How We Misunderstand the Sources of Religious Violence

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December 19, 2016

E-Notes

Adam Garfinkle

Adam Garfinkle is a Robert A. Fox Fellow in the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Program on the Middle East. He is founding editor of The American Interest. Read More

This essay is adapted from the 20th Annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs delivered on November 29, 2016, at the National Liberty Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This text is an amended version of the oral presentation, which was delivered sans text.

It is an honor to have been invited to present the twentieth Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs, and that is for two reasons: to stand with the list of luminaries who have preceded me and to have the opportunity to participate in one man's visionary generosity. The late John Templeton has managed to do through this lecture series what few ever achieve: a way to continue to make the world a better place even after we have left it.

That said, the title handed over to me is a daunting one because it pulls in its train an array of aspects that even taken separately, let alone together, are complex, capacious, and highly charged emotionally. The typical corrosive effects of emotion on analytical precision inclines to conflation, to the shoving together of subjects better understood through distinctions. And that is indeed the problem we face this evening.

In these days and in this country, when most people hear the phrase "sources of religious violence," they tend to conflate religious violence with terrorism, tend to assume that the principal source of that violence is "religious" in nature, and tend to focus their attention on violence perpetrated in the name of Islam. These conflations are unfortunate.

Terrorism is but one form of religious violence; sectarian conflict between subsets or sects of a religion, which

usually account for the majority of the corpses, is religious violence, but it is not necessarily or usually limited by way of tactics to terrorism.

And not all political violence and terrorism has been or is today motivated by religion. It is no simple matter to distinguish the religious sources of political violence (and terrorism) from a range of other plausible sources: ideology (similar in some ways to religion but not the same); ethno-nationalism; perceived threats to corporate social identity; mass social-psychological dislocation; or, typically, some hard-to-unscramble combination of these and other motivational ingredients. Just because perpetrators themselves or victims, let alone remote bystanders, assert that religion is the source of an act of violence does not make it so.

Most putatively religious violence today is said to come from self-avowed Muslims, and that is empirically true; but it has not been true in even the relatively recent past as historians reckon it, and it need not be true in the future. Islam has no monopoly among religious institutions on the violence franchise.

So from all three assumed directions, the conflation implied to many by this lecture's title melts away—as well it should for it is the cause of much confusion and no little policy malpractice. In its place, we need some serviceable distinctions, and we may come by them in the usual way—via some useful definitions. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once noted:

> *Although it is notorious that definitions establish nothing, in themselves they do, if they are carefully enough constructed, provide a useful orientation, or reorientation of thought, such that an extended unpacking of them can be an effective way of developing and controlling a novel line of inquiry.*

Geertz's description of what definitions can achieve is well taken. They can be, when properly constructed and unpacked, a superb antidote to misleading conflations even if not always to intellectual novelty. For our needs this evening, we do not require novelty, only that we recall Orwell from 1939: "We have now sunk to such a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men."

Terrorism Defined

We need two definitions in particular: one of "terrorism," briefly and one of "religious" at somewhat greater length. Let us take them in that order.

We have had for some time now a perfectly good—logical, sharp, and objective—definition of terrorism. Both the State Department and the United Nations share it with most other governments and with the vast majority of academic specialists who troll the topic. To paraphrase, it is this: The use of deadly violence by non-state actors against random civilians in order instill fear in a population for the purpose of seizing media attention and provoking government authorities to react in ways counterproductive to their own values.[1]

Observers may quibble over the relative weight given in any particular incident to the operative parts of this definition, and some observers argue, too, that states as well as non-state actors may also perpetrate terrorism against their own (see Syria) and other people. Some states have and still do such things, true, but it constitutes a separate phenomenon since no state authority deliberately acts to undermine its own interests and values. So the basic definition stands, which is why when Americans describe the attack on the *USS Cole* in Aden Harbor in 2000, or before that on the U.S. Marine and French Marine barracks near the airport in Lebanon in October 1983, as acts of terrorism—which they are wont to do—they are way off the mark. Attacks against uniformed soldiers on foreign territory in no way conform to the standard and widely accepted definition of terrorism.

It doesn't mean these were innocent, justified, or nice sorts of behavior; guerrilla war tactics, which is what they both were, can be gruesome and loathsome in the extreme. But they are not acts of terrorism, and the lazy conflation

which holds that they are is not harmless. When some apologist for terrorism tells us with an upward flip of the wrist that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” we want to be able to refute that form of permissive relativism. But if we allow the definition of terrorism, as *we* use it, to become so elastic that it can mean almost anything, we thus provide a license for such nefarious relativism to come at us from directions we do not appreciate. If we want to promote the norm that terrorism is never a justified means of pursuing political objectives, as well we should, then we must exercise strict discipline over the language we use to describe it.

What is Religious Violence?

As for a definition of what is religious, that is a taller order. Just what is “religious violence”? Or, put a bit more usefully, what is it about a given act of violence, or class of violent acts, that makes it “religious”? Put still more usefully, perhaps, how do we distinguish the motivational sources of individual behavior, *when that behavior occurs in a group context*, when some of those sources may be socially embedded in a religious context but others not?

This latter question is of course generally relevant to all facets of social psychology, not just to violent or terroristic behavior. The professional and academic literature on this general subject is vast, running all the way from Solomon Asch’s famous conformity experiments of the 1950s through Irving Janis’s equally famous analysis of “groupthink” in the 1970s, and well beyond to other famous and not-so-famous research efforts up until the present time. What all of the literature either stresses or takes for granted (depending mainly on when it was written) is that individual motives are indeed socially embedded. In other words, neither an individual’s thoughts nor the acts that flow from thoughts exist in a solipsistic vacuum. They are entwined in a matrix of experience and expectations with other people, and that is true even for “lone wolf” incidents of terrorism in which the relevant social matrix may be remote, via the internet, as was the case with the Pakistani-born couple who perpetrated the San Bernardino shootings.

What this means is that individuals who commit acts of political violence (and terrorism) may do so as representatives of religious groups committed to violence, such as al-Qaeda, Daesh, Jemmah al-Islamiyah, and others, yet whose own private motives—the conscious ones as well as the substrata of other murkier motives—may be all over the proverbial block. Extremists often do what they do out of group solidarity, in a quest to be a part of something larger than themselves—and it doesn’t matter what glue makes the group cohere. The same went for the Baader-Meinhof group as goes now for al-Qaeda cells. The only relevant general difference, perhaps, is that in the Middle East the dominance of individual agency is generally far weaker than it is in Western societies, so such groups may form more easily.

In the Middle East, too, this yearning often has to do with the pull of a specific social structure. It is no coincidence that in the sectarian strife currently ripping apart several Arab societies, groups of fighters tend to be related—siblings, cousins, and so on, connected closely or less closely to each other through the segmentary lineages of their tribes. Tribal ties can and often do trump sectarian ties. Indeed, it is very difficult in many Middle Eastern contexts to separate the social structure of tribalism, which predates Islam, from the religious legitimation of tribal forms that came afterwards. So some people who claim to be fighting for religious reasons may instead be fighting in the social matrix of collective guilt and collective responsibility central to tribal identity and order, and some who claim to be fighting for their tribe may instead be inspired by religious metaphors, if not actual religious law. If they are not sure, how can we be?

Some do what they do so that their families will be honored to have given birth to a martyr, an understanding nested in a religious narrative but that is not a positive obligation of Islamic law, as the vast majority of authorities understand it.[2] But they do it, often enough, so that surviving family members will be paid money or otherwise be materially supported as a result of the martyr’s deed. This has been common among Palestinian radicalism directed against Israelis and Jews for decades. How can one reliably tell after the fact which motive is dominant? One cannot; the nest of interlocking motives in an extended family is inscrutable from the outside, and often enough even from the inside. In other words, “martyrs” may blow themselves up in the hope of murdering innocent bystanders for any number of reasons that have nothing do to with their following a religious injunction, and yet because the

organization to which they belong is a “religious” one—Hizbollah or Hamas, say—many observers assume that this in and of itself makes the violence “religious.” It doesn’t.

What about when the perpetrators of violence themselves claim, in the thrall of the violent act itself, that they are religiously in motivation? They might be, but then again how do we know—because how do *they* know—that they are not really motivated instead by the aforementioned ethno-nationalism, which in many cultures is hard to separate from the religious civilization that abides beneath it? That is a relevant question, for example, about Hamas members. They claim to be religiously motivated, but unlike radical organizations like al-Qaeda that reject nationalism in principle, Hamas is an explicitly Palestinian organization. Any Muslim might join al-Qaeda or Daesh, but no non-Palestinian is likely to join Hamas. So who can really say what the balance is in given individuals between ethno-nationalist and strictly religious motives?

Can Ritually Irreligious People Perpetrate Religious Violence?

In truth, the matter is even more convoluted than that. As we will discuss in a moment, a goodly number of those whom we call religious extremists think they are defending “Islam” from a conspiracy mounted in the West—with either a little or a lot of help and direction from Zionists, depending on the variety of the conspiracy theory d’jour—to destroy Islam. But what exactly do they mean by Islam? Do they mean a religion as we understand it? That’s unlikely since there is no word in Arabic that precisely means “religion” as we understand it in the West. The word *din* is sometimes translated as religion, but it actually means law and can mean faith or even truth, depending on context. Do they mean an ecclesiastical hierarchy, which is to say an institution? Sunni Islam lacks ecclesiastical hierarchies comparable to those in Western Christian history. Do they mean a theology, a set of ideas about God? Or do they mean a corporate identity expressed in the mode of a religious civilization that subsumes a mash-up of pretty much all of the above? Hint: the latter is the correct answer most of the time.

That helps to explain why, as it turns out, very few homicide/suicide bombers write notes or express last wishes that refer explicitly to religious texts or religious law. Very few of them have madrassa level educations, and very few know much about Islamic law or the origins and deeper meaning of Islamic customs. Some, especially those living outside Muslim-majority societies, do not lead remotely pious lives. The perpetrators of the Paris bombings of November 13, 2015, residents of the Molenbeek section of Brussels, were known to have hung out in bars, hired prostitutes, and used drugs. Can ritually irreligious people like that perpetrate what it is reasonable to call “religious” violence? If religion is defined very broadly to encompass a civilizational identity, then “yes.” But that broad a definition loses in explanatory precision what it may gain in inclusivity.

Clearly, then, defining “religious violence” is no simple matter. Human behavior is motivated by various layers of need and purposefulness, some rational by general measure and some perhaps not, some conscious and many clearly not. Even getting someone on the couch does not guarantee that a trained psychologist or psychiatrist can get to the bottom of the motivational reservoir beneath any given act of violence, and, in the case of “martyrs,” putting a bloody corpse on a couch will accomplish nothing, except to render the couch unfit for future use.

Short of using couches, there is an enormous professional and academic literature on why some people but not others, in some situations but not others, decide to kill innocent people *en masse*. Some of this literature comes from the precincts of psychology and psychiatry, some from sociology and anthropology, some from criminology, legal studies, political science, philosophy, and from brave historians willing to tilt their knowledge forward. Some even comes from theology and religious studies.[3]

To simplify a fair bit, all of this literature aims basically to get answers to four questions. First, under what socio-economic conditions do people tend to join terrorist groups, religious or otherwise? Second, does the profile of extremists reflect any sort of group self-selection, or does it drive recruitment strategies? Third, does ideology (not theology) matter in sorting which groups particular individuals join? And fourth, is there a mindset or personality type susceptible to extremist thinking, and presumably acting?

Amid this vast literature, some of it based on impressive empirical analysis, answers to these questions vary. But it is fair to say that once various forms of social embeddedness are taken into account, the percentage of the variance in explaining political violence that can be laid at the feet of specifically religious motivation articulated by the perpetrator is low. Some of the finest work taking this view includes Scott Atran's theory of "the devoted actor," the basic approach of Marc Sageman—a psychiatrist turned terrorism analyst of the highest caliber—and several others of note.[4]

Now, this may be all wrong, for the simple reason that most of the Western researchers interested in this topic are not themselves traditionally religious people, and so may be expected to discount religious motivations in others.[5] The scientific method notwithstanding, this happens a lot. Then again, looking at the evidence in as objective a way as possible, an inarguably religious motivation for the perpetration of violent acts against innocents appears to be present only in a minority of cases.

On the Other Hand . . .

That said, some of those minority cases have been of extreme importance. Indeed, whatever the numbers—and if ever numbers were soft and slippery these are—religion matters critically in the perpetration of political violence in Muslim-majority societies today in two ways. But these are two ways *neither of which* aligns with the common understandings that most Americans seem to have about this subject.

One has to do with the global historical phenomenon of chiliastic religious violence, and the other has to do with what I will call the primordial human intuition of guilt. The two, very different as they are, rather often come together in what we call lazily "religious violence." Again, let's take them in this order.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the American political class split into its usual schizophrenic Left-Right orientation in trying to explain what had just happened. To make a long story shorter, both sides reverted to their stock explanations from Cold War vintage, merely superimposing them from Communism onto Islamism. So liberals blamed poverty and social inequities and proposed a "Marshall Plan" for the Middle East, demonstrating that they had little idea of what the Marshall Plan actually was or why it worked. Conservatives blamed the absence of freedom and democracy, and so we got the counterproductive calamity of the George W. Bush administration's "forward strategy for freedom." Both of these explanations succeeded in identifying minor to mid-level accelerants or enablers of terrorism, and both failed miserably in identifying the actual motivations behind al-Qaeda's attack.[6]

They failed because the stock of relevant historical knowledge on which they could draw went back at most fifty years. The American political class today is the most historically ignorant political class in the history of great powers since the Treaty of Westphalia. Its members' educations are strikingly poorer in history from those of European power elites of earlier times, and even from their worthy American elders—the likes of Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Brent Scowcroft.

The simple and well-recorded truth is that religious violence erupting from premillennarian movements has struck nearly in every century in recorded history and in every habitable continent. A short list of "greatest hits" would include: the Jewish zealots fighting the Roman Empire, all the way to Masada, in the 2nd century CE; the Crusaders sacking Jerusalem in 1099[7]; the White Lotus/Maitreya cult movement against the Manchu Qing dynasty, which first coalesced in the 14th century; the Peasants' Revolt of Thomas Müntzer in 16 th century Germany; the Taiping Rebellion of 19th-century China; the Spirit or "Ghost" Dances of the American Indians that ended with the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890[8]; and on a smaller scale the Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s.

All of these episodes, and hundreds of lesser-known ones strewn through history as well, display a similar basic structure. A traditional culture finds itself the prey of a more powerful external force and breaks into essentially three schools of thought in how to deal with the challenge: give in and be like the wealthier and more powerful adversary; take the techniques but not the culture of the adversary; and reject everything about the adversary as a threat to the

corporate identity of the people. The three groups—assimilators, reformers, and nativists—vie with each other and the latter group invariably mobilizes religious symbols around a charismatic leader to both win the civil dispute within the society and to fight against the challenging power from without.

Al-Qaeda's actions in September 2001 constituted a textbook case of chiliastic religious violence. In this case, its charismatic leader, Osama bin-Ladin, decided to wage the civil battle inside Islam by attacking the preeminent symbol of the adversarial culture bearing down on Islam—the United States—what he called the "far enemy." The West and the United States were really just props in what was essentially an internal struggle within Islamic societies over how to deal with the crisis of modernity bearing down on it with ever greater ferocity since the 1798-99 French invasion of Egypt.[9] If one can understand Islam as a religious civilization instead of a religion/theology, as it is narrowly defined in Western terms, then yes, this was religious violence on a massive and history-changing scale.

Again, it had happened many times before, even, as noted, on American soil when Wovoka (Anglicized name, Jack Wilson) first led the Paiute tribe, and then others, in a series of mystical dances to put an end to the expansion of white people into Indian lands. Wovoka preached to Indians that they needed to remain apart from the whites, needed to live a clean life and avoid boozing, lying, stealing, and causing or contributing to any divisions among the Indians themselves. Revolutionary demands for asceticism, cultural integrity, and unity…..sound familiar? In this case, one element in the traditional pattern of premillennarian movements does not conform: For the most part, the Indians did not initiate the suicidal violence common to the other cases. They might well have done so in time and some were experimenting with the notion on a small scale, but the white folks beat them to the bloodletting—at Wounded Knee.

It was obviously too much to expect the senior members of the Bush administration, or the Democrats in opposition, to have known much about any of these foreign historical cases and to have understood them in such a way as to apply them to what happened on September 11, 2001. But the Ghost Dances, on our own soil? Not to have even thought about the Ghost Dances in context? We all learned something about this in high school, right? *Right?….*

The Role of Guilt

Human beings are social animals, and all human beings are socialized by their parents and/or other close family members to replicate the language skills, body-communication gestures, touch skills, cosmological understandings, and moral values of the group. Every culture—and this is true to some degree even among primates—devises means of disciplining and redirecting individuals who deviate from the rules that ensure that the socialization process is successfully completed, at least to the point where minimal social coherence can be maintained. One of the functions of religion—which every culture has and about which more below—is to sacralize critical elements of the culture into which people are socialized, people who in turn socialize succeeding generations.

Now, one of the key issues every culture must deal with concerns sexuality. Every culture known to history has devised certain sexual taboos, and every religion has codified and enforced those taboos. We need not dwell here on the reasons for this, whether its origins lie in concerns about incest, or whether it has to do with the need to cooperate so that human beings do not replicate the extreme violence of many alpha males elsewhere in the animal kingdom, which would jeopardize the survival of the species. What matters for our purposes is that controlling sexuality is a key challenge for any society, and religion always plays a role in that function.

Now let's apply this observation to the case before us. Boys who grow up in a traditional environment—and this goes for Orthodox Jews and Victorian-era Anglicans as well as traditional Muslims—are taught certain sexual taboos, and depending on the culture, these may be taught by the mother rather than the father. In traditional Islamic societies, the mother usually tells her son at a certain suitable age that he mustn't masturbate; it's a sin. You stain yourself spiritually as well as literally when you do that, she says, for you are wasting the seed of life that is a gift of God. You mustn't touch any woman who might be menstruating, because during her period, she is ritually unclean; and since you can't ask a woman, even a female cousin, if she is menstruating because it is unseemly, you simply

avoid touching women other than your own mother until you are married. That means no pre-marital sex at all, not even consensual adolescent fondling. It also means not looking at licentious photos or videos, because these stir up carnal urges that might lead one to become impure.

These are *shameful* things to do, the mother asserts—a word chosen very carefully. The stress on impurity and stain is not incidental; it is the metaphorical hinge on which the entire socialization effort depends. There is a consequent need, should one become impure, to atone for one's behavior in order to excise the stain, which in less concrete terms is shame if it becomes known to others and guilt if it does not. This metaphor is taken very concretely in many traditional societies. You can see this entire conceptual system open to view in the Torah, especially in Leviticus, and especially in the liturgy of the Jewish High Holy days; Islamic sensibilities are not appreciably different in this regard.

Now, the boys in Molenbeek, as already noted, were known to be carousers, drinkers, and drug users before they carried out their murderous sprees in Paris and Brussels. In their case, socially networked personal commitments solidified their behavior. And though more of a loner, Omar Mateen of Orlando fame used to go out and have a good time as well. He is described as having oscillated between being occasionally very religious and being "normal" and fun-loving most of the time. This calls attention to a pattern that, if you understand what it's like to be raised in a traditional environment with regard to sexual behavior only to be subsequently drowned in temptation, is not hard to discern. It goes something like this, and let's use Omar Mateen as our hypothetical case.

Omar knows he's not supposed to lust after women out of marriage, and certainly not after men. But even when married (twice, apparently), he is exposed to sexual cues and opportunities all the time in south Florida, and he is weak: maybe he watches porn and masturbates, or maybe he hires a hooker from time to time.

He remembers well his mother insisting that all this is sinful, so he feels remorse. He becomes temporarily pious so that he can remove the stain he has caused. He resolves not to sin again, but his determination lapses. He does it again, and he feels intense guilt, leading to frantic renewed efforts at atonement and stain removal. He falls into a cycle of sin and remorse until he concludes that he can never escape; he has sinned too much to be forgiven. This depresses him and renders him prone to explosions of anger and violence, such as beating his wives. There is only one way out now: having dishonored and shamed his family, especially his own mother, because of his wanton behavior, he has to redeem the family through his own martyrdom.

This psychological-behavioral complex explains certainly not all but a fair number of Islamist suicide terrorism cases. It is hard to prove, because what goes on in someone's head is impervious to sure knowledge and, as already noted, what goes on inside someone's head can never be divorced from the social frameworks in which thinking is ever embedded.

Now, is this a description of a religious motivation? At the level of standard theology, no—but theology and *the community that embodies it* can set parameters on extreme behavior. If a person so afflicted with guilt over sexual improprieties is not bound by such community-buttressed norms—a Mohammed Atta in Hamburg, the rowdies in Brussels, Omar Mateen in South Florida—what he might do is less constrained. So most suicide terrorism is probably deeply religious in a generic sense, but it is not particular to Islam and the basic structure of motivation here is pre-Islamic—indeed, it is pre-Abrahamic altogether, right down to primal. Mass murder driven by rage, guilt, or a collapse of self-worth—sometimes suicidal and sometimes not—has happened in many places (Tasmania, Norway, Columbine, Sandy Hook, South Carolina) where the mass murderers were not Muslims. It can exist amid any way of thinking in which sin and shame and ritual impurity have a place.

Why don't most Western analysts of terrorism make this observation? Because, again, most are themselves so far from traditional ways of thinking and living that they but rarely sense the power of pre-intellectualized religious beliefs. They therefore tend not to credit them as possible sources of behavior. The combination of chiliastic religious violence operating on the macro-level, so to speak, and the guilt/stain removal behavior operating on the micro-level, offers a way to get arms around the data before us. And this is a possibly useful way to conceptualize

the problem even if most of the motivation for political violence within and emanating from the Muslim world today is not properly described as *conventionally* "religious."

Misreading Islamist Terrorism: Why It Matters

So, in sum, what do we tend to misunderstand about the sources of religious violence? Just about everything. We usually fail to distinguish between political violence and terrorism; we fail to look closely enough at the socially embedded motives of individual extremists that we lazily label "religious," as if that is tantamount to understanding them; and some of us at least fail to avoid breathless and false essentialist accusations about the supposedly inherent character of some religions altogether.

Let me close with two brief, related points about this latter failure. The President-elect goes George W. Bush a long step further in his avowed theory of Islamist terrorism, assuming for a moment that he may be taken at his word. Whereas Bush identified a democracy deficit as the problem, Trump insists that Islam itself is terroristic. Not only is this an absurd fact-free proposition, it is exceedingly counterproductive to give voice to it. Muslim Arabs are not stupid. They are more than capable of reasoning that if Westerners think that Islam itself is their mortal enemy, then the only way for the West to finally solve its terrorism problem is to convert or kill pretty much every Muslim adult on the planet. And that just reinforces the propaganda line of the radical political entrepreneurs who claim that the West is engaged in a conspiracy to destroy Islam. Making such statements helps the worst actors in the region, and that is hardly in the U.S. or Western interest even if the statements were true.

For years now, many conservatives have raised pulses—their own and others'—by criticizing the Obama administration for refusing to name the enemy, instead limiting its language to references to "violent extremists." Everyone knows that these violent extremists are Muslims acting in the name of Islam, and to avoid calling a spade a spade is just a pusillanimous example of political correctness run completely amok. It's a great applause line—just like other, similarly glib arguments that sound right until you actually think about them. But it misapprehends the motives not only of the Obama administration, but also of the Bush administration before it, whose language usage on this point was not much different.

The Bush administration's initial reluctance to explicitly define the problem in religious terms turned on its concerns about what became known as Islamophobia. It wanted to avoid giving any pretext for domestic violence against Muslim residents and citizens of the United States. But it soon came also to understand that to deal effectively with the problem over time required Muslim allies, and those allies (in other governments and in civil society) by and large pleaded with the U.S. government privately not to speak in ways that would further polarize internal divisions in the Muslim world over religion. That, they explained, risked validating the propaganda line that the West was at war not with Islamism but with Islam, and that would make it harder for them to be the effective allies we needed them to be.

Bush administration principals understood this and acted accordingly for the most part, as did the Obama administration after it. How a Trump administration will behave in this regard is, as of this writing, anyone's guess.

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[1] The classic exemplar of this definition is David Fromkin's still-excellent *Foreign Affairs* essay from Spring 1975, entitled "The Strategy of Terrorism."

[2] No Islamic school of jurisprudence condones either suicide or the murder of innocents, and all uphold the inadmissibility of coercion in religion. Even within the ISIS caliphate there is at least a pretense of law most of the time before gruesome things are done to innocent people.

[3] An excellent example is Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (Schocken, 2015).

[4] See Atran, "The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict Across Cultures," *Current Anthropology*, Volume 57, Supplement 13 (June 2016); and Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (University

of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). For a typical focused example of the contemporary approach to research, see Kunaal Sharma, “What Causes Extremist Attitudes Among Sunni and Shia Youth? Evidence from Northern India,” GW Program on Extremism (November 2016). One interesting recent effort that tries to correlate engineering educations with a propensity toward terrorism is Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection Between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

[5] It requires a huge dose of historical amnesia to pull this particular form of obliviousness off. Here we are, citizens of a great power, trying to parse the meaning and strategic implications of a sectarian struggle within Islam that from time to time spills out of the region and scatters blood on us and our Western friends, apparently without realizing that about four, four and half centuries ago there was a great Muslim power trying to parse the meaning and strategic implications of a great sectarian struggle within Christendom. And the leaders of that power concluded that, as sincere as the religious disputations in Europe were, it did not stop a Catholic power (France) from allying with the Ottoman Empire against another Catholic power (Hapsburg Austria). So it has *always* been more complicated than it may seem.

[6] I have written on this before. See, for example, “Comte’s Caveat: How We Misunderstand Terrorism,” *Orbis* (Summer 2008).

[7] This is specifically where the term chiliastic came from, referring to the Christian belief that Jesus would return at the millennium and rule visibly over mankind for a thousand years.

[8] The other well-known, if poorly understood, American example—peculiar and short-lived though it was—was John Brown’s essentially suicidal-terrorist raid on Harper’s Ferry in October 1859.

[9] See Michael S. Doran, “Somebody Else’s Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2002.