

OLD MADNESS NEW METHODS

Revival of Religious Terrorism Begg for Broader U.S. Policy

By Bruce Hoffman

One of the world's leading experts on terrorism, Bruce Hoffman has rejoined RAND as director of the Washington, D.C., office after four years at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where he served as chairman of the Department of International Relations and director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence. His latest book, Inside Terrorism, was published by Columbia University Press in 1998.

"I acted alone and on orders from God," said Yigal Amir, the young Jewish extremist who assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. "I have no regrets." Amir's words could have been uttered just as easily today by Islamic Hamas

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suicide bombers of buses and public gathering places in Israel; by Muslim Algerian terrorists who have targeted France with a campaign of indiscriminate bombings; by Japanese followers of Shoko Asahara, whose Aum Shinrikyo sect perpetrated the March 1995 nerve gas attack on a Tokyo subway in hopes of hastening a new millennium; by members of the American Christian Patriot movement, who bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City a month later; or by Arab Afghans linked to Osama bin Laden, the alleged Saudi mastermind behind the

August 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Indeed, the religious imperative for terrorism is the most important defining characteristic of terrorist activity today. The revolution that transformed Iran into an Islamic republic in 1979 played a crucial role in the modern advent of religious terrorism, but it has not been confined to Iran, to the Middle East, or to Islam. Since the 1980s, this resurgence has involved elements of all the world's major religions as well as some smaller sects or cults.

The characteristics, justifications, and mind-sets of religious and quasi-religious terrorists suggest that they will be much more likely than their secular counterparts to use weapons of mass destruction—that is, nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. Four incidents in particular—the Tokyo nerve gas attack, the Oklahoma City bombing, the 1993 bombing of New York City's World Trade Center, and the 1998 attack on U.S. embassies in Africa—indicate that terrorism may be entering a period of increased violence and bloodshed. The connecting thread linking these four otherwise unrelated incidents is religion.

The emergence of religion as a driving force behind the increasing lethality of international terrorism shatters some of our most basic assumptions about terrorists. In the past, most analysts tended to discount the possibility of mass killing involving chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear terrorism. Few terrorists, it was argued, knew anything about the technical intricacies of either developing or dispersing such weapons. Political, moral, and practical considerations also were perceived as important restraints. Terrorists,

we assured ourselves, wanted more people watching than dead. We believed that terrorists had little interest in, and still less to gain from, killing wantonly and indiscriminately.

The compelling new motives of the religious terrorist, however, coupled with increased access to critical information and to key components of weapons of mass destruction, render conventional wisdom dangerously anachronistic. And while it is true that the increasingly virulent threats posed by religious terrorists require increasingly superior military responses and deterrent measures, the ultimate solutions lie far beyond military strategy alone. Driven by value systems and worldviews that are radically different from those of secular terrorists and that are largely impervious to military counterattacks, religious terrorism demands vastly revised national and international diplomatic and cultural strategies that aim to strike at its root causes.

Resurgence of Religious Terrorism

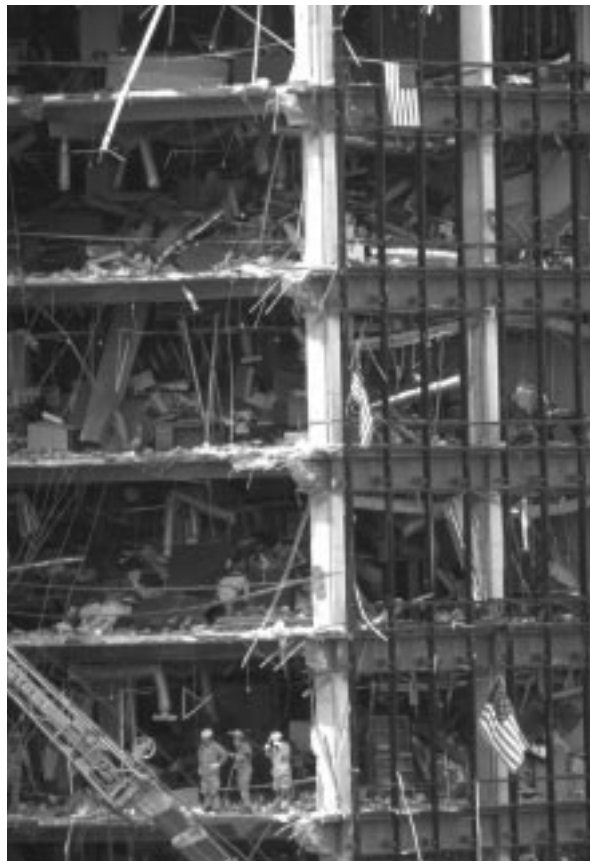
The connection between religion and terrorism is not new. In fact, some of the English words we use to describe terrorists and their acts today are derived from the names of Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu religious groups active centuries ago. The etymology of “zealot,” for example, can be traced back to a millenarian Jewish sect that fought against the Roman occupation of what is now Israel between 66 and 73 A.D. The Zealots waged a ruthless campaign of both individual assassination and wholesale slaughter. Similarly, the word “assassin” is derived from a radical offshoot of the Muslim Shi’a who, between 1090 and 1272 A.D., fought the Christian crusaders attempting to conquer present-day Syria and Iran. The assassin, literally “hashish-eater,” would ritualistically imbibe hashish before committing murder, an act regarded as a sacramental or divine duty designed to hasten the new millennium. Finally, the appellation “thug” comes from an Indian religious association of professional robbers and murderers who, from the seventh century until their suppression in the mid-19th century, ritually strangled wayward travelers as sacrificial offerings to Kali, the Hindu goddess of terror and destruction. Until the 19th century, religion provided the only justification for terrorism.

Only in the past century has religious terrorism tended to be overshadowed by ethnonationalist/separatist and ideologically motivated terrorism. These categories include the anticolonial, nationalist



Mourners gather to honor former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the day after his assassination by a Jewish religious extremist on November 5, 1995.

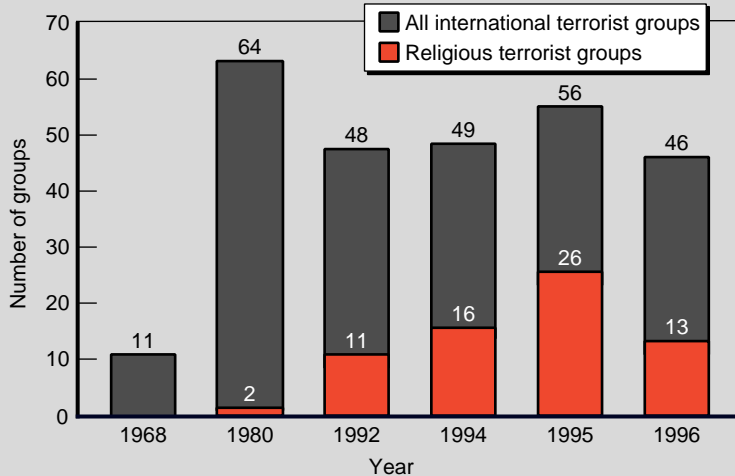
CORBIS/ELDAD RAFAELI



Recovery workers pitch American flags to consecrate the floors of Oklahoma City's Alfred P. Murrah Federal Office Building, bombed on April 19, 1995, by individuals associated with the American Christian Patriot movement.

PICTUREQUEST PHOTO

RELIGIOUS INTERNATIONAL TERRORIST GROUPS ON THE RISE



SOURCE: The RAND-St. Andrews Chronology of International Terrorism is a computerized database of international terrorist incidents that have occurred worldwide from 1968 to the present. The chronology has been continuously maintained since 1972, first by RAND and since 1994 by the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

movements of Jewish terrorist organizations in pre-independence Israel; the Muslim-dominated National Liberation Front in Algeria; the overwhelmingly Catholic Irish Republican Army; their Protestant counterparts, such as the Ulster Freedom Fighters, Ulster Volunteer Force, and Red Hand Commandos; and the predominantly Muslim Palestine Liberation Organization. Although these groups evidence a strong religious component, it is the political, not the religious, aspect of their motivation that is dominant. The preeminence of their ethnonationalist or irredentist goals is incontestable.

In fact, *none* of the identifiable international terrorist groups active in 1968 could be classified as religious—that is, having aims and motivations of a predominantly religious nature. Perhaps this is only to be expected at the height of the cold war, when the majority of terrorist groups were left-wing, revolutionary Marxist-Leninist ideological organizations and the remainder were ethnonationalist/separatist groups typical of the postcolonial liberation movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not until 1980—as a result of the repercussions of the 1979 revolution in Iran—do the first “modern” religious terrorist groups appear. For these groups, the religious motive is paramount.

By 1992, the number of religious terrorist groups had increased exponentially (from 2 to 11) and expanded to embrace major world religions other than Islam as well as obscure sects and cults. During the

1990s, the proportion of religious terrorist groups among all active international terrorist organizations grew appreciably. In 1994, 16—nearly a third—of the 49 identifiable organizations could be classified as religious; in 1995, their number grew yet again, to 26—nearly half—of the 56 organizations identified. In 1996, the most recent year for which complete statistics are available, only 13 of 46 identifiable groups had a dominant religious component (see figure). Nevertheless, religion remained a major force behind terrorism’s rising lethality. Groups driven in part or in whole by a salient religious or theological motive committed 10 of the 13 most lethal terrorist acts of 1996.

It is perhaps not surprising that religion should become a far more popular motivation for terrorism in the post-cold war era as old ideologies lie discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist ideology, while the promise of munificent benefits from the liberal-democratic, capitalist state—apparently triumphant at what author Francis Fukuyama has termed the “end of history”—fails to materialize in many countries throughout the world.

Finally, it must be contemplated that we may be on the cusp of a new and potentially more dangerous era of terrorism as the year 2000—the literal millennium—approaches. One cannot predict the effect that this pivotal symbolic watershed might have on religion-inspired terrorist groups who feel impelled either to hasten the redemption associated with the millennium through acts of violence—as the Aum sect in Japan has already attempted to do—or, in the event that the year 2000 passes and redemption does not occur, to attempt to implement Armageddon by the apocalyptic use of weapons of mass destruction. The pattern of religion-inspired terrorism over the past few years alone suggests that the potential for still more and even greater acts of violence cannot be prudently discounted.

Intensity of Religious Terrorism

Terrorism motivated in whole or in part by religious imperatives often leads to more intense acts of violence producing considerably more fatalities than the relatively discriminating acts of violence perpetrated by secular terrorist organizations. Although religious terrorists committed only 25 percent of the recorded international terrorist incidents in 1995, their acts were responsible for 58 percent of the terrorist-related fatalities recorded that year. The attacks that caused the greatest numbers of deaths in 1995—those that killed

eight or more people—were *all* perpetrated by religious terrorists. The reasons why religious terrorism results in so many more deaths than secular terrorism may be found in the radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimization and justification, concepts of morality, and worldviews embraced by the religious terrorist.

For the religious terrorist, violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty executed in response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators are consequently undeterred by political, moral, or practical constraints. Whereas secular terrorists, even if they have the capacity to do so, rarely attempt indiscriminate killing on a massive scale—because such tactics are inconsistent with their political aims and therefore are regarded as counterproductive, if not immoral—religious terrorists often seek to eliminate broadly defined categories of enemies and accordingly regard such large-scale violence not only as morally justified but as a necessary expedient to attain their goals. Religion—conveyed by sacred text and imparted via clerical authorities claiming to speak for the divine—therefore serves as a legitimizing force. This explains why clerical sanction is so important to religious terrorists and why religious figures are often required to “bless” terrorist operations before they are executed.

Religious and secular terrorists also differ in their constituencies. Whereas secular terrorists attempt to appeal to actual and potential sympathizers, religious terrorists seek to appeal to no other constituency than themselves. Thus, the restraints imposed on secular terrorist violence—by the desire to appeal to a tacitly supportive or uncommitted constituency—are not relevant to the religious terrorist. This absence of a broader constituency leads to the sanctioning of almost limitless violence against a virtually open-ended category of targets: anyone who is not a member of the terrorists’ religion or religious sect.

Religious and secular terrorists also have starkly different perceptions of themselves and their violent acts. Whereas secular terrorists regard violence as a way to instigate the correction of a flaw in a system that is basically good, religious terrorists see themselves not as components of a system worth preserving at all but as “outsiders” seeking fundamental changes in the existing order. This sense of alienation further enables the religious terrorist to contemplate far more destruc-

tive and deadly types of terrorist operations than secular terrorists—and reinforces the tendency to embrace a far more open-ended category of “enemies” for attack.

Even more disturbing is that, in some instances, the aims of contemporary religious terrorist groups go far beyond the establishment of a theocracy amenable to their specific deity (e.g., the creation of an Iranian-style Islamic republic in Algeria, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia). These aims can embrace, on the one hand, mystical, transcendental, and divinely inspired imperatives or, on the other hand, a vehemently anti-government form of populism that reflects far-fetched conspiracy notions based on a volatile mixture of seditious, racial, and religious dicta. In this respect, the emergence of obscure, idiosyncratic millenarian movements—such as the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo sect and the American Christian white supremacist militias—alongside zealously nationalist Islamic groups represents a far more amorphous threat than secular terrorist groups. The members of the Aum sect in Japan; the fanatical Jewish groups in Israel, such as Eyal, of which Yigal Amir was a member; the Christian Patriot movement in America; and some of the radical Islamic organizations in Algeria, Lebanon, and Israel do not conform to our traditional models of the secular terrorist organization. Traditional groups had a defined set of political, social, or economic objectives, and however disagreeable or distasteful their aims and motivations may have been, their ideology and intentions were at least comprehensible.

Countering Religious Terrorism

In terms of the countermeasures that the government, military, police, and security services can employ against these new types of adversaries, the first and most immediate challenge is simply identifying them. These ethereal, amorphous entities will often lack the “footprint” or *modus operandi* of an actual, existing terrorist organization, making it more difficult for intelligence, law enforcement, and other security specialists to get a firm idea of their intentions and capabilities, much less their capacity for violence, before they strike. A second challenge is unraveling the reasons why many “fringe” movements or hitherto peaceful religious cults suddenly embark on lethal campaigns of indiscriminate terrorism.

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In many pockets of the American hinterland, the challenge is to develop educational programs to mitigate grassroots alienation.

These primarily investigative, intelligence, and academic research issues need to be addressed before effective countervailing and deterrent measures can be considered. Traditional approaches and policies may not be relevant, much less effective, in the face of religious terrorism. Strategies that have been used successfully in the past—such as political concessions, financial rewards, amnesties, and other personal inducements—would be not only irrelevant but impractical, given the religious terrorists' fundamentally alienated worldviews and often extreme, resolutely uncompromising demands.

Above all, the profound sense of alienation and isolation of these cults and religious movements needs to be vigorously counteracted. A bridge needs to be found between mainstream society and the extremists so that they do not feel threatened and forced to withdraw into heavily armed, seething compounds or to engage in preemptive acts of violence directed against what they regard as a menacing, predatory society.

Demonstrable progress arguably has been made along these lines in the United States. The nonviolent resolution of the 81-day standoff between the Freemen, a Montana militia organization, and the FBI in April 1996 stands in marked contrast to the debacle three years before in Waco, Texas, where 74 persons were killed, including 21 children. By skillfully employing the tactics of negotiation and the non-confrontational approaches developed during previous encounters with antigovernment and white supremacist groups, the authorities defused a potentially explosive situation, obtained the surrender of 16 heavily armed Freemen who had barricaded themselves at the isolated ranch they had dubbed "Justus Township," and avoided the bloodshed that had accompanied previous incidents.

But while patient negotiation and minimum force have an important role to play in specific instances, particularly sieges, there is a more widespread problem of intense, often paranoid, antigovernment sentiments in many pockets of the American hinterland. Here, the challenge is surely one of developing preemptive educational programs to mitigate grassroots alienation and polarization and to stop the spread of

seditional and intolerant beliefs before they take hold and become exploited by demagogues and hate-mongers. Across the United States, progress can also be seen in this respect. A number of community groups and political action committees are attempting to counter the spread of ignorance, hate, and simplistic conspiracy theories that are used to explain complex economic phenomena and thus acquire new recruits to the antifederalist movement. Through a series of "town hall" meetings featuring plain-speaking, commonsense presentations that communicate important lessons in a vernacular as accessible and relevant to the local populace as that peddled by the conspiracy theorists, people gain a more critical perspective from which they can challenge the assertions of the sophists and refute the homespun ideologies that lie at the core of their odious belief systems.

The immense challenge of countering religious terrorism at home is dwarfed, however, by that of ameliorating anti-U.S. sentiment abroad. In no region is this problem more acute than in the Middle East. The bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last summer once again brought into sharp focus the intense enmity felt by some Muslims toward the United States. The rise of Osama bin Laden and his worldwide Islamic revolutionary movement, al-Qaeda ("The Base"), is a case in point. The movement flows from a regionwide perception that America cares only about Israel and access to oil—and not about national rights to self-determination and truly democratic domestic institutions. In this respect, the use of U.S. military force—even in self-defense or to prevent terrorist attacks—is seen by many as symptomatic of a heavy-handed foreign policy.

Clearly, every country must retain the right to retaliate or use military force to defend itself. But the issue here is whether more subtlety—or a mix of policy options—might be more appropriate. For example, only 12 of the 267 persons killed in the Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam bombings were Americans. The vast majority of the casualties were Kenyan and Tanzanian embassy employees and ordinary passersby. Among the victims, too, were many Muslims. Indeed, in the wake of the tragedy, there were many reports of moderate Arab opinion leaders throughout the Middle East having been appalled by the death and injury brought so callously to their brethren by terrorists acting in the name of Islam. Yet, in a stroke, the United States vitiated this sentiment with cruise missile attacks. This

Religion has been the major driving force behind international terrorism during the 1990s. As described below, the most serious terrorist acts of the decade—in terms of the number of people killed or the political implications—all have had a significant religious dimension.

- 1992 onward: Bloodletting by Islamic extremists in Algeria has claimed an estimated 75,000 lives.
- February 1993: Thirteen car and truck bombings shake Bombay, India, killing 400 and injuring more than 1,000, in revenge for the destruction of an Islamic shrine.
- February 1993: Islamic radicals bomb New York City's World Trade Center, attempting to topple one of the twin towers onto the other, reportedly while releasing a deadly cloud of poisonous gas.
- December 1994: Air France passenger jet is hijacked by terrorists belonging to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA), who plotted unsuccessfully to blow up themselves, the aircraft, and the 283 passengers on board precisely when the plane was over Paris, which would have caused the flaming wreckage to plunge into the crowded city below.
- March 1995: Apocalyptic Japanese religious cult releases sarin nerve gas in Tokyo subway system, killing a dozen people and wounding 3,796 others, with reports that the group also planned to carry out identical attacks in the United States.
- April 1995: Members of the American Christian Patriot movement, seeking to foment a nationwide revolution, bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people.
- July–October 1995: GIA unleashes a wave of bombings in Paris Metro trains, outdoor markets, cafes, schools, and popular tourist spots, killing 8 and wounding more than 180.
- November 1995: Jewish religious extremist assassinates Israeli premier Yitzhak Rabin, viewing it as the first step in a mass murder campaign designed to disrupt the peace process.
- February–March 1996: String of attacks by Hamas suicide bombers kills 60 people and turns the tide of Israel's national elections.
- April 1996: Machine-gun and hand-grenade attack by Egyptian Islamic militants on a group of Western tourists kills 18 outside their Cairo hotel.
- June 1996: Religious militants opposed to the reigning al-Saud regime in Saudi Arabia perpetrate truck bombing of U.S. Air Force barracks in Dhahran, killing 19 people.
- November 1997: Terrorists belonging to the Gamat al-Islamiya (Islamic Group) massacre 58 foreign tourists and 4 Egyptians at the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut in Luxor, Egypt.
- August 1998: Attackers believed to have been financed by Saudi Arabian dissident Osama bin Laden bomb U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 257 people, including 12 Americans, and injuring more than 5,000 in Kenya, and killing 10 people and injuring dozens in Tanzania. Bin Laden had issued a *fatwa*, or Islamic religious edict, as part of his worldwide campaign against the United States. An estimated 5,000 adherents throughout the Muslim world allegedly are prepared to follow his summons to battle.

is not to say that the attacks were unjustified or unnecessary—only that an important, and often exceedingly rare, opportunity may have been lost to influence opinion in the region against terrorism and against the terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam.

The resurgence of this ancient breed of adversary, the religious terrorist, means that nothing less than a sea change is required in our thinking about terrorism and the policies needed to counter it. Perhaps the most sobering realization in confronting religious terrorism is that the threat—and the problems that fuel it—can

never be eradicated completely. The complexity, diversity, and often idiosyncratic characteristics of religious terrorism imply that there is no “magic bullet”—no single, superior solution—that can be applied to all cases. Yet this fact only reinforces the need for multiple creative solutions, if not to resolve, then at least to ameliorate both the underlying causes of religious terrorism and its violent manifestations. Only by expanding our range of possible responses will we be able to target our resources prudently and productively in ways that will have the greatest positive effect. ■