

Terrorism and Humanity: What We Are Fighting For, and What We Are Fighting Against

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In a recent forum on terrorism in New York, entitled “Fighting Terrorism for Humanity,” Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel startled the participants by posing the question: “Can terrorism be fought *with* humanity?” At first blush, the intellectual gauntlet thrown down by the sagacious gentleman of peace seems almost too dreamy, fit only for an impractical peacenik. It runs contrary to the often repeated promises of “rooting out,” “smoking out,” or “hunting down” the terrorists. Quick and decisive retaliatory actions seem to be the only solution for the scourge of our times.

Yet when we don’t allow our rage to overwhelm reason, we realize the wisdom of Mr. Wiesel’s challenge. Despite its daily use, “terrorism” has remained largely an undefined term reflecting the deep ambivalence in the international community. This ambivalence is amply demonstrated in the fact that at least three recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize have been accused of being terrorists.

As we mourn our mounting losses since the dreadful days of September 11, 2001, we must realize that what we are fighting is not so much an individual, such as Osama bin Laden or even a group, like Al-Qaeda or the Talibans; what we are fighting in the global arena is an idea. Ideas, not simply a litany of grievances alone, have moved people throughout history. The Minute Men, the volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, the

Communist sympathizers in support of Che Guevara, and even the Freedom Riders have all been moved by the strength of ideas. Some ideas have advanced what we generally uphold as humanity, others have caused pain and misery. In the early 20th century, the ideals of emerging nationalism -- primarily in Europe -- produced terrorism. In the 1940's and 1950's revolt against colonial rule caused terrorism in Asia and Africa. In the 1960s and 70s, the revolutionary ideals of communism as well as Arab nationalism spawned global terrorism.

Today we face the menace of an idea that holds out promises of Islamic paradise on earth to many, who have had little to rejoice and are besieged by an overwhelming feeling of losing out. The once proud Islamic nation that stretched from one end of the known world to the other, is now reduced to a number of countries, most of which are wracked by poverty, injustice, and an overarching feeling of desperation. Although aspects of economic are only peripherally linked to terrorism, they supply the essential foundation on which leaders can build their edifice of hate. It is not just economic poverty that gives rise to terrorism; it is the poverty of opportunity, political freedom, and a global outlook, which manifest themselves into acts of extreme violence. It is the poverty of basic human dignity that shapes the mindset of those who would consider the only way of affirming their own lives by ending them with a spectacular show of violence and destruction.

When hate threatens our lives and the roots of our civilization, we fight back, not just against the leaders or their organizations, but against the ideas they espouse. In our battle, we wage war not against the entire Islamic world, but the idea that a particular brand of Islam should rule the world.

The most insidious aspect of the spread of ideologies of the extreme is that in every case, the extremist groups were initially promoted by people in power for political or strategic reasons. Successive US administrations helped the Taliban and the current leaders of the Al-Qaeda movement to fight the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan; Indira Gandhi saw the Sikh extremists as instruments of her political ambition; her son Rajiv Gandhi initially supported the separatist Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka. Despite its Islamic extremist roots, in the 1970s Israeli government promoted groups, such as *al -Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, which later became the Hamas, as a counter-weight to the PLO. In each case, the monster turned against Dr. Frankenstein; Indira Gandhi was assassinated by the Sikh extremists, Rajiv Gandhi by the Tamil Tigers, Hamas has been the single most potent source of death and destruction in Israel, and the veterans of the Afghan war are the biggest adversaries of the United States.

The worldwide rise of Islamic extremism can be directly linked to its patronage by the Saudi government. The Saudi authorities thought that they would be able to buy off the extremists, who would leave them alone and, instead, would spread their venom to other parts of the world. Alas, the primary targets of the Islamic extremists also include the desert kingdom. Similarly, other Islamic nations, most notably Pakistan, Egypt, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Indonesia, have either actively supported the Islamic extremists or have tried to ignore their nefarious activities. Their support has only undermined their own political stability.

How should this war of ideas be fought? We can fight against a tyrannical regime with our military might, but how do we win over those who hate us more than they love their own lives? The policy that confirms the worst about us to our adversaries only adds fuel

to their fire of hatred. Every military action that kills innocent bystanders, regardless of the nobility of the intention, gives birth to many more suicide bombers. Western civilization is rooted in the concept of rule of law. We cannot win over those who violate the law by breaking the law ourselves. Any act that violates the basic principles on which our civilization is based ultimately debases us. Any move that weakens the global consensus isolates us, particularly when the problem should be addressed globally. This does not mean that we should coddle those who attack us. We should take every action to defeat them, militarily, politically, and most importantly, ideologically.

Since the problem is of global importance, we must be steadfast in our opposition to the leaders of countries whom we support in their effort at mixing religion and politics. We must impress upon leaders whose people are chafing under intolerable poverty that economic development cannot take place in countries where women and minorities are not granted equal status. We must make clear to the political elite of these countries the danger of sending the children of the poor to schools that do not prepare them for the modern world while sending their own to schools in the western nations. We must tighten international banking laws to deny terrorist organizations their source of funding. Also, any armed rebellion is ultimately rooted in perceived injustice; no mass movement can be stopped without addressing its legitimate grievances.

Fighting terrorism is a long-term proposition and we must be prepared for the long haul. Eli Wiesel is right, terrorism can only be fought with humanity. It is important to know what we are fighting against, but it is even more important to know what we are fighting for.