Getting to the Roots of Terrorism

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Strategic thinking to solve a complex problem

Strategic thinking on the nature of terrorism may produce far better results than the alternatives. Some of the alternatives come so naturally that it becomes easier to make a choice based upon precedent, rather than reasoning through the particular situation.

When you go to your physician, for example, he or she probably elicits a pattern of information and then looks to match it with a set of pigeonholes to get a diagnosis, rather than search for a wide variety of possibilities. This approach works most of the time, and is efficient for the physician's time management. It works for the patient, except when the diagnosis is reached without probing the issues sufficiently. This was my wife's experience 15 years ago. Fortunately, she insisted on pursuing the clues and is now a cancer survivor.

This line of reasoning also applies to dealing with legal counsel. Some legal counsel will, based upon the law, tell you what you cannot do. What you may want to know is how to accomplish your goals within the law. What you are looking for is an appropriate path, not a list of barriers.

For any particular problem, there may be many workable options. Engineers may be accustomed to thinking that there is only one correct answer, and that all questions are answerable. Philosophers who buy into pluralism accept the idea that there are many different valid answers. Individuals reared in dif-

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ferent cultures tend to see different answers. Professional training and experience, cultural background, and even heredity affect how individuals process information to arrive at a solution.

ADOPTING A STRATEGIC APPROACH

There are no easy answers to decision making that has to deal with the irrational behavior of others. The best option is to deal with these problems strategically. One such approach, the minimax strategy, assumes the worst possible outcome and then maximizes the benefits within the constraints of the worst case. This approach misses the biggest gains, but also misses the biggest losers by enough to average out better than the alternative of a go-for-broke strategy.

The go-for-broke strategy, which accepts the risks of getting the worst outcome, may get the biggest win, but also could mean heavy losses. Taking a conservative approach instead may average out with as good a result. An important element in the process is the interaction among players. The actions of one player may influence the actions of the others.

The most interesting case of interdependencies is the cascading effect described by network scientists. An example of that cascading effect is the blackouts that occur when linked power distribution systems undergo a critical failure, resulting in shifting loads too heavy for the recipient systems. The failure then cascades, much in the same way as clothing fads spread, or viruses swamp the Internet.

Strategic thinking deals not only with the down side, but also takes into consideration the different disciplines that come to bear on the situation. Cognitive science,

where reasoning is explored by blending many disciplines, can be a cornerstone in developing a strategic approach. Blending such disciplines as psychology, linguistics, computer science, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, anthropology, and philosophy gives scientists a better understanding of behavior and, therefore, a better forecasting of outcomes. And forecasting outcomes is the critical aspect of strategic decision making.

After all, a great many questions require an understanding of multiple disciplines. Indeed, the more perplexing problems are perplexing because of the interdisciplinary aspects of the situation. The most challenging part of making good forecasts is blending the relevant disciplines into a seamless paradigm that reflects the diversity of knowledge.

That process may have to trade off some rigor for relevance. But academics worship at the altar of rigor. The rewards of rank and tenure are tied to the refereed journals that focus on the rigor, not the relevance of the knowledge enhanced. The great challenge of our time may be to get academics to give a higher priority to the relevance of their research. And nowhere is the need greater than understanding the current risk of what has been called the clash of civilizations. Avoiding the potential clash of civilizations, and the terrorist activities that are the warning signs of the growing clash, requires strategic thinking.

STRATEGIC THINKING:
SOLVING THE TERRORIST PROBLEM

The goal of the US government, along with other governments around the world, is to reduce the future supply of terrorists and the support that they receive. What is needed is a strategy that fits within US values and minimizes the down side over the long run. Such a strategy starts with understanding the underlying forces.

A working hypothesis may be built upon a combination of factors. A first assumption would be the need to understand the conditions of a society in which individual liberty is constrained severely. This lack of freedom to pursue peaceful processes of change may contribute to accepting the alternative of violence. A second assumption is that economic deprivation leads to efforts to change the system which is blamed for the deprivation. Third, it is important to try to mitigate the feeling of humiliation among the deprived people of an unfree society.

The next step is to recognize the existence of some demagogues who understand enough of human nature

to promise rewards in a hereafter, and position people to make a commitment to martyrdom such that to renege would be shameful to them and their families. This is one hypothesis of how terrorists are developed. There may be other hypotheses equally worthy or superior. But let us work with this one as a step in sketching out a long-term strategy for reducing the supply of terrorists and terrorist support, which will require more than just undermining the willingness to provide financial support for terrorist activities. New thinking is necessary to reduce the emotional support that leads terrorists to believe they are doing the right thing.

The development of a counter-terrorism strategy is based upon an interdisciplinary paradigm, which relies on some salient concepts. The first is that we must understand the system from the perspectives of diverse disciplines. The real challenge is to integrate those disciplines to forecast better the outcomes of alternative policies and subsequent actions.

The second salient concept of this strategy is an interactive concept that takes into account that the actions of others influence our actions, and that our actions, in turn, influence theirs. (The actions may be based on reason and/or emotion.) These dynamics recognize a great deal of uncertainty, which must be dealt with strategically in order to get better outcomes.

The third concept is that even though we are engaged in an inter-civilizational conflict (between Islam and the West), the conflict involves only certain parts of the Islamic world. Furthermore, the bigger conflict may be intra-civilizational (within Islam). Understanding this complexity is essential to developing a strategy for dealing with the parts of Islam that we hope to influence by our policies and actions.

The fourth salient concept is one of applying the science of networks in order to leverage our efforts. The key concept is that network behavior is not simply the summation of individual behavior. In this context, the dynamics produce different outcomes because of the impact of the different segments of Islamic populations upon one another through their connections. While there are non-Islamic terrorists and terrorist supporters, our focus is on the Islamic segment of terrorists that is the greatest threat to our way of life. The other segments of Islam come into play as part of the strategy of dealing with the potential supply of terrorists.

Much of this analysis has emerged from a book in progress that is directed primarily to social scientists. Its purpose is to influence their choice of topics in research and methodology to channel greater attention

toward the most relevant issues. The idea is to pursue the development and dissemination of knowledge that influences decisions to flesh out a mosaic that improves the quality of decisions. Using strategic thinking will help create some of the steps towards winning the peace.

THE PERFECTIVE APPROACH

A key element is the perfective approach. Using a medical analogy, curative measures include taking medication once the disease has struck. Preventive measures include inoculation against a disease. Perfective measures include eating the right foods and having health habits that create an environment that is resistant to the disease. If the disease does strike, the natural systems should be able to combat it.

The problem in this context is that terrorism is spawned under a variety of conditions in which a combination of factors produces a supply of terrorists. The theory is that by removing at least some of the conditions, the chemistry for terrorism also will be removed. Rather than waiting for an externally forced regime change, we should not let the "disease" progress to a stage in which it reaches a higher level of destruction. Cancer is a good analogy. The earliest clues are just that—clues, not certainties. The more evidence that the cancer has taken hold, the more difficult the cure.

In the case of the Palestinian situation, the difficulty is in producing a peaceful regime shift to an authority that wants peace and rejects terrorism. The Israelis could win the wars but could not win the peace because the "representative authority," the Palestinian Authority leadership, does not really want peace. They did not accept a two-state solution and have not worked toward the conditions that would ameliorate the desperation of Palestinians.

The critical step in a perfective strategy is to convince the people and their representative authority to pursue the conditions antithetical to terrorism. Some progress towards freedom and economic development that improves the quality of life of the masses is essential.

The majority of the least free countries in the world have an Islamic majority. To understand enough to deal with the issues, it is important to examine the diverse views within Islam as they relate to freedom and democracy. Additionally, one needs to conceive of a detailed, workable political structure that may enable freedom to function. A "one man, one vote, one time" approach is not a workable system for freedom, as long-

term leadership and constitutional changes are needed. The freedom these countries develop may not be our version, but is likely to focus more on the tribe and other communal groupings, rather than the individual. That approach may provide more autonomy in local areas, interestingly enough with some parallels to our state and local governments within a national context.

Clearly, the strategy needs to deal with the process for enhancing freedom as a means of stemming the supply of terrorists, if not on moral grounds alone. Putting aside the moral grounds as a basis for policy, the rationale of self-defense is sufficient to pursue some policies in fostering freedom.

THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION

Economic deprivation often is cited as a condition that breeds violence. Even without seeking to avert violence, the goal of enhancing the quality of life of others through counteracting economic deprivation is worthwhile, according to our values. Education is a vital factor in any program designed to enhance the economic status of a deprived populace.

Primitive societies require a specialized education in order for the local economy to function. Much of that education is provided informally through apprentice-related modes. Industrialized societies may use similar or even more advanced methods, but the technological content may be substantially greater at some level of organization. In the information age, societies require greater education at all levels. In short, the greater the degree of modernization in a society, the greater the educational requirements, and the greater the productivity and resulting economic well-being.

Unfortunately, many people confuse Westernization with modernity. Modernity utilizes innovation to enhance productivity and takes technological and other developments on their own terms to use as it sees fit. Westernization has adopted modernity and used it to enhance the economic quality of life, but engenders such a diversity of lifestyle choices as to make one wonder about the merits of the choices made by others. As it happens, the freedom to make the choices is an enabling condition to progress, but not without costs. Less permissive societies can adopt the benefits of modernity without committing to the Western style of living.

The adoption of the technological advances in modernity requires education, both on a technical and managerial level. When the Soviets pulled out of Central Asia, for example, most of the managerial talent

was concentrated on the foreign administrators who ran the local economies. These countries had been economically deprived as colonies. The experiences of former French and British colonies reinforce the importance of training both technocrats and bureaucrats.

In the Islamic world, this type of education is not common. The *madrassahs*, or Islamic schools, provide little, if any, scientific and social science education, producing students who are well-schooled in religion, but ill-equipped for modernity. They also learn to hate the Great Satan, America; and the Little Satan, Israel.

Obviously, education also is an important cornerstone in the operation of democratic institutions. Democracy is a participatory endeavor. Thus, people accustomed to a despotic regime have a substantial transition when the despot is removed. A population that has not been attuned to the communal aspects of decision making requires some education on the operation of democratic systems.

The 2003 *Arab Human Development Report* identified a knowledge status in the Arab countries that substantially lags the developed world. The challenge is to make progress in those areas that impact economic progress.

The great difficulty faced by the lesser-developed countries with predominately Muslim populations is that their tyrannical regimes have not fostered the development of the social service organizations amenable to democratic institutions. Many social services are delivered by organizations that also may support terrorist activities. These groups also may play a critical role in delivering education through the *madrassahs*.

The development of organizations that would provide a viable infrastructure for the transitions necessary in the problem countries will require cooperation from social scientists of Muslim heritage. They are in a better position to understand the culture, develop the institutions, and provide the technical assistance. The United States and other countries can facilitate the development of programs and use our leverage with the political leadership to facilitate a gradual process.

The reality is that an existing regime wants to protect its power. No one lives forever and it may well be that the leader may be willing to compromise with some advancement in non-governmental organizations with some erosion of power, rather than losing all power. If the countries are selected wisely, the cooperation may be forthcoming, especially since two uncooperative Islamic regimes already have fallen.

This may sound heavy handed, and heavy handedness is a problem. Power must be used wisely and, it is hoped, sparingly. But, to use strategic thinking in the context of medical treatment as an example, early treatment of any cancer works best. If the disease progresses too far down the line, the options are to burn, cut, or poison (radiology, surgery, or chemistry).

TOWARD A WORKABLE SOLUTION

The problem of terrorism may arise when the theological becomes ideological, and that ideology embraces imposition of religious or other views by force as part of a vision of extending Islam to the rest of this world. In the history of civilization, various attempts to impose Utopian solutions by violence have had horrendous costs on humanity. Some of that violence has manifested itself in the traditional warfare of conquering nations. Terrorism differs in that the terrorists do not have the military strength to conquer, but are able to resort to violence against innocent people as an expression of their will and hope of progress towards their vision.

The thinking of some terrorists is that there is no compromise. It is what they have to do in pursuing their vision. It may be characterized as a mixture of passion and reason, rooted in a culture with a set of values and experiences that leads one to choose the path of violence.

The goal of the strategic approach is to undermine the future supply of potential terrorists by helping some of the most helpable Muslim groups to develop the attributes in their societal organization that will foster overcoming the problems that breed the conditions for terrorism. To achieve this goal means assisting social scientists with an Islamic heritage in developing applications of modernism to their culture. They may take what they see appropriate from the Western vision of modernity and integrate it into their own cultures, if they so desire.

Bernard Lewis, author of *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (2003), had it right when he identified the necessity of Islam asking the right question. The question for Islam is not who did this to us. Rather it is how can it be put right. If we want to avoid a clash of civilizations, we need a strategy to help Islamic social scientists understand how they can make progress within their cultural heritage. We can't do it for them, but we can help in the process.