

Julian Lewis reflects on Katharine C. Gorka & Patrick Sookhdeo (eds.): *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism*, Westminster Institute & Isaac Publishing, McLean, Virginia, 2012, 240 pp, £9.99 (ISBN 978-0985310905)

This volume of seven essays is not the first to draw parallels between the ideology of Al-Qaeda and previous totalitarian brands – nor will it probably be the last. It is, however, unusual in benefiting from the direct experience of authors such as John Lenczowski and Robert Reilly who were at the heart of the Reagan counter-offensive against Soviet Communist doctrine at the end of the Cold War. Both are convinced that a failure to tell the truth about the nature of the current enemy threat will fatally undermine our efforts to resist it.

Lenczowski reminds us of the shockwave which followed the President's first press conference in January 1981, when he stated that Soviet leaders had a different morality which reserved the right "to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat to further the goals of Communism". Such blunt language from the top was buttressed by the mobilisation of powerful means of communication asserting Western values, exposing disinformation and propaganda, and reconnecting the West with millions of people denied their human rights in the countries of the Eastern bloc.

It was not simply the methods of Communism to which the West objected, but its values and goals as well. Throughout the Reagan years – much to the irritation of CIA Director Bill Casey – his Agency's analysts argued that "the Soviets disapproved of terrorism ... and did not support ... nihilistic terrorist groups" such as the Baader-Meinhof gang. This suited the tendency to believe that the nature of the Soviet regime was ceasing to be dangerous. By contrast, the Reagan strategy

was based on the premise that the source of the conflict between the two powers was neither the existence of nuclear weapons ... nor economic rivalry, nor any other material factor. Such elements were not causes of the conflict; they were its symptoms. The Cold War, rather, was political in nature, and it would not end until its political causes were addressed.

Most of the authors identify a similar tendency today to distinguish between movements and governments which support and promote a repressive global ambition, and terrorist groups which adopt methods of extreme violence to bring it into being. As a former Director of Voice of America, Reilly believes that

the United States is suffering from the same kind of conflict within itself over the nature of the threat that it is facing, that it suffered from during the Cold War. There exists the same reluctance to name things for what they are and therefore to do the things that are necessary.

## THE NATURE OF THE THREAT

In order to defeat an enemy, writes Sebastian Gorka, Director of the Homeland Defense Fellowship Program at the US National Defense University, it is essential to understand his threat doctrine which explains why he behaves as he does. Unfortunately,

it is now not politically correct to discuss this new enemy's threat doctrine since religion is a taboo subject within US government and especially within the national security apparatus of the United States. So much so that the official description for the enemy we face today is the nebulous "violent extremism". This is despite the fact that ... our enemies see themselves as holy warriors, recruiting their followers in mosques and quoting the Qur'an to justify their murderous acts.

Far from being a ridiculous concept, the aim of creating a global Caliphate is seen as a continuation of historic incarnations of Islamic empires. These came to an end only when Ataturk dissolved the Ottoman Empire and created the Republic of Turkey as a secular state. The notion that such change could be reversed gained momentum from the Iranian revolution, the ousting of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and the concessions made to extremist clerics by the Saudi King after the seizure by jihadists of the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

The ideology which confronts the West is one of global supremacy through religious war. Of course, it is highly improbable that any objective of worldwide domination can ever be achieved. Yet, as past ambitions of this sort have demonstrated – and as the so-called Arab Spring may be demonstrating now – it has frequently proven possible to build extensive empires on the basis of such visionary aims. It is because of the centrality of this concept in the thinking of Islamists, that the authors subscribe to the term "Global Jihadism" to define the threat.

This leads them to a controversial conclusion: that it is not enough merely to focus on those

Islamists who use extreme violence to destabilise democratic states and authoritarian regimes. Bodies like AQ are just the tip of an Islamist iceberg. Below the surface is the greater and more prevalent strategic threat – the Muslim Brotherhood which is, even now, making immense strategic gains. For this reason, the narrow focus of the West on terrorist groups, independently of the ideology which motivates them, is heavily criticised.

### "VIOLENT EXTREMISM"

Imagine that a series of major terrorist incidents occurred in half-a-dozen different countries. Let us suppose that, in each case under investigation, it was found that all the victims targeted belonged to ethnic minorities and all the perpetrators were affiliated to a terrorist organisation modelled on the Ku-Klux-Klan. Would we then be satisfied with a decision to define the threat as one of "violent extremism", making no reference in that definition to the concepts of racialism and white supremacy? Almost certainly not – even though the ideology at work clearly was extremist and the methods employed clearly were violent. This, in a nutshell, is the objection of the authors to the way in which the West characterises the AQ threat.

Why does the West take this view? As we have seen, the authors mainly ascribe it to "political correctness"; but there is a more substantial explanation. It is the fear that by referring to Islam in any way in connection to AQ activities, we will somehow legitimise the role of AQ and its imitators as the vanguard of the entire Islamic community.

Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, Visiting Professor at the UK Defence Academy, suggests that the effort to divorce terrorism from Islam has gradually led to the removal of practically any mention of the religious aspect of what AQ is all about:

While The 9/11 Commission Report, released in July 2004, used the word Islam 322 times, Muslim 145 times, jihad 126 times, and jihadist 32 times, The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States, issued in August 2009, used the term Islam 0 times, Muslim 0 times, jihad 0 times.

These striking statistics bring to mind a meeting I had several years ago with a Foreign Office counter-terrorism expert. Drawing on the commonsense assumption that most people in most communities tend to be moderates rather than extremists, I suggested that a major effort was

necessary to divide the two. His reply was revealing: "It is true that there is an important division between moderates and extremists, but there is another important division between those who hold extreme views without resorting to violence and those extremists who do". Non-violent extremists could therefore be helpful in isolating and neutralising the violent ones.

The problem with this approach was – and is – that it does nothing to tackle the destructive ideology that gives rise to violent extremists in the first place. By cosyng-up to non-violent extremists in order to frustrate individual terrorist plots, we focus on the symptoms whilst neglecting the cause. Indeed, by accepting Islamists as our intermediaries with Muslim communities, we dishearten and discourage the "silent majorities" of moderates within those communities.

### "STATELESS" TERRORISM

Not only is it wrong and dangerous to divorce AQ and its imitators from the ideology of global revolution which gives rise to them, it is a serious mistake to regard them as operating without state sponsorship. Just as Bill Casey was right about Soviet support for Marxist terrorists – most of whom faded away after the collapse of the Communist bloc – so the history of AQ demonstrates its dependence on a succession of regimes including Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Such dependency is important because, even though AQ fanatics may well be undeterrable, the states which sponsor them can be deterred from doing so if they are correctly identified and openly challenged.

In July 2010, David Cameron memorably warned that Pakistan should not be allowed "to look both ways" and "promote the export of terror". This statement was widely regarded as a diplomatic blunder – not least because it was made in India. Yet, its substance was absolutely right. The authors set out a long catalogue of double-dealing by elements of the Pakistani state to the detriment of the democratic cause and the advantage of militant Islamism. "When we speak of jihadist nation-states," writes Thomas Joscelyn, editor of *The Long War Journal*:

it does not mean that the entire government of that nation sponsors terrorism. Typically, it is the military and intelligence establishment of the jihadist states that sponsors terrorists ... Al-Qaeda itself grew out of Saudi and Pakistani cooperation against the Soviets ... After the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Pakistanis, with cash from the Saudis, created the Taliban – which, in time, became Al-Qaeda's most important ally. Everywhere the Saudis have founded mosques and spread wahhabism, the Saudi state's jihadist religion, extremism and terrorism have followed.

Al-Qaeda has benefited from this largesse despite its animosity for the Saudi royals.

Given that bin Laden was eventually discovered to be hiding in premises close to Pakistan's equivalent to West Point, a degree of shamefacedness might have been expected from the authorities. Not a bit of it: instead, the elimination of the world's most wanted terrorist on their soil was greeted with howls of outrage and a vindictively long prison sentence for a Pakistani doctor found guilty of assisting the Americans.

In the light of all this, it comes as less of a surprise that Dr Gorka of the US National Defense University (whose views are described as not representing US Government policy) identifies a Pakistani brigadier as the one writer whom everyone should read in order "to understand the enemy". S K Malik's 1979 book, *The Quranic Concept of Power*, is described as a theological strategy of war for Islam. Gorka's précis of Malik highlights three key propositions:

- \* that the sole purpose of war is the "realization of Allah's sovereignty on this earth";
- \* that the only centre-of-gravity in warfare is the soul or faith system of the enemy, which must be crushed;
- \* that the best weapon with which to do this is terror.

The foreword to that book was by a senior Law Officer in the Pakistani government, while the then head of the Pakistan Armed Forces – later the President – General Zia ul-Haq wrote its introduction. Instead of recognising the real basis of enemy strategy, Gorka concludes, we simplistically attribute irrationality to Islamist terrorists; and we disregard their motivation by labelling them merely as violent extremists.

## THE "AUTHENTICITY" OF ISLAMISM

Yet, in one crucial area, a caveat must be entered. It is true that our approach to AQ – and also to movements like the Muslim Brotherhood – should be based on an understanding of their revolutionary jihadist objectives. But we must not legitimise those objectives as the logical consequences of the Islamic religion itself. Nothing would satisfy the ghost of bin Laden more than to see his Western foes branding all Muslims with the values and beliefs he adopted.

In an essay written for RUSI in 2007, I suggested that it is counterproductive to describe our adversaries as "Muslim fundamentalists", or even as "Islamists", because such descriptions

"define them by the faith they claim to serve and position them prominently in its vanguard". Nor was it helpful to describe our response to their attacks as a "War on Terror", given that terrorism is a technique – not a doctrine or a cause. (So far as I recall, the similarly vacuous "violent extremists" label was not then yet in vogue.) It seemed that the characterisation which would be least welcome to the militants would be that of "un-Islamic extremists". This would indicate both the nature of their cause and the viciousness of their methods.

Two objections have been raised to this approach. The first is that no statement made by anyone who is not a Muslim about what is or is not Islamic, will have credibility in the Muslim community. Given that so many members of Muslim communities do not choose to interpret their own religion in extreme terms, however, it may be that they are rather more receptive to well-argued interpretations of their faith – irrespective of who presents them – than is sometimes assumed. If, indeed, moderate Muslims wish to stand their ground against the inroads of extremism, it would be entirely reasonable for them to welcome intellectual reinforcement based on sound and honest scholarship.

Dr Sookhdeo accepts that Western politicians "are understandably afraid of offending moderate Muslims or seeming to imply that Islam is a violent religion". No doubt this explains why they use terminology designed to obscure the fact that they are, as he states, "engaged in a long-term ideological struggle based on religious dogma, which has affinities to the ideological wars against Fascism, Nazism and Communism". At one point he concedes that the Obama Administration might have a good reason for challenging the authenticity of AQ in terms of the Muslim religion: "defining Al-Qaeda as un-Islamic, or as a distortion of Islam," could be "a commendable act of psychological warfare, one with strong potential for delegitimizing the enemy and disillusioning possible recruits". Despite this potential "strategic advantage", he later states that, because they emphasise specific texts and offer "literalist interpretations" of Muslim theological sources, "Islamists and Islamist theorists ... cannot be undermined with the simple claim that what they are doing is un-Islamic".

That is, in my view, an unnecessary concession to the extremists. Just because there may be "a strand of radicalism and violence inherent in much of traditional Muslim theology", this should not prevent moderates emphasising the legitimacy of alternative interpretations. In centuries gone by, Christian fundamentalists did not hesitate to inflict cruelties on those with whom they had theological disagreements. No doubt, they too cited textual justification for their ruthless behaviour. That did not, however, make them authentically Christian and, over time, a more humane version of Christianity prevailed. There is no reason why a similar process should not apply to the Muslim faith.

AQ and other Islamists do not hesitate to denounce moderate Muslims as un-Islamic. Why should not their opponents give them a taste of their own medicine? As Dr Sookhdeo acknowledges, several conferences have been organised by traditional Muslims condemning extremism "as un-Islamic and contrary to sharia law", and he quotes with approval King Abdullah II of Jordan as being "a staunch supporter of these efforts". His own solution is to argue that "aggressive texts in the sources" should be set in context and that Muslim reformists should explain why "some sources and models are not applicable to the modern world".

This is to take a purist, theological approach too far. As all the authors acknowledge, we are in the midst of a deadly ideological confrontation. The extremists exert great leverage by claiming that their interpretation is the only authentic path. Their moderate rivals should not hesitate to do the same. In an elegant comparative study of Islamist extremism and earlier forms of totalitarianism, Stephen Ulph of the Jamestown Foundation rightly notes that:

"If authority depends on authenticity as understood by the Salafist precedent, it spells out immunity to alternative streams of Islamic thought ... For without any challenge being mounted to this authenticity the jihadists can retain an unassailable resilience."

His preferred solution is to publicise the many points of similarity between the ideology of the Islamists and the "man-made, infidel political ideologies of the 20th century" – quoting Sheikh Maududi's explicit admission that a sharia-ruled state "cannot restrict the scope of its activities, its approach is universal and all-embracing ... In such a state ... no one could regard any field of his affairs as personal and private. Considered from this aspect, the Islamic state bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states."

By demonstrating that most of the core features of Islamist extremism are typical of other forms of totalitarian doctrine, Ulph hopes to spark a debate between Muslim theologians which will help deprive extremist interpretations of their uniqueness and, therefore, of their authority. Nevertheless, his subtle approach does presuppose a degree of open-mindedness and intellectual integrity which may prove difficult to discern.

### A COORDINATED COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

When the Foreign Office realised in early 1946 that its hopes for post-war friendship with Soviet

Russia were futile, the Head of the Northern Department, Christopher Warner, wrote a seminal memorandum entitled "The Soviet Campaign against this Country and our Response to It". It recognised that the Soviet Union "proposes to play an aggressive political role"; it warned that "we should be very unwise not to take the Russians at their word"; and it set in train a plan to "organise and coordinate our defences" against the Soviet use of "military, economic, propaganda and political weapons, and also of the Communist 'religion' ". This led to the initiation of a "defensive-offensive policy", involving the creation of the Information Research Department as an effective method of countering Communist ideology.

In America, this role was performed by the US International Communication Agency, later renamed the US Information Agency. As an old USIA hand, Bob Reilly is well-placed to deplore the fact that "the principal institution for the conduct of our side in any war of ideas, was eliminated" by President Clinton in 1999. Its last Director had stated: "I am not sure we should be broadcasting to the world. We should be listening to the world". Fighting the Ideological War is a profoundly important compilation of expert views. Its authors include those who fought and won past doctrinal battles and who wish to apply the lessons to the present. It demonstrates the short-sightedness of tackling terrorism in isolation from its ideological roots. The West managed to discredit Communist doctrine whilst deterring the Soviet military threat. We must contain the threat from Global Jihadists, but we must undermine their ideology as well.

This review first appeared in RUSI Journal December 2012 - reproduced by kind permission of the author

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