

Making the World Safe for Terrorism

by Nuh Ha Mim Keller

In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate

By what one can gather from the press, the FBI and CIA have seemingly been unable to prove who precisely, if anyone, may have masterminded the attack earlier this month on the World Trade Center other than the immediate assailants, who are presumed to have been a number of young men from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and one from the United Arab Emirates. Whoever they were, the facts point to a number of inescapable conclusions. The planning of it argues for a method to the madness, coupled with at least normal intelligence and a technical education, while the psychological facts entail that such people do not destroy themselves unless they see some advantage for themselves in doing so, which entails that they believed in an afterlife, meaning that according to their own standards, they were in all probability “religious.” The question arises: “What sort of religion condones killing thousands of ordinary civilian people?” The answer is “No religion at all.”

As far as I know, there is no religion or system of morality that justifies deliberately killing or injuring someone unless (1) he is an aggressor seeking to take one’s life, against whom one may defend oneself; (2) he has been proven to be guilty of a capital crime, or (3) he is a combatant in war. Most ethical systems agree upon these three justifications for deliberately inflicting death or injury upon someone. The World Trade Center tragedy raises the question of what on earth may have made some contemporary people think that these principles may be set aside?

If there are altogether no moral reasons for this crime, there is perhaps a discoverable mentality behind it. We call it “terrorism,” in view of its typical motive, which is to strike terror into the hearts of those conceived to be guilty by committing atrocities against those of the innocent who resemble the guilty closely enough, whether in race, citizenship, or social class, for the terror not to be lost on the guilty. But its enormity as a crime, as I apprehend it, lies less in the motive of its perpetrators, which is bad enough, than in the fact that shedding innocent blood is wrong. All previous moralities and religions agree that one cannot kill the innocent, but only the guilty. One cannot, for example, kill a generic “American” for the actions of other Americans, or for the actions of his country’s army if he is not part of it, or for the foreign policy of his government. In general, moral law mandates that one may not kill a man for what another man has done.

How has this now come to be set aside in some minds? While I am not a specialist in the history of atrocities, it seems to me that this basic principle of morality was first violated,

and on a grand scale—and with the tacit and the spoken support of the intelligentsia, press, and policy makers—in the Second World War, with the advent of “carpet-bombing.” Here, ineffective attempts at precision bombing of military targets and factories gave way first to incendiary bombing of particular German cities to burn them down, then to “area bombing” of as much urban acreage as possible. Bombing everything—soldiers and civilians, combatants and non-combatants, residential areas and strategic targets—would shorten the war; so the bombs rolled out, and eliminating civilians became itself a major strategic aim. In Cologne, in Hamburg, in Dresden: the numbers of the dead were unprecedented and horrendous. In Dresden, where there were no war industries at all, some 130,000 were killed. Perhaps the ultimate “area bombing” (there is little reason not to call it “terror bombing”) was the atomic bomb dropped on the old Japanese provincial city of Hiroshima, and later on Nagasaki. Men, women, babies, schoolgirls: the first instantaneous flash of atomic radiation burned their clothes off them and cooked the outside of their bodies, then the concussion blew it off so that it hung down in flapping strips seen by those who survived when they looked at each other. One can read the eyewitness accounts. We were showing them what would happen if we dropped one on Tokyo. They got the picture.

My point is that a mentality has been given birth in this century, and the attempts by its beneficiaries to draw some legitimacy for it from existing morality or religion, if understandable at a psychological level, have nothing to do with morality or religion. This kind of terrorism is going on today, indeed has been carried out by American presidents and their proxies in Nicaragua, in Sudan, in Lebanon, and in Iraq for the last twenty years, as described by Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, and others whose books and articles about these events are many and well-documented, and blithely ignored by almost everyone in America.

The little bands of bomb makers and plane hijackers are not at bottom religious men, but desperate men. They are inspired less by religion than by hope that on a symbolic scale they can somehow emulate the “success” of America’s and Israel’s “punitive strikes,” and “preemptive attacks.” Civilians die all the time in the West Bank and in Iraq. Someone in Jordan told me of a relative from another country who needed a kidney and could not find a donor of suitable blood group from his extended family, so he went to Iraq and bought one for two thousand dollars. The donor did not have food to eat, and was willing to sell his kidney. People are starving there. Birth defects and cancer are burgeoning from all the chemicals and explosives that have that been dropped on the people. Bombs are dropped from time to time to show them who is boss. According to Chomsky we have by now succeeded in killing one million civilians in Iraq, one half of whom were small children. The United States continually vetoes the United Nations initiative to allow UN *observers* into Israel to see what is being done to Palestinians there. In 1998 Clinton destroyed one half of Sudan’s pharmaceuticals and the means of replenishing them in punitive bombing raids on that country and killed untold numbers of civilians. How many? We don’t know, because the United States prevented the UN inquiry. Eighty percent of the refugees of the world bear Muslim last names. Desperation grows among these throngs, as hope wanes for a balanced U.S. foreign policy, or even an abatement of U.S. bombing and violence against Muslim civilian populations. There is no hope for people who know from the example of Nicaragua, Sudan, Iraq, and Israel that

any attempt of redress or appeal to the United Nations or World Court will be vetoed or defied by the attackers. People without hope do a lot of things.

Someone recently informed me that half the terrorist organizations officially listed on some or another “terrorist watch website,” were Muslim. Though Islamic law does not countenance terrorism or suicide of any sort, and I know these organizations represent an extreme splinter of an extreme splinter of Islam, I did not find the statistic particularly shocking. Rather, if in the last fifty years world governments like the United States and Britain have somehow convinced themselves that it is morally acceptable to kill, starve, and maim civilians of other countries in order to persuade their governments to do something, it would be surprising if this conviction did not somehow percolate down to the dispossessed, the hopeless, the aggrieved, and the powerless of every religion and ethnic group in the world. It looks as if it has.

We Americans are not bombing people, young and old, whose lives, when they survive, are brutally interrupted by the loss of an arm or a leg, or a father, or a son, or a mother, or a house that the family saved for years to build. We are too civilized for that. Rather, we bomb Iraq. We bomb Sudan. We bomb Southern Lebanon. We bomb “Palestinian positions.” We don’t cause the tens of thousands of birth defective and mentally retarded babies with the chemical mayhem and ten-year famine we are currently paying for in Iraq. We are “imposing sanctions.” We don’t kill actual human beings with all the explosives we are dumping on these countries. We are killing generic Iraqis, generic Sudanis, generic Palestinians. It sounds like we may now have to kill some generic Afghans. And now the shock of all shocks, the devastation of all devastations: some crazy people this past month decided to kill a lot of generic Americans. What on earth made them think it was morally acceptable to kill people who hadn’t committed any crime, who were not combatants, and were not killed in self-defense?

The answer, I apprehend, is not to be found in Islam, or in any religion or morality, but in the fact that there are fashions in atrocities and in the rhetoric used to dress them up. Unfortunately these begin to look increasingly like our own fashions and sound increasingly like our own rhetoric, reheated and served up to us. The terrorists themselves, in their own minds, were doubtless not killing secretaries, janitors, and firemen. That would be too obscene. Rather, they were “attacking America.”

The attack has been condemned, as President Bush has noted, by “Muslim scholars and clerics” across the board, and indeed by all people of decency around the world. I have read Islamic law with scholars, and know that it does not condone either suicide or killing non-combatants. But what to do about the crime itself?

The solution being proposed seems to be a technological one. We will highlight these people on our screens, and press delete. If we cannot find the precise people, we will delete others like them, until everyone else gets the message. We’ve done it lots of times. The problem with this is that it is morally wrong, and will send a clear confirmation—if more is needed beyond the shoot-em-ups abroad of the last decades that show our more or less complete disdain for both non-white human life and international law—that there is no law between us and other nations besides the law of the jungle. People like these attackers, willing to kill themselves to devastate others, are not ordinary people. They are desperate people. What has made them so is not lunacy, or religion, but the perception

that there is no effective legal recourse to stop crimes against the civilian peoples they identify with. Our own and our clients' killing, mutilating, and starving civilians are termed "strikes," "preemptive attacks," "raiding the frontiers," and "sanctions"—because we have a standing army, print our own currency, and have a press establishment and other trappings of modern statehood. Without them, our actions would be pure "terrorism."

Two wrongs do not make a right. They only make two wrongs. I think the whole moral discourse has been derailed by our own rhetoric in recent decades. Terrorism must be repudiated by America not only by words but by actions, beginning with its own. As 'Abd al-Hakim Winter asks, "Are the architects of policy sane in their certainty that America can enrage large numbers of people, but contain that rage forever through satellite technology and intrepid double agents?" I think we have to get back to basics and start acting as if we knew that killing civilians is wrong.

As it is, we seem to have convinced a lot of other people that it is right, among them some of the more extreme elements of the contemporary Wahhabi sect of Muslims, including the members of the Bin Laden network, whom the security agencies seem to be pointing their finger at for this crime. The Wahhabi sect, which has not been around for more than two and a half centuries, has never been part of traditional Sunni Islam, which rejects it and which it rejects. Orthodox Sunnis, who make up the vast majority of Muslims, are neither Wahhabis nor terrorists, for the traditional law they follow forbids killing civilian non-combatants to make any kind of point, political or otherwise. Those who have traveled through North Africa, Turkey, Egypt, or the Levant know what traditional Muslims are like in their own lands. Travelers find them decent, helpful, and hospitable people, and feel safer in Muslim lands than in many places, such as Central America, for example, or for that matter, Central Park.

On the other hand, there will always be publicists who hate Muslims, and who for ideological or religious reasons want others to do so. Where there is an ill-will, there is a way. A fifth of humanity are Muslims, and if to err is human, we may reasonably expect Muslims to err also, and it is certainly possible to stir up hatred by publicizing bad examples. But if experience is any indication, the only people convinced by media pieces about the inherent fanaticism of Muslims will be those who don't know any. Muslims have nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing to hide, and should simply tell people what their scholars and religious leaders have always said: first, that the Wahhabi sect has nothing to do with orthodox Islam, for its lack of tolerance is a perversion of traditional values; and second, that killing civilians is wrong and immoral.

And we Americans should take the necessary measures to get the ship of state back on a course that is credible, fair, and at bottom at least moral in our dealings with the other peoples of the world. For if our ideas of how to get along with other nations do not exceed the morality of action-thriller destruction movies, we may well get more action than we paid for.