find a
few hundred activists willing to volunteer for jihad and, of course, a much broader
section of the Muslim community which, while not actively joining the struggle,
would sympathize and extend help in various ways. This reservoir certainly existed
and is bound to exist for a considerable time to come.

So far mention has been made of Europe only, but the Afghan alumni and local
sympathizers of al Qa’ida have been active in other continents as well, notably in
Southeast Asia. They have engaged in propaganda in most Muslim countries and
also countries with Muslim minorities, and they have launched terrorist operations
in Central Asia as well as the Caucasus, Malaysia, the Philippines, and elsewhere.
There have been considerable differences between the various local groups. The
Caucasus has seen a mixture of cultural-religious national motives in the fight
against the Russians; Chechen gangs in Moscow have been closer to the model
of the Mafia than the Koran, and the Abu Sayaf group in the Philippines has
specialized in the abduction of foreign tourists for monetary gain rather than in
the pursuit of jihad. But other operations such as the unsuccessful attempt by
Ramzi Yussef and others to hijack a number of commercial planes from Manila
in 1994 were precursors of September 2001.

Should one look for a common denominator? Is there a Muslim (or Islamic)
International similar to the Comintern, the Communist International (1919–
43)? Or is it merely a conspiracy on an international scale? Having digested so
much anti-Semitic propaganda, did they want to take a leaf out of the Protocols
of the Elders of Zion? Certainly, for the first time in the history of terrorism,
an international organization, however loose, has come into being. But there is
no central leadership comparable to the Third International, only a common
ideology.

Like the Communist International, the bin Laden International operates on
a variety of levels. It has been working through legal religious and political
associations, as well as an illegal underground apparatus and a variety of groups
(NGOs) in between. In some respects, it has been structured on the lines of a
multinational corporation, but its branches are under no obligation to provide
accounts to a chief executive. Perhaps a comparison with the Second (Socialist)
International, which was a loose federation of political parties, would be more
to the point, except of course that the Second International strictly rejected ter-
rorism. A comparison with the “leaderless resistance” preached by the militias
of the extreme right in the United States could also be made. This is based on
the assumption that a group (or a phantom cell) without a visible head would be
difficult for the security forces to detect, and if detected, to immobilize. A similar
strategy has apparently been adopted by the radical wing of American environ-
mental militants. But it is easier to apply this doctrine in theory than in practice,
given the ambitious aims of groups like al Qa’ida on the one hand and the logistic
complexities of modern societies on the other. Nor is it certain that the relations
between the cells in various countries were as loose as initially assumed; subse-
quent investigations tended to show a considerable measure of coordination and
direction from some central authority.54

The practitioners of Jihad have the great advantage in comparison with the
Communist International that they could make use of space (mosques and other
religious institutions) that in democratic countries were outside the jurisdiction
and the supervision of security services and where operations could be planned
and prepared without fear of interference. The mosques, the Islamic cultural
centers and the schools were the free zones that Sudan had been at one time
and later Afghanistan under Taliban rule. As in the Communist International,
there is a fairly strict division between legal and illegal work. The terrorists have
considerable latitude as far as their behavior among the infidels was concerned;
they were sometimes advised to shave so as not to stand out, and they could do
things, if need be, that an observing Muslim was forbidden to do; this permission
even extended to the consumption of alcohol.

There is no party discipline among them and no monolithic ideology as there
had been among the Communists, except in a very general way subscribing to
the doctrine of jihad and practicing the various rituals whenever possible. At the
same time, they have great freedom of action as far as terrorist initiatives are con-
cerned. All this developed, in all probability, not according to any master plan but
spontaneously; a rigid bureaucratic system would not have worked among people
from so many countries and different backgrounds. Nor are references to “net-
working” and “interfacing” of much help; eager to engage in violent action, the
conspirators would find like-minded people in clubs and bookshops or somewhere
else in the orbit of a mosque known for its radical orientation.

Conspiracy of this kind had been the practice of nineteenth-century secret
societies and sects, and not much has changed since except the means of com-
unication. A member of such a society of bygone days, whether European or
Muslim, would find himself at home in this atmosphere except that the earlier conspiracies were usually confined to one country, whereas at present they are more international in character. Radical preachers play a key role because they received their training in the same religious seminars, but radical businessmen or diplomats can also fulfill this function because of their international contacts and activities. Thus, the new radical Islamic International is not particularly sophisticated in its structure. But this is not necessarily a drawback, because their antagonists would have found it easier to understand and combat a modern international organization than a premodern one in the pattern of the nineteenth century.

Suicide bombing, one of the most prominent features of contemporary terrorism, has been one of the most difficult to understand for those living in what is commonly known as the postheroic age. It has led some to believe that those willing to sacrifice their own life must be supreme idealists and the cause for which they are willing to make this greatest of all sacrifices must be a just and noble one. At the same time, it is frequently maintained that suicide attack is something new in history and specifically Muslim. (At one time, in the 1980s, it was believed to be specifically Shi'ite.) However, such missions have occurred over a long time in many countries and cultures. In fact, a review of the history of terrorism over the ages up to the 1960s shows that in the great majority of cases, all terrorism was suicide terrorism. The number of attackers who got away from terrorism was very small. From what we know about their mindset, it appears that they did not expect to escape, and in many instances they did not even try. An attempt to understand the suicide bombers ought to take into account a great variety of circumstances and motives and should not focus on one specific group and religion, even if that group happens to figure very prominently at the present time.

Some have seen the sources of suicide attack in the commandments of religion. According to the teachings of Islam suicide is forbidden, but martyrdom in the struggle for Allah is not; on the contrary, it is a religious duty. The term shahid originally meant "witness" (as in a court of law), but in Christianity it acquired another meaning — that of a martyr, fighting the infidels and sealing his fate with death. The shahid receives great privileges in paradise nearest the throne of God. His wounds become red like blood on the day of judgment and shine and smell like musk. They are the only ones in paradise to have the special privilege of returning to earth and suffering martyrdom another ten times. True, the longing to die a martyr's death was not encouraged by orthodox Islamic theology because this kind of self-sacrifice looked like suicide, which was condemned by Islam. And in the end, almost anyone who died a violent death was considered a shahid.

In our time, various religious dignitaries in Egypt and Saudi Arabia have opposed suicide terrorism, but others — such as the Mufti of Jerusalem and Palestine — have justified it as shahada (martyrdom). Yet others have taken a middle
way, regarding attacks against enemy soldiers as permissible, but attacks against civilians are not. Some have favored suicide attacks against the “Zionist occupants” in Palestine but not against fellow Muslims. Sheikh Muhammad Tantawi, head of Al Azhar in Cairo, said on one occasion that all Israelis—men, women, and children—were forces of occupation and therefore legitimate targets of suicide bombers. But on another occasion he said that no Muslim should blow himself up in the midst of children and women but only among aggressors, among soldiers. Yussef el Qaradawi, the TV sheikh of the Al Jazeera network, famous in the whole Arab world, also declared suicide terrorism the highest form of jihad and therefore very commendable.

The arguments in favor of such martyrdom are historical, and they usually refer to battles fought in the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad or soon after. Thus Sheikh Sabri, the Mufti of Jerusalem, in a speech justifying suicide attacks, referred to the battle (or campaign) of Mu’tah (629), in which the followers of Muhammad fought a superior Roman (that is to say, Byzantine) army. The leader of the enemy army, a Roman general, wanted to take Muhammad’s life but was killed when his horse stampeded in the general confusion. Such an action was considered a great feat of courage. According to the chronicler, he had fifty injuries but none in the back because he did not retreat. The prophet named him “Jafar the flyer” because Allah granted him two wings when he entered paradise to replace the two hands that had been cut off in battle. Then a third commander, Abdullah ibn Rawaha, took over until he was martyred. And so it went on until Khaled ibn Walid took command, who, the chronicler reports, developed a brilliant plan for withdrawal and lived to fight another day.

Appeals to go to a battle from which there would be no return are frequent in the Muslim tradition. Thus, al Baraa ibn Malik of the Ansar tribe at the battle of Yamama, said, “Oh Ansar, let not anyone of you think of returning to Madinah. There is no Madinah for you after this day. There is only Allah, and then Paradise.” Of Baraa, the tradition says that he died in another battle. He had prayed to God to grant him martyrdom.

As the Mufti of Jerusalem and other contemporary clerics see it, these heroic actions were not suicidal but the obeying of a religious duty such that the martyrs entered paradise directly. They did not have to undergo examination by the “interrogating angels” or pass the purging fires of Islam (Abdul Wahid Hamed, Companions of the Prophet, vol. 1). And the Mufti ended his sermon saying that whereas the enemies of Islam love life, Muslims love death and strive for martyrdom.

Such martyrdom is not unique. By a long oral and written tradition, similar legends of heroism and sacrifice are equally frequent in the history of other peoples, cultures, and religions, and many more were reinvented during later romantic ages. A typical example of religious motivation in warfare was ancient Assyria, which in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. engaged almost continuously in military campaigns. These wars of aggression were by no means imperialist-secular in character (even though they led to the establishment of an Assyrian empire). They were inspired and commanded by the gods, above all the god Assur. Conducting warfare was religious service ad majorem Dei gloriam, and the gods justified warfare even if conducted with utmost brutality.

The cult of heroes with a variety of ceremonies on their graves goes back to time immemorial; it can be found in earliest Greek history. The Spartan heroes at the battle of Thermopylae who under King Leonidas fought to the last man did so because law had ordered it and law was sanctioned by the gods. As the author of the Iliad relates, “Go tell the Spartans, thou who passes by, that here obedient to their laws, we lie.” The Jewish zealots who retreated to Massada near the Dead Sea for a last stand that ended in collective suicide were part of the same tradition. The Romans considered all their wars not only just (bellium justum) but also pious (pium) and there was a quasi-religious ritual ceremony for starting such a war: throwing a spear into enemy territory.

The Nordic (Icelandic, Viking, German) sagas deal with little but acts of heroism with the gods of pagan religion playing a prominent role. The heroes who had died in battle were taken to Asgard, the palace of the gods with 540 doors; they were kept there until Ragnarok, the last decisive battle. Their life was described as extremely comfortable. They were eating excellent boar meat and drinking the finest mead. When they were not feasting, the heroes were fighting, cutting themselves to pieces. But when mealtime came their wounds had healed and they returned to Valhalla.

The legends of the early Middle Ages are in a similar vein, with the Chanson de Roland as a prominent example. This is the story of the heroic rear-guard action at Roncesvalles of the emperor’s army. Roland, the nephew of Charlemagne, and his friend and comrade-in-arms Olivier and thirty other knights were too proud to sound the horn to call for help when faced by an overwhelming troop of Saracens. When they at last blew the horn, it was too late and when help arrived, they were dead on the field of battle. The Chanson says that they fought not only for their country (la douce Francie) but above all for their religion against the pagans.

The church regarded them as martyrs, not only those who had died having been persecuted for their belief in Christ. Thus the knights who went to fight in the Crusades were promised not only forgiveness for all their sins but entrance to paradise, just as the Muslim fighters were.

There are countless stories of self-sacrifice in battle, just as the one of Arnold Winkelried, the Swiss who in the battle of Sempach threw himself in the middle of the fray, thus forcing the enemy to concentrate on him and creating a way through their lines for his fellow fighters. Next to Wilhelm Tell, Winkelried became in a later romantic age the central figure in Swiss national mythology. The legend of Ivan Susanin (Glinka’s opera “A Life for the Tsar”) shows that not
only a bogatyr, a knight and professional fighter, but a simple peasant could be a martyr. It is the story of a man who during the Time of Troubles deliberately led the invading Polish army units into the middle of a forest to give the tsar the opportunity to escape. He was killed by the Poles for having misled them and became a national hero invoked by political leaders (including Stalin) up to the present day. It was more than a story of patriotic loyalty because the tsar apart from being the political ruler was also the supreme religious leader.

To write the story of these ages is to a large extent to write about heroes, cults of heroes, and martyrdom. If, during the age of the Enlightenment, these traditions went temporarily out of fashion, they came back with a vengeance during the romantic age, with modern Germany as an obvious example. As Theodor Koerner, the poet of the war of liberation against Napoleon, wrote on the eve of a battle (May 12, 1813): “Happiness lies only in sacrificial death.” Koerner did die such a death but a greater poet than Koerner, Friedrich Holderlin, not known as an aggressive militarist, had written even earlier (1797) a poem entitled “death for the fatherland” that was in the same vein. The inscription of Horace’s Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori could be found in the assembly halls of German schools after World War I, and in similar form in Britain and France. This was to commemorate, above all, the heroes of the battle of Langemarck in Flanders (November 1914), when thousands of young students and members of the youth movement (the Wandervogel) had tried to storm the Allied lines singing “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” — which was not even the national anthem at the time. The fallen symbolized the triumph of youth. They were not really dead but were sleeping in the lap of Christ, according to pictures widely distributed at the time. The graves and cemeteries became shrines of national worship.

The heroes had not died in vain. They lived on in eternal life in the tradition of Ich hatt einen Kameraden, Ludwig Uhland’s famous poem in memory of the good comrade who was killed in battle. It became a famous popular song, which ended,

Kann dir die Hand nicht geben
Bleib du im ew’gen Leben
(My friend I cannot ease your pain
in life eternal we’ll meet again
and walk once more as one.)

Under Nazism the heroic tradition involving self-sacrifice was not only continued but became central to the essence of the regime. This fact, perhaps more than anything else, led some contemporaries to interpret Nazism as a political religion. (Some Catholic commentators drew parallels with early Islam.) Up to the outbreak of the war the cult was mainly devoted to those killed in the struggle for the victory of Nazism — that is to say, in the street battles of the early 1930s. The semi-official anthem of the Nazis, the Horst Wessel song devoted to the memory of a Berlin Nazi killed before 1933, clearly states that “comrades killed by the Reds and the reactionaries were still marching in our ranks (Kameraden die Rotfront und Reaktion erschossen, marschieren im Geist in unseren Reihen mit).”

Later on, Nazi propaganda centered on the victims of the military campaigns in Western and Eastern Europe. Nazi propagandists were given instructions to explain to those who had been bereaved that there was no need to mourn, which was not good for national morale, but they should be grateful that their dearest had been given a chance to sacrifice their life for some higher ideal. They had not to suffer pain but were living in eternity; they were more alive than the rest, having suffered not just a necessary but a noble and beautiful death.

These ideas found their reflection in hundreds of poems written at the time: the fallen were still “living while we were breathing,” their death had been a magnificent triumph over death. Another poem related a vision: a miracle had occurred, the fallen had left their graves and had taken their place in the columns marching through town (Holzapfel). It was customary on ritual occasions among German as well as Romanian Nazis that when the list of those present was read out, those who had fallen were included and that someone would say “present” after the names of the dead had been called.

The poems about those who had died a hero’s death were written not just by party hacks but by highly respected writers of the time who were not even members of the Nazi Party. One of them was Ernst Bertram, one of the leading Germanists of the time, a member of the George Circle, the aristocracy of the spirit and friend of Thomas Mann (he had proposed to bestow an honorary doctorate on Mann at Bonn University which later became something of an academic scandal). Bertram wrote that only graves were creating Heimat (the beloved homeland), that only the dead were giving us light, that a people came into being through its coffins.

The cult of heroes, and above all the fallen heroes, figured prominently in the ideology and practice of other fascist movements, such as the Romanian Iron Guard (The Legion of Archangel Michael), which was permeated more by religious elements than any other. Many years later an admirer of Codreanu wrote about the “legionnaires”:

In the ethics of the legionnaires’ sacrifice, martyrdom, death had a larger than life significance. In the writings of Corneliu Codreanu, Ion Mota and Alexandru Cantacuzino the love for the sacrifice, the faith in death appears like a martial passion, a mysticism akin to the fighting spirit and suicide in the Weltanschauung of the Japanese samurai. In the 20th century one may find something similar only in the auto-da-fés of the kamikaze pilots and the ritual seppuku of the poet Yukio Mishima — the triumph of the will, the triumph of the sacrifice.

Ion Mota was the second-in-command in the Iron Guard and went to fight in the Spanish Civil War on Franco’s side; he was killed, and the return of his
body to Romania was celebrated by his comrades as the greatest moment in the history of their movement. Another great admirer of Codreanu and his cult of martyrdom and heroic suicide was Giulio Evola, the ideologist of neo-Nazism in Italy, a prominent figure in the war against the West and proponent of a hero's death.21

A similar spirit was inculcated in early Spanish fascism by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the head of the Falange. General Astray, the head of the Spanish Foreign Legion, addressing the students of Salamanca University in October 1936, shouted, “Down with the intellectuals, viva la muerte!” expressed something of the Zeitgeist. “The intellectuals” was mainly the great Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno, who was among the audience. Astray was a brave man, but despite the invocation of death he was not killed on the battlefield but lived to a ripe old age and so, for all we know, did the students who applauded him that day.

SS units wore the skulls-and-bones insignia both on their caps and on their rings, on their daggers and the buckle of their belts. Not only elite units but regular soldiers were expected to undertake missions from which the chances of return were small or nonexistent — for instance, those serving in the German submarine fleet after 1943. Generally speaking, this was true with regard to those on the Eastern front during the last year of the war. In later years, the question was often asked why German soldiers continued to fight when the military situation was altogether hopeless. The consensus reached by the historians was that fear of the Nazi security forces did play a role, as well as fear of the Russians and ideological indoctrination, but that esprit de corps — a feeling of solidarity with fellow soldiers — was probably the single most important motive.

This was, of course, not confined to the German army of the Third Reich; in the Soviet army, the legend of Alexander Matrosov became a shining example for self-sacrifice early on during the war. Matrosov threw himself in front of an enemy machine gun to give his comrades a chance to storm the German positions.

But the closest to contemporary suicide terrorists were the Japanese kamikaze pilots in 1944–45. (Kami is the Japanese word for various gods and spirits; kaze also refers to a divine figure, a savior in a desperate situation.) The decision to send pilots to crash-dive their planes on American ships was a counsel of despair, not a strategy with any hope for success, and some of the surviving kamikaze admitted in later years the futility of these operations. Several thousand junior officers and cadets volunteered for these missions; there was actually a waiting list of candidates. The attacks took place near Okinawa, in the South China Sea and in the direction of the Philippines and Australia; several dozen American ships were hit, but the campaign had no impact on the outcome of the war.22

Who were the volunteers and what motivated them? From the farewell letters of the suicide bombers, from interviews with survivors (who had been chosen but in view of technical failure or other reasons did not proceed with their missions), and from other sources, it is known that religion — in this case, Shinto — played a central part in the psychological decision to volunteer. In the first line of virtually every farewell letter, the emperor, who was considered a god, is invoked. But it was not traditional religion alone (some of the kamikaze were Christians) but the whole Japanese cultural and social tradition, the “Japanese ideology” of the Showa period (1926–45) with its extreme nationalism, its quasi-fascist elements, and its stress on unquestioning obedience to authority that shaped the mentality of these very young people, aged between seventeen and twenty-five. They all believed in the superiority of the Japanese way of life even though many felt the conflict between their patriotic duty in a holy war (“If I had seven lives I would gladly sacrifice them to smite the enemy,” one of them wrote) and their duty toward their parents who would miss them. They were equally convinced that there was an afterlife and that they would live on as spirits. The idea that courageous Japanese soldiers would be enshrined at Yasukuni, a site of veneration, may have played a certain role but apparently not a decisive one.

Some kamikaze felt happy that an opportunity had been given to them to die for all that was dear to them. With others the feeling of duty was predominant, and yet others seem to have been reluctant to undertake these futile missions but they were conditioned by their training well before they had joined the army not to question orders. They knew that the appeal for volunteers was a thinly veiled order.23 The evidence collected many years after the event is contradictory. A fair number of suicide candidates have reported that they were sad and weeping before their missions, that they had no illusions about the outcome of the war even though they had been told that the Americans and the British were devils. They agree that the most important factor was military discipline and peer pressure.24

The Readiness to Engage in Suicide Missions

There were suicide missions in postwar armed conflicts such as the war between Iraq and Iran (mainly on the part of young Iranian Islamic guards), in the Korean War, and a few also on the part of the Viet Cong. But these wars took place outside Europe and the Americas and in a postheroic era in which fighting often became a contest of technologies. It was gradually forgotten that in earlier ages, when war was as frequent as peace, the willingness to pay the ultimate price in war had been taken for granted.

A student of the Irish national movement has drawn attention to the tradition of folk heroes such as Cuchulain, the mythological chieftain who sacrificed his life to allow fellow warriors to escape capture and death — themes that were taken up by leading poets of the period such as Yeats. And a line could be drawn from Cuchulain to the Easter Rising of 1916, the crucial date in the history of Irish nationalism, a rebellion that was carried out without virtually any chance of success. The sacrificial motif can be traced even further on to 1981, when ten republican militants starved themselves to death in the Maze prison in Belfast.25
An even greater number of militants, some of them terrorists, starved themselves to death in Turkish prisons in 2001–2.

A tradition of suicide terrorism has existed in India and Southeast Asia (Malabar, Pondicherry, Atjeh, the Philippines) which goes back to the arrival of the Spanish and the Portuguese (and their missionaries). For all one knows some of the amok races described by contemporary observers in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India also occurred on a religious-political background.26

The readiness to engage in suicide missions would certainly not have been a source of astonishment to terrorists of a bygone age all over the world. In the rites of passage of many terrorist organizations, the members joining were asked to affirm on oath their readiness to give their lives when needed. It was implied that they had taken leave from life as understood by those around them.

In the pre-dynamite era, with the dagger and the pistol as the main weapons, the chances of terrorists not to get killed in the attempt (or to be apprehended and to be executed) were minimal. Even during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the making of bombs was such a risky business and the bombs produced so unstable that the chances of being blown up during or before the attempt were very high indeed. The danger of getting caught while on missions outside their country remained very high; when two members of the Israeli right-wing underground went to Cairo in 1944 to kill Lord Moyne, the British minister in charge of Middle Eastern affairs, there was no real hope to escape alive. The attack at Lod Airport by members of the Japanese Red Army in 1972 belongs to the same category, even though members of the group survived. Leading members of the Baader-Meinhof gang killed themselves in Stammheim prison using arms that had been smuggled into the building.

The more or less systematic use of suicide missions in our time — usually, but not always, by means of bombing — dates back to 1983. It was applied by a variety of groups primarily in the Middle East but also in Southeast Asia in the Balkans and elsewhere. It was used by a variety of groups Muslim (both Shi‘ite and Sunni), non-Muslim (Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish [such as Dr. Baruch Goldstein, who killed a group of praying Arabs in Bethlehem]) and also atheists (the Kurdish PKK, the Lebanese Communist Party, and the various Popular Fronts for the Liberation of Palestine).

The motives of the suicide bombers were complex. The confusion in the West was further aggravated as a result of the fact that attention was almost exclusively focused on certain groups in the Middle East, whereas others were ignored. Hundreds if not thousands of journalists wrote about the suicide bombers of the Palestinian Hamas, about whom there were countless interviews and articles and also academic studies, whereas the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka were virtually ignored.

Considering the small number of people involved (the Jaffna Tamil minority in Sri Lanka totals perhaps less than one million) there were proportionally many more suicide attacks in Sri Lanka than in the Middle East. However, the Jaffna Peninsula and nearby places were less familiar to a Western public than Jerusalem or Bethlehem. There was no concentration of the media in Sri Lanka, and it could always be argued that Sri Lankan terrorism was a domestic affair without international repercussions — which was however only partly true, as shown by the murder of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi by members of this group.27

Common to suicide bombers is the belief that they were warriors in a just struggle in the best tradition of their religion (or nation), that their group was cruelly oppressed, and that their sacrifice was not just desirable but imperative. Common also was the belief that the collective (the religion, the sect, the nation, the race) was infinitely more important than the individual. Their spiritual imperative was again that of Horace’s Dulce et decorum: that it was sweet and becoming to die for the fatherland, and to kill in the process as many of the enemy as possible. The feeling of racial or religious superiority and an eternal conflict between their race or religion and that of the enemy also played a role — among the SS, in Sri Lanka, as well as the Islamic terrorists. Common also was the belief not only that their memory would live on forever but that in choosing death they were opting for eternal life in one form or another. The promises varied with the nature of the religious-political character of the group to which they belonged.

Contemporary suicide terrorism began in Lebanon in April 1983 and in Sri Lanka in December of that year. The attacks in the Middle East were mainly directed against the United Nations. Forces stationed in Beirut (U.S. and French) were spectacular and eminently successful. Hundreds were killed in these attacks, which resulted in the evacuation of the foreign forces (except the Syrians) from the country. The U.S. embassy in Beirut was also attacked as were Israeli military installations. These activities were carried out by a little-known Shi‘ite organization named Hizbullah, which acted under Iranian sponsorship and with substantial material help from Teheran.

In the years that followed, more attacks took place in Lebanon. Altogether there were about sixty between 1983 and the present day, but they were on a relatively small scale. The most deadly ones took place in Argentina (1992 and again in 1994) and were directed against local Jewish institutions.

In the meantime, suicide missions were directed by other radical Islamic groups against Muslim leaders, against Emir al Sabah, the ruler of Kuwait (1985), against Anwar Sadat of Egypt (1981), and against Lebanese Prime Minister Bashir Gemayel (1982). It later appeared that the assassination of Sadat was to be part of a general insurrection in Egypt which, however, never materialized.28 Prominent Muslim personalities were killed in suicide attacks in Algeria and the former Yugoslavia as well as Egypt and Pakistan, as was General Ahmed Shah Masoud, the commander of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan (September 2001). The first suicide mission in Israel took place only in 1993, but before analyzing in greater detail this new strategy in the Arab and Muslim world, where initially it
was practiced only sporadically, we ought to deal with the other main theater of such missions: Sri Lanka, where for years suicide missions became more or less standard procedure.

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), the island south of the Indian subcontinent, has been ruled since independence by an elected, more or less democratic government in which the Sinhalese majority prevailed. Relations between the ethnic groups were less than cordial; the Tamil concentrated in the north of country felt oppressed and discriminated against. Whether this feeling was justified in reality is a separate question; the Sinhalese certainly argued that the Tamils got more than their fair share in every walk of life.

The Tamil fight for greater independence was at first political and nonviolent, but with the advent of a new, younger, and more militant generation, it turned to armed struggle. Race riots in 1983, in which allegedly some three thousand Tamils were killed, aggravated the situation. Many Tamils felt helpless, and the belief among the younger generation gained ground that only military action could restore their dignity and ultimately bring them independence.

This attitude led to the emergence of a number of activist groups consisting mainly of left-wing students of which the Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) became the most important by far, having eliminated their competitors, often by violent means. The LTTE was headed by Prabhakaran, who has remained its political and military leader from the beginning in 1975 to the present day. Prabhakaran’s personal position was absolutely central, comparable only to the position of the leaders of the dictatorships in Europe in the 1930s.

He led the LTTE from very modest beginnings, when it was a small gang engaging in robberies to acquire the means to conduct both guerrilla warfare and terrorism, to greater importance and glory when it could maintain a little flotilla of its own, both to attack the government forces and to maintain contact with the much larger Tamil community in South India. It also temporarily established “liberated zones” primarily on the Jaffna Peninsula. Support for the LTTE on the part of the 70 million Tamils in South India was limited, but there was a great deal of help on the part of the eight hundred thousand Tamils living abroad, in Canada, Australia, and elsewhere. Money was collected — according to some estimates, up to $150 million annually — to finance the armed struggle of the LTTE. During the two decades of terrorist and guerilla attacks, about sixty-five thousand citizens of Sri Lanka were killed (more than thirty-seven hundred in the year 2000). In between there have been armistices and negotiations but a decisive breakthrough toward peace came only in early 2002.

A search for the deeper causes of the conflict and its particular bitterness is not easy because there is a wide distance between facts and perception. The Tamil wish to establish a state of their own is based on historical claim, but there never was a Tamil kingdom in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese majority and the Tamil coexisted for many centuries more or less in peace. When the British withdrew, there was no claim for Tamil autonomy. The Tamil has been represented in the government administration over and above their percentage of the population. Under the British and in the decades after, Tamil had been appointed to key positions in every walk of life, such as the army, the police, and the Supreme Court, and they played a leading role in the cultural life of the country and the universities. Nor did religion play a central role, the Sinhalese being Buddhist, the Tamils predominantly Hindu. The Tamil separatist movement did not make an appeal to religious motives in its propaganda, partly, no doubt, in order not to alienate the 15 percent of Tamils who were Christian. To the extent that Hinduism was rooted among Tamils, it was an upper-class phenomenon, whereas the Tamil Tigers were based predominantly on the less wealthy sections (but not the poor) of the population. Tamil separatism, in other words, is secular, and its leadership is atheist. At the same time, the leaders have used a symbolism going back to ancient Tamil history — the tiger being the symbol of Murugan, one of the favorite Tamil gods. There is among the Tamils the concept of honor after death and the brave mother sacrificing the family for the sake of liberation. The idea of martyrdom and the cult of the martyrs (a “martyr’s week” is celebrated in November) also plays a central role in Tamil propaganda.

Given that they are not religious believers, how does one explain the religious fervor of the Tamil Tigers? Some have tried to account for it as a civic religion or as a hysterical mass cult. But all this does not satisfactorily explain the total alienation of the radical Tamils, the fanaticism and the persistence of their struggle. Measured by objective standards, the position of the Tamils in the country had been considerably better than that of most minorities elsewhere in Asia and Africa. Nevertheless the perception of being persecuted and tormented was very real and led to the outbreak of the violent struggle and its continuation over many years. Nor was there a historical propensity toward violence and in particular toward suicide missions.

Hinduism on the other hand has a strong element of nonviolence (ahimsa and satyagraha), even though Hindus have not always lived up to the prescription of their religion. Furthermore, the radicalization and the terrorism were by no means shared by all Tamils, above all not by the Tamils in the south of Sri Lanka and the Tamil intelligentsia. There had been a tradition of political radicalism in Ceylon with the south gravitating more to a lumpen Marxism (as the critics called it — Ceylon was perhaps the only country in the world with a sizeable Trotskyite party), whereas the inclination in the Tamil north was more toward chauvinism and racism bordering on fascist ideas (to quote the critics). But this radicalism had seldom manifested itself in systematic violent action prior to the 1970s.

Furthermore, the Sinhalese government, taught by bitter experience, has made several far-reaching offers of autonomy over the years to the Tamils, which have been rejected. Nor was the economic factor of any decisive importance. The statist economic policy (Sri Lanka is called a socialist republic to this day) led to
stagnation and unemployment. But young enterprising Tamils could have easily joined those of their countrymen and women who went looking for their fortune outside their country (as many did with much success) rather than engaging in suicide missions. In any case, social issues virtually never figured in their political program.

If so, there remains no other explanation than the antipathy between different national or religious groups in multinational societies, which for some unfathomable reasons seem to be even stronger on islands such as Ireland, Sri Lanka, or Cyprus. There is a deep-seated unwillingness to share a common country and the desire to have a state of their own at any price. The Sinhalese government did show insensitivity with regard to the minorities, for instance, as far as the language issue was concerned. The Sinhalese radicals thought that the English language was the root of all evil and wanted to replace it with their own language, and among the Tamils there was a similar reaction. There were fights among the communities and victims, but a feverish imagination was needed to believe (as their propaganda claimed) that the government and the Sinhalese majority aimed to exterminate the Tamil people.

Tamils - who did not lack monetary resources - had modern weapons such as SA 7 ground-to-air missiles; on frequent occasions they were better equipped than the forces opposing them. Thus they succeeded in making life so uncomfortable for the Indian peacekeeping force that the Indians withdrew their units after a few years. Generally speaking, the Tamils showed not only enormous persistence but also great inventiveness. While unlike the Palestinian resistance they had no neighboring countries sympathetic to their cause, providing supplies and a safe haven, their speedboats plying between India and Sri Lanka gave them the opportunity to carry weapons (and fighters and drugs) almost freely.

Suicide terrorism carried out by the Tamil Tigers was quite indiscriminate; it was certainly spectacular as far as the number of victims and the success of their missions were concerned. They assassinated not only an Indian president but also President Premadasa of Sri Lanka, and they killed or injured many government ministers, military commanders, and also Sinhalese (and occasionally Muslim) peasants and other citizens who had the misfortune of belonging to the wrong ethnic minority. The Tigers had a reputation of honesty and lack of corruption; at the same time, they murdered without compunction not only non-Tamils but also those among their own community who were considered rivals or insufficiently enthusiastic to their cause. Politically the impact of suicide terrorism was less impressive since it did not bring about a decision in the struggle. A variety of pressures induced the LITE to declare an armistice in February 2002: the general world situation in which there was little sympathy for terrorist groups, whatever their aims; declining financial support from Tamils abroad; and the opening of a new front with the Muslim inhabitants of northern Sri Lanka.

Among the Tigers engaging in suicide missions there was a fairly high percentage of women (about 30 percent), very much in contrast to Muslim suicide terrorism. The LTTE began the systematic indoctrination of its fighters at school level; fourteen-year-old cadres wrapped in explosives were used in many a mission. Very often they were given the honor of having a last meal with the leader of the Tigers on the eve of their mission. According to popular belief, they carried cyanide pills with them so as not to fall alive into the hand of the enemy. But this seems to be a legend, at least in part, for Tamil Tigers have been taken prisoners, and only some of them are known to have carried poison with them.

In the final analysis, the most important single factor in Tamil suicide terrorism could well be the personality of the leader — similar to the central role of Hitler and Mussolini in European fascism — and also the feeling of racial incompatibility between the two groups. It is certainly far more important than in most other terrorist groups. That the Tamils of India do not show the same propensity toward violence is certainly interesting. Their attitude toward the Tamil Tigers is similar to that of the Irish of Eire to the IRA of Northern Ireland: a vague sympathy but no solidarity with their terrorist campaign.

Other important features are the esprit de corps, the feeling of obligation not to let down the commander and the comrades-in-arms. Also of significance is the ancient cult of martyrs that the LTTE leadership has revived. This veneration takes various forms, such as ancestor rituals, special cemeteries (like those in Europe for the fallen in both world wars), and "hero stones." According to LTTE doctrine, the hero belongs to the collective, the public, not just his or her own next of kin. Mention has been made of the celebration of Great Heroes Week (November 21–27), which happens to be close to the birthday of Prabhakaran, the leader.

Thus the Tamil Tigers are in important respects a unique phenomenon. As far as their ruthlessness is concerned, they have been compared with Nazism and Pol Pot's movement in Cambodia.

History and cultural heritage are of limited help only in explaining the fanaticism and endurance of the LTTE. The central role of the leader resembles a cult in which the members blindly follow the leader. The content of his message is of importance but apparently less so than the free-floating thirst for action underlying it.

Suicide terrorism has occurred at all times, but at certain times far more often than others. The main scene in the 1980s was Sri Lanka and Lebanon, where the main perpetrators were Shi'ite groups. In later years, the scene of action shifted to Israel, Turkey, and the Indian subcontinent, as well as attacks against American targets in various parts of the world. Some sixteen groups have been identified as engaging in suicide terrorism. Such figures are bound to be imprecise,
Suicide

Following the spectacular attacks by Hamas and al Qa'ida, there were endless discussions among Muslims and outside students of Islam whether there was anything inherent in this religion conducive to suicide terrorism. A consensus holds that the Koran says that suicide is a sin, and that those who commit it will not enter paradise. But there is also general agreement that those fighting in defense of Islam are engaging in jihad — that is to say, holy war — that they are heroes acting in accordance with one of the most basic commandments of their religion: “Do not say that those who are killed in the cause of God are dead: for they are alive although you do not perceive that.” These are the same words we have encountered in ancient and medieval mythology, in German poetry of the last century, as well as in the poetry of other countries.

The martyrs are those who are killed in God's cause, and in God's cause alone — not in the name of king, nation, or for an ethnic cause, or for fame or glory. Jihad, like many other Islamic concepts, has been interpreted in various ways by different Muslim commentators. Does it mean war, or does it refer to a moral struggle in which the individual tries to overcome his or her base instincts, as the Sufi school claims?

In the most influential of Hadith collections (al Bukhari), there are 199 references to jihad and each assumes that it means warfare. However, medieval Islamic jurists weakened somewhat the original implications of jihad, which would have meant uninterrupted struggle against all non-Muslim societies and states up to the final, worldwide victory of Islam over the nonbelievers. They pointed to the fact that the prophet himself had established temporary truces with his enemies.

This moderate interpretation, however, was by no means accepted by all. The most prominent representative of an aggressive interpretation was Ibn Taimiyah (1268–1328), who maintained that jihad as warfare was an elementary duty of every Muslim and that those rulers who did not accept this principle had to be considered nonbelievers or apostates. His key text is from the Koran: “Prescribed for you is fighting though it be hateful to you” (Surah 2, 216). The Ibn Taimiyah tradition continued throughout the ages and with the emergence of radical Islamism became official ideology of an important segment of Muslim thought and politics. In an updated form it provides the doctrine of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s. The Ibn Taimiyah approach is based on the assumption that peace and politics. In an updated form it provides the doctrine of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s. The Ibn Taimiyah approach is based on the assumption that peace and politics. In an updated form it provides the doctrine of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s. The Ibn Taimiyah approach is based on the assumption that peace and politics. In an updated form it provides the doctrine of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s. The Ibn Taimiyah approach is based on the assumption that peace and politics. In an updated form it provides the doctrine of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s. The Ibn Taimiyah approach is based on the assumption that peace and
as is the idea that the martyrs do not experience any pain at the time of their death. All their sins are forgiven, and they have the privilege of intervening on behalf of members of their family or clan to enable them also to enter paradise. There are detailed descriptions of paradise — wonderful gardens, streams with clean water, and above it a jeweled dome of pearls and rubies extending roughly from Damascus to Southern Yemen. The martyrs will recline on thrones and eat and drink meat and fruit with happiness. Some seventy thousand servants will wait on the martyrs and seventy black-eyed women, all of them fair virgins, young and full-breasted with wide lovely eyes, will be at their call.

Suicide Terrorism — When and Where

Having briefly dealt with the geopolitics of suicide terrorism, the questions of the identity, the social background, and the motives of the perpetrators remain to be discussed. The most detailed breakdown in existence covers Israel. Altogether one hundred missions were undertaken up to July 2001 inside Israel and the occupied territories, which does not take into account the attacks carried out inside Lebanon during the occupation. Of these one hundred, thirty were launched during 2000–2001. Seventy-five terrorists were killed, twenty-five were intercepted before carrying out the attacks or captured because the explosives failed to detonate. (Between July 2001 and August 2002, ninety-eight suicide bombers went on their missions; thirty-five were intercepted or they failed to blow themselves up.) Two-thirds belonged to Hamas, one-third to Islamic Jihad. Later on, such missions were organized by other groups such as the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Two-thirds of the “martyrs” were under the age of twenty-three and there was hardly anyone over the age of thirty. The majority came from Gaza (54 percent), 45 percent from the West Bank and one (the oldest) was an Israeli Arab. Twenty-three percent had an elementary education; the rest were high school graduates or had a higher education. Eighty-six were bachelors and fourteen were married. Of the 605 victims of suicide bombers (through August 2002), about 75 percent were civilians, including citizens of countries other than Israel.

Virtually all suicide bombers came from large families with many brothers and sisters; Hamas and Islamic Jihad announced that they would not select single children to engage in suicide missions. Some parents expressed great pride following the death of their children; others said that they would have prevented them from engaging in a suicide mission and that they were not willing to sacrifice more of their children. The young women among them were all unmarried; one of them had been divorced by her husband because she was infertile.

According to a survey by the Israeli security services in July 2002, details of which have not been published, a significant percentage of Palestinian suicide bombers suffered from an advanced form of serious diseases, organic or mental. Because this report was not scheduled to be published, propagandistic intentions were unlikely to be involved. Judgment will have to be suspended as long as the statistical details are not available.
Islamic Jihad used, on the whole, younger bombers (aged seventeen or eighteen) who had received little training, and their attacks were frequently more primitive and caused fewer fatalities. As the fighting against the Israelis continued in 2002, more women were among those who went to blow themselves up, as well as children aged thirteen and fourteen. After the death in April 2002 of two suicide bombers aged thirteen (Ismail Abu Nada and Anwar Hamduna), the Hamas leadership in Gaza came out against the use of children in such missions. A family of the Palestinian Authority said that the media were indirectly responsible because they daily broadcast programs glorifying martyrdom. A member of a family of one of these very young suicide bombers said in an interview that the decision to blow himself up could not possibly have been his.43

A Palestinian feminist (Sumaya Farhat Nasser) said in an interview that the suicide bombings were part of general brutalization in Palestinian society manifesting itself in violence within families, aggressivity in schools, and mental disease. According to her evidence, half the children were hyperactive and could not sit still for more than ten minutes.44 On the other hand, interviews were published and documentaries shown in which mothers and fathers of the bombers expressed their total identification with their martyr-children, encouraging them and claiming that the day they killed themselves was the happiest day in their lives (Um Nidal about her son Muhammad).45

In comparison with the activities of the Palestinians, the (much fewer) international operations of al Qa'ida were planned a long time ahead, and those who took part in them came from a very different background. Some were Egyptians, some North Africans (mainly Algerians), but the majority came from Saudi Arabia. Their background was middle class or upper middle class; many came from professional families. The Saudis mainly originated from certain regions of the country which had made enormous progress within the last three decades. This region was well-off and had become a center of tourism for the rest of the country. In view of these facts, the participation of the southerners had nothing to do with poverty but with certain indirect consequences of urbanization. The intellectual development had not proceeded at the same rate as technical progress. Southerners were street-smart, God-fearing, and naïve people who tended to believe whatever the preachers told them, and certain preachers had used religion as a cover behind which to disseminate their venom. In brief, "they believe everything they are told. They listened more attentively than they should have done regardless of who stood in the preachers' pulpit."46

The majority of the Saudi suicide bombers had a higher education, but according to all the evidence their education was not exactly well rounded; it was almost exclusively technical. Their general knowledge was limited, and they were certainly not intellectuals in any meaningful sense of the word. Nor were many of the suicide bombers well versed in their own religion. They had frequently been to the mosque and said the ritual prayers, but how much they understood of Islam is another question. Mention has been made of the interesting fact that in one of the trials against Egyptian terrorist groups, offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, it emerged that the leader did not know a single verse from the Koran by heart and that this was by no means a unique case. In the farewell letter written by Muhammad Atta, the leader and coordinator of the group, to his comrades on the eve of September 11, there are not only elementary mistakes in Arabic, his native language (it might have been written in a hurry), but whenever he quotes the Koran (which he does frequently) he missed the obligatory invocation "the Almighty is right," which no pious Muslim would do.47 Thus, the religious education of the suicide bombers is limited on the whole to some elementary quotations and incantations they heard from their preachers.

All this does not perhaps come as a particular surprise because the al Qa'ida operations were carried out in foreign countries, and those chosen or volunteering for them had to have certain knowledge of the outside world. The ability to move freely in Europe and America without attracting too much attention was more important than a thorough religious education. Such knowledge of the modern world could not be acquired in Pakistani religious schools or Palestinian refugee camps. But the lack of a thorough knowledge of so many of them of their own religion still shed interesting light on their motivation.

Within the radical Muslim International, there were considerable differences between those who had grown up in the Middle East and others who were enlisted in Western Europe. Among the latter were recent converts to radical Islam, petty criminals, drug smugglers, and quite often unstable characters who were chosen for terrorist missions because they had been to British, French, or German schools, were street-wise, and had the required technical and linguistic faculties.

A typical example for those recruited in Western Europe was Nizar Trabelsi, a North African who emigrated to Belgium and had a disappointing career as a footballer in Germany. He drank heavily, was later arrested for drug dealing, served a prison term in Germany, and then drifted into the al Qa'ida orbit. For him, as for others, radical religion seems to have been a way out of a dead-end existence, giving him a set of beliefs and perhaps a little hope, and above all allowing him to become part of a group of like-minded comrades. At the same time it led him to a life of action rather than resignation. Another such character was Richard Reid, born in England to a West Indian father (who spent the better part of his life in prison) and a British mother. He smuggled explosives in his shoes on board of an aircraft and (unsuccessfully) tried to ignite them. He was a dropout at school, was arrested for a string of minor crimes, and was converted to Islam by a radical Muslim preacher who took care of the inmates of a prison for juvenile offenders outside London.48 Another al Qa'ida operator belongs to the same category; he tried to smuggle explosives from Canada to Seattle but was...
arrested owing to the watchfulness of a border guard near Vancouver. He too had a record of criminal offenses in Canada.

There are also the stories of the young Australian, enterprising but exceedingly moody, who became a drifter and ended up in Afghanistan; of a young Scotsman from a family of academics who dropped out at university, underwent psychiatric treatment, and also converted to Islam, ending up doing what he thought was his religious duty in Afghanistan. Another story concerns a boy from Marin County, California, a not atypical product of the ultra-permissive way of life of middle-class suburbia with all its confusions, who went to Afghanistan to be taken prisoner by his fellow countrymen. But these foreign volunteers joined the Taliban rather than al Qaeda, nor do the stories imply that most suicide bombers were drifters or mentally unstable and/or had a record of crime. Professor Ariel Merari, a Tel Aviv University psychologist who has studied the phenomenon of Palestinian suicide terrorism probably more closely than anyone else, noted on the basis of many interviews that he did not find a single psychotic among the candidates for terrorism suicide. But according to some evidence, a great many had a weak ego, were unstable and were looking for a spiritual anchor and a sense of certainties and community in a bewildering world.

Suicide bombing in its most recent form appeared first in Lebanon in 1982-83 and was carried out by members of Hizbullah and Jihad al Islami, Shi'ite organizations trained, financed, and equipped by the Iranians. Initially many observers gained the impression that suicide terrorism was somehow a specific Shi'ite characteristic. They saw the origins of this phenomenon in the particular virulent character of the Shi'a, the self-destructive and self-punishing elements (such as self-flagellation), in a movement which had received enormous fresh impetus as the result of the Khomeini revolution in Iran. As contemporary observers saw it, the Shi'ite suicide bombers were marching to their death as Husein, Muhammad's nephew, had done at the battle of Kerbela (632).

It should have been clear, however, at least from 1985 on, that suicide missions were by no means a Shi'ite monopoly; about half of the attacks in Lebanon were carried out by members of nationalist and left-wing organizations (including the Communist Party).49 The latter were less effective than the Hizbullah operations, partly perhaps because the latter were less well organized and prepared than Hizbullah, which had Iranian instructors and money. Women were among the secular suicide bombers in Lebanon, whereas it would have been unthinkable for a radical Islamic organization to send anyone but a young man on such missions.

The part of women among the Tamil Tigers' suicide bombers has been noted, and it was even higher among the PKK suicide bombers in the 1990s. The PKK was a Kurdish militant group established by several students of Marxist-Leninist persuasion who demanded freedom for Kurdistan. However, the nationalist-separatist inspiration was infinitely stronger than the Marxist impulse, which became less and less prominent over time. The role of the leader, Abdallah Ocalan, was preeminent (as it was among the Tamil Tigers), and it is significant that only one of the PKK suicide bombers had volunteered for the mission, while all others were selected.

Sixteen PKK suicide attacks altogether took place between 1994 and 1998, when the campaign petered out; there were eleven young women among the suicide bombers.50 Most of these attacks caused relatively little damage or loss of life, primarily because of insufficient training and technical preparation. However, in the present context it is not success or failure that count but above all the decision to opt for suicide missions and the motives underlying it. The high percentage of PKK women among the terrorists has been explained against the background of the lower social standing of women in Kurdish society, mainly in the countryside where most of the support of the PKK came from, and their suffering. But this is not wholly convincing because the status of women in Muslim society was even lower, whereas in Tamil society women did not suffer from discrimination, which did not, however, prevent their participation in the terrorist struggle.

There is no need to enumerate every terrorist movement which has engaged in suicide missions to find common features and differences among them. Suicide missions have been chosen as a strategy for a variety of reasons. They frequently cause many victims and attract greater media attention than other terrorist attacks. They generate fear, even panic among the victims. They are relatively easy to plan because no route of escape is needed, and once a suicide terrorist is on his way, it is difficult to stop him; even if he does not succeed reaching his target, he will still be able in most cases to inflict some damage on the enemy while being apprehended.

If terrorism in general has attracted attention out of proportion to its intrinsic political importance in view of its sudden and mysterious character, the fact that seemingly everybody anywhere could be a target of suicide terrorism has had an even greater psychological impact.

The suicide terrorist is only the last link in a chain. There is no spontaneous suicide terrorism. The candidates are chosen by those in charge in the organization. The suicide terrorists are indoctrinated and trained — receiving intelligence information to guide them — and eventually are given the arms and explosives to carry out their mission. The people who guide the suicide terrorists have their political agenda. They organize the missions not as a purposeless manifestation of despair but to attain a certain political aim. While the suicide terrorist may be unstoppable, those behind him are certainly not; they can be deterred by inflicting unacceptable damage on them. Thus the leadership of the Lebanese Hizbullah after years of suicide terrorism discontinued these operations realizing that they were no longer very effective. Among Palestinians too, support for suicide terrorism vacillated. During Intifada Two, such support was high, but it declined following Israeli military counterblows. Enthusiasm for suicide terrorism seems
to be confined to members of a certain generation. Once it is realized that the
martyrdom of these young people does not bring the desired goal any nearer, the
readiness to sacrifice one's life is bound to wane.

The motivation of the religious suicide terrorists is in many ways easier to
explain than the secular. The radical Muslim has been promised various rewards
such as life in paradise, his family will be taken care of, he knows he will not
really be dead but continue another and much richer existence in the future.
Support for the families of martyrs is an important consideration, as is the religious
obligation to repay one's debts prior to the suicide mission—hence the financial
help (amounting to about twenty-five thousand dollars) given to the families of
suicide bombers by Iran and Iraq, as well as other Arab countries and Muslim
foundations. In comparison, the families of those killed in open combat with the
Israelis were paid merely two thousand dollars. Saudi Arabia provides a trip to
Mecca for the members of the family of the suicide bomber, as well as other fringe
benefits, such as housing. If in Sri Lanka the candidates for suicide had their last
supper with the leader, there has been a thorough ritual in Lebanon and Palestine
for the suicide terrorist to be photographed on the eve of his scheduled mission,
to give his mission a solemn, quasi-religious character.

The secular suicide terrorist cannot have such expectations. But the differences
between religious and secular motivation could be less wide than often assumed,
for the underlying motives might be quite similar. There is the feeling of doing
one's duty (religious, patriotic, or a mixture of the two) and of hate of the enemy,
the infidel, the occupant. There are social and psychological pressures to engage
in suicide missions. The readiness to sacrifice one's life is generated through a
process of indoctrination—in orthodox religious schools or conspirational circles.
Religious or ideological indoctrination needs some rootedness in an objective
situation; the rage and the hate of the enemy have to be perceived as obvious.
But in some cases the personality of the leader is sufficient to play the decisive role
in committing acts that otherwise are incomprehensible, such as the collective
suicide of groups of sectarians (Jonestown).

An analysis of the cult of suicide terrorism in Sri Lanka, which is not at all
religious in character, shows far-reaching similarities with the Muslim cult. There
is, in the words of a close student of the LTTE, an elaborate symbolism of death
and resurrection and a sacrificial commitment to the nation, a demand for blind
faith, a mysticism of blood, and an intimate communion of brotherhood: "The
LTTE has divided the year into the veneration of martyrs on five fixed recurrent
occasions." The leadership of the Tamil Tigers claims to be "beyond religion," but in fact the concept of martyrdom is deeply religious even though (as a historian
of the LTTE says) they are not aware of it. It is a political movement with
religious sources and religious aspirations, and the same is true for the radical
Muslim groups in the Middle East. Common to both is the concept of absolute
obedience also mentioned in Muhammad Atta's last instructions to his comrades;
Namimura, a member of the Aum sect which carried out the attack on the Tokyo underground, told an interviewer that when he graduated from school he faced two alternatives: become a monk or commit suicide. He also said that the predictions of Nostradamus had a great influence on his generation. But it is not certain that this case was typical for many of his generation in Japan, let alone in other cultures and civilizations.

How does one account for the fact that, as in the cases of the Manhattan and Pentagon bombers, the indoctrination survived years of exposure to the temptations of Western civilization? We are dealing with a relatively small group, and it is not at all certain that, in the long run, the majority of those exposed to the temptations are not bound to be corrupted. As for the minority who will remain impervious, they physically live in Western society but their hearts and minds are still at home with the gurus of their formative years. In a very few cases, al Qa'ida members (such as the shoe bomber from London or a young Arab of Swedish nationality with a Finnish mother) were actually born in Europe; for them, the excitement of belonging to a conspiracy may have been the single most powerful motive.

The great majority has, however, come from the Middle East. They lived together even in London, Paris, and Hamburg; they prayed and spent most of their free time in a small circle of like-minded people. Far from being absorbed by the customs and manners of this civilization, they may feel pushed into the defensive, alienated by what is (or what they consider to be) the sinful way of life to which they are exposed. When Sayed Qutb, the ideologist of radical Islam, went to America in the late 1940s, a drunken woman allegedly tried to seduce him on ship. This incident played an important role in turning him decisively against the West. We have only Qutb's word for it, and it is known that he always had problems with the opposite sex, but as so often is the case, the perception counts; it is the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and the temptations of the flesh to which some Christian martyrs were exposed.

The psychology of the closed mind has not been studied so far very thoroughly. The fact that the suicide terrorist may have acquired a technical education in the West does not mean that he has understood (let alone shares) Western values. The indoctrination begins at a very early age; signs on the walls of Hamas kindergartens in the occupied territories in Palestine read "the children are the holy martyrs of tomorrow." According to Dr. Huda Zakaria, an Egyptian sociologist who has studied the suicide terrorist phenomenon, the terrorist group is different from the previous group (such as the family); it does not plant its values gradually through childhood and youth toward a constructive aim but prepares him for destruction and death: "The person who plants such ideas in the mind of him for destruction and death: "The person who plants such ideas in the mind of the terrorist motivated by religion or quasi-religious creeds. The subject is exceedingly difficult to investigate. Just as there are various terrorisms, the character and the motivation of suicide terrorists differ from country to country. Only very few of those who feel intensely motivated about politics or religion are willing to sacrifice their lives. In other words, while indoctrination is crucial, a psychological predisposition ought to exist too. But since the candidates for such missions are unlikely to submit to tests and discussions about their motives (of which, in any case, they may not be fully aware), the issue will remain to a large extent the subject of speculation.

The issue of indoctrination (or brainwashing) has figured prominently in connection with the activities of some of the new religious cults (and sects) in Europe and America. In several Western European countries, brainwashing has been made a crime, and much effort has been invested in finding effective ways of "deprogramming" those affected. The American Psychological Association has commented on mind control; the cults and sects affected have violently protested against any attempt to restrict what they consider freedom of religious practice. Some of these sects have induced their members to commit collective suicide. If it is possible to persuade hundreds of people to commit suicide, it stands to reason that it is possible with equal ease to make them engage in suicide terrorism.
Muslim terrorist groups, but also others engaging in suicide terrorism, have argued that indoctrination is of no importance, that jihad is a religious obligation, and that more volunteers apply for action than they can use for such missions. But the evidence shows that wherever suicide terrorism occurs, preachers (or nationalist propagandists) play a crucial role in creating a climate conducive to such action. As for the psychological disposition, it has emerged from interviews with suicide bombers who were caught or failed in their missions that, when asked for their motives, they repeated, usually verbatim, what they had been told by their spiritual teachers. Obviously, one would look in vain for critical spirits or independent thinkers among them.

Suicide terrorism has appeared incomprehensible to people living in secular societies in which, by and large, ideological passion was a spent force and fanaticism had become a phenomenon restricted to marginal groups. It seemed not only mysterious but also invincible, for how could anyone resist enemies willing to sacrifice their lives? Suicide terrorism can spread panic, at least momentarily, among the "enemy"; it can cause substantial financial damage to the enemy, as in the case of Israel.

It is also a useful tool in the battle for public opinion outside the country directly involved. With all this there has been a tendency to overrate the importance of suicide terrorism. It has been tried in a dozen countries and it has been discontinued in most — even by the Lebanese Hizbollah and the Tamil Tigers, who were the most prominent suicide bombers at the time. The economic damage caused has not been fatal; a handful of dishonest heads of corporations in the United States have caused more damage to the stock markets and the reputation of the capitalist system than all terrorists taken together.

As far as the frequency of suicide bombing is concerned, in recent years Israel has been the exception, partly because of the considerable number of those volunteering for suicide missions but mainly because of the mistakes of the Israeli governments: political mistakes such as the desire to hold on to all the territories occupied in 1967, tactical mistakes rooted in ideological obstinacy. Israel has the most effective and sophisticated technology to combat terrorism, but it has refused for a long time to apply it because of the unwillingness to give up territories or to divide Jerusalem. Walls and other physical obstacles are not a panacea; they cannot, for instance, prevent cross-border artillery duels as in Kashmir. But they are bound to reduce suicide missions to a large degree.

Suicide terrorism is asymmetric warfare par excellence: It knows no rules. The martyrs are permitted to use even the most devastating weapons, concentrating attacks against civilians, for they seem people driven to despair by lack of hope. The state, in contrast, is not permitted to retaliate effectively; it has to stick to rules and conventions. It is curious that there has been so much emphasis on the elements of despair and lack of hope among Western commentators; they probably played a role in some cases but not in many others. The young Saudis who hijacked the planes on September 11, to give but one example, were certainly not driven by lack of hope, and in any case those motivated by religious belief are certain to enter paradise upon blowing themselves up. In other words, they are full of hope, rather than despair.

As for the invincibility of the suicide bombers, we have it on the authority of Tertullian (A.D. 160–245) that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. But a Christian martyr in the early pacifist tradition is not really comparable to a believer in jihad, and seen in historical perspective, Islam expanded as the result of its military campaigns, not because of turning the other cheek.

Suicide terrorism is not a sporadic phenomenon. It needs not only people willing to become martyrs but also organizers and coordinators. This is where suicide terrorism is most vulnerable, and it is also doubtful whether there is an unlimited reservoir of candidates for such missions. Suicide terrorism has been a more effective weapon than other terrorist strategies, but only when those targeted have adopted the wrong political and military countermeasures.

Enthusiasm for martyrdom persists as long as there is a reasonable chance that it will lead to victory. Sacrifice must have a purpose. It can prevent reconciliation and even trigger a war. But what if, after years of such missions and hundreds of martyrs, the suicide bombers and their dispatchers feel no nearer to their target? Or what if the militants prevail in their campaign, as they did in the case of Algeria fighting France — and if the political system that emerges is the opposite of what the militants had hoped for? Prabhakaran, the chief guru of the Tamil Tigers, once remarked that his ethnic group would achieve independence in a hundred years in any case but that terrorism would shorten the process. With remarkable persistence and ingenuity, the Tamil Tigers engaged in a terrorist campaign which lasted almost twenty years and resulted in few achievements and a great deal of ruin. Among the Palestinians too, intellectuals began to ask questions in the summer of 2002 not so much about the morality of suicide bombing inside Israel but about its efficacy. The majority of the Palestinians still believed that it was their most effective weapon. But how to keep up the momentum in the long run? This is the dilemma bound to face campaigns of suicide bombing sooner or later.