

The infidels are us: Anatomy of a fundamentalist cause

by [Lamin Sanneh](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

In the wake of the terrorist fury unleashed by Osama bin Laden and his Islamic al-Qaeda organization on September 11, Western analysts have been scrambling to analyze the competing ideologies that have brought about a violent collision between two cultures. The American culture of consumerism and of popular entertainment has spread deep into the Muslim world, and there collided with Islamic fundamentalism's moral struggle against infidels and their Muslim quislings.

For the most part the West has paid little heed to the competing ideologies behind the terrorist attacks, and instead has focused on what is closer at hand in terms of past U.S. actions and policies. Let's consider some of these national actions and policies to see what connections there are, if any, with foreign terrorist groups.

During the cold war, the U.S. actively fought communism in Vietnam and Cuba, but there has been no comparable American campaign against the Muslim world, so it seems unlikely that geopolitics alone could explain the vicious network that Islamic radicals have set up to terrorize the U.S. Furthermore, the Muslim countries with which bin Laden is identified contain immense wealth, which undermines the notion that his real enemy is Western-induced poverty. Bin Laden himself comes from a wealthy Saudi family, and his terrorist network hasn't shown particular solidarity with impoverished populations in, say, India, Africa and Latin America. As far as we know, bin Laden hasn't challenged the economic injustice that was exacerbated by the phenomenon of "Petro-Islam," which has funneled oil revenues to a tiny minority of Muslim elites.

The U.S. support of Israel—including its connivance in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's repressive policies in Gaza and the West Bank—has understandably caused outrage around the world, and that has been given as a reason for the attacks. While America's unconditional backing of Israel continues to hinder relations with Muslim regimes, it is difficult to see how that could account for both fundamentalism and

terrorism. Many in the Middle East remember that America had little say in the founding of the state of Israel, and that it was Czechoslovakia that saved the infant state from certain oblivion by providing military aid. And in the Suez crisis of 1956, the U.S. intervened on the side of Egypt and against the British government, forcing the withdrawal of British, French and Israeli troops from the Suez Canal. If that intervention was meant as a strategic geopolitical move, it backfired: in the aftermath of the Suez crisis, Egypt, Iraq and Syria formed a cold-war alliance with the Soviet Union. (Malcolm Kerr describes this shift in his indispensable book, *The Arab Cold War*.) Together the Soviet Union and its Arab allies assailed the U.S. on the floor of the UN, and much present-day American resentment of the UN harks back to that time.

An oft-repeated reason given for anti-Western Islamic views is U.S. support for corrupt undemocratic Muslim governments, but that reason also seems inadequate given the relative weakness in conservative societies of domestic support for progressive social policies. To accuse the U.S. of allowing corrupt regimes to hold off on domestic social reform lest their people charge them with betraying their culture seems circuitous. What interest of the U.S. does it serve that authoritarian regimes promote a conservative cultural agenda to stem cultural defections to the West? The external influence of the U.S. has not helped even its staunchest allies when the radicals have come calling, as the case of the shah of Iran showed.

A litany of sins of omission and commission has been laid at the feet of the U.S. to explain the nature of the radical Islamic anti-Western campaign, including slavery, racism and global unilateralism. It has been widely noted that the U.S. government recently pulled out of the Kyoto agreement on the environment, refused to recognize the International Court of Human Rights at the Hague, held off on paying its UN dues, walked out of the UN racism conference in South Africa and abandoned the ABM treaty. Yet it's not clear why such sins should outrage Muslim fundamentalists more than they do, say, transatlantic leftists. In any case, it seems unlikely that the Muslim world would rise in righteous indignation on the issue of reparations for slavery, since the Muslim practice and defense of slavery—from the Zanj slave revolt in the ninth century to the plight of captives in Sudan today—is well documented.

A further explanation is that anti-U.S. terrorism is yet another manifestation of anti-imperialism. This is not a convincing argument either, however, though it contains a grain of truth. The U.S. took a very active role in the process of decolonization, even

if cold-war considerations often overshadowed its commitment to nationalism. And there have been other imperialisms, too, such as those of Russia and Japan. In fact, Islam itself is not innocent of imperial pretensions, as manifest in Islamic expansionist regimes under the Arabs, the Mongols, the Ottomans, and the Moghuls of the Indian subcontinent. It was Ivan the Great who freed Russia of the Tartar yoke. One might argue, accordingly, that America has appropriated the sense of dominion that was once Islam's. It has extended its influence over the entire world, including the Muslim world, not by pursuing a policy of suppressing religion but by requiring no religious mandate for its policies.

Americanization has meant secularization, has meant in effect the arrogant display of power without divine acknowledgment. That development represents a direct challenge to the fundamentalist concept of the divine nature of authority and of human stewardship of worldly affairs. And so when conscience-stricken Muslims find their public spaces filled with what they perceive as the unwholesome content of American mass culture, they recoil in outrage and look for a religious response. Poverty is not the issue here, but rather the excesses of a global consumer culture in which America is dominant. Perhaps that is the grain of truth that stirs the passion of the radicals who see America standing in their way.

In the end, there's something circular about the nature of anti-U.S. feeling in the Muslim world, something that resists simple explanations of cause and effect. U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia include many who, according to published reports, have converted to Islam, yet Osama bin Laden considers them infidels simply for being American. That is why it's misleading to view the September 11 attacks as payback for a specific set of grievances. For years, America has found itself in a Catch-22 in the eyes of the radicals. They are equally aggrieved by America's friendship with the Muslim world and America's alleged hostility. That makes a coherent or effective response difficult to formulate.

Bin Laden, his agents and his numerous sympathizers have an agenda, a clear set of goals they have enunciated repeatedly. Bin Laden has condemned the stationing of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, saying they constitute an infidel defilement of sacred soil. He has also called for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops in the gulf so that Islam may be left free to fill its God-appointed role of world dominance. And the establishment of the state of Israel continues to serve as cannon fodder for the fundamentalist anti-Western rhetoric. Indeed, the appeal of bin Laden among the Muslim masses draws on a kind of free-floating conviction that America is an

impediment to Muslim world dominion.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York City and at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., the highly esteemed Islamic jurist Shaykh Tantawi, the shaykh al-Azhar of Egypt, reportedly handed Osama bin Laden only a mild rebuke, rather than a stern fatwa stripping him of his identity as a Muslim. And the editor of a Muslim newsletter cautioned President Bush against counting on a subservient Islam to support his campaign in Afghanistan. Islam's subservient status in the West, warned the editor, is being corrected by robust growth that will bring about a pan-Islamic resurgence (Abdul Hamid in the *New Haven Register*, October 10).

Inexpedient as it may be for Muslim leaders to admit, bin Laden's actions seem to evoke deep sentiments of Islamic pride against an overweening West. Stripped of any hope of a better life for themselves and roused by ritual incantation of past Islamic greatness, the Muslim masses easily respond to notions of moral election. To some Muslims, bin Laden's transnational terrorist network seems a symbol of international Islamic solidarity.

In light of that pan-Islamic sentiment, anti-Western enmity seems more like the result of a worldwide divide. For Muslim fundamentalists, the world is embroiled in a cosmic conflict between truth and falsehood, between light and darkness, between virtue and vice.

Because it draws a sharp line between an individual's private life and his or her outward public actions, the West inhabits the realm of enmity, and is judged guilty for having reduced religion to the level of the private and subjective while elevating politics and economics to the levels of public good and objective commitment. That, say the fundamentalists, has produced a culture of pornography, promiscuity, abortion, divorce and other vices, proof of the West's guilt, and reason for waging a jihad against the West. For a long time, the radicals have concocted from this index of Western decadence a coarse-grind fundamentalism that seeks to subdue the West as a corollary to extending the rule of truth and virtue. They maintain that believers are enjoined by God's revelation to line up on the side of truth and virtue against the agents of Satan, God's adversary.

When President Bush declared war on terrorism by saying those who are not with the U.S. are on the side of the terrorists, he appealed to a familiar fundamentalist polarization. But a significant difference is that fundamentalists claim scriptural warrant to the effect that contending with infidels requires holy war in which the end

justifies the means. Scriptural appeal for this fundamentalist view has the effect of handing embattled Muslims a doctrinal advantage and putting their modernist opponents on the defensive. Having all along professed adherence to the Qur'an as infallible and exclusive divine speech, even moderate Muslims are constrained not to dissent too openly from this characterization of the West as infidel. Many Muslims, egged on by Western allies, would say publicly that bin Laden's monolithic view is not representative of Islam, but privately, watched by their disaffected co-religionists, they are slow to defend the West's innocence.

Muslim conservatives and radicals alike view the West as an enemy that has few intrinsic virtues, though the West is seen as having many tactical uses. Aware of the charismatic appeal of bin Laden, for example, Saudi and Pakistani authorities have tried to walk a fine line between showing support for the U.S. cause and not giving offense to the sympathizers of bin Laden. These countries dislike the fact that America has put them in that position, and have said so. A rift between the ruling House of Saud, which wants to be rid of the phantom of bin Laden, and rank-and-file Saudis who admire him would erupt from a close alliance with the U.S.

Bin Laden released an audio tape last summer in which he lashed out against the U.S. and Israel and boasted about U.S. weakness. The tape became a hotly sought-after item on the black market, much to the alarm—and the embarrassment—of Saudi authorities. And a Saudi journalist, who asked for anonymity, admitted that in the eyes of ordinary Muslims, bin Laden has become a symbol of anti-American defiance (*New York Times*, October 5). In such an environment, the perception of a pro-American bias in the Saudi regime could provoke a widespread pro-bin Laden backlash and threaten the regime's stability. The same is true in Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbor.

Typically, fundamentalist groups see their struggle as a war on two fronts: one against the compromisers within, and the other against the infidels without. Many Muslim countries are reluctant to spark an internal struggle against bin Laden's forces, and so they are circumspect about throwing in their lot with a secular America. President Bush has not made it easier for these Muslim countries by stressing that the war on terrorism is not directed at Muslims, and that Islam is a noble religion of peace and tolerance. Watched by suspicious clerics, Muslim leaders find a poisoned chalice in the endorsement of the infidel West.

So how should the U.S. proceed against the terrorists? The military alliance against terrorism cannot be an adequate or effective response—in part because military action inflames fundamentalist passion, in part because a free society is a haven that cannot preclude the possibility of a potential terrorist, and in part because terrorists are not a discrete ethnic or social group. A terrorist cannot be identified before an act of terrorism has been committed; prior to September 11, Mohamed Atta was, by all accounts, a person of normal habits, what Muslims call “a mere son of Adam” (*min bani Adama*). And if the existence of the terrorist is established by the act of terrorism, then an effective defense would necessarily reach potential terrorists—by means other than force—before they acted, assuming they can be identified.

An ideal but not unrealistic solution to the terrorist problem would be to persuade bin Laden’s supporters and allies to abandon their black-and-white division of the world and to concede that there are people of God even in unlikely places—among America’s millions of Muslim citizens, for example. This would require the fundamentalists to make a mental shift, to go back to the drawing board and reflect on how Muslims are commanded to proclaim, “*Allah-u-Akbar*” (“God, than whom is nothing greater”), a call that makes Allah the greatest (*akbar*) goal of fallible human quest instead of making Islam an end in itself. That would make God’s compassion and mercifulness—to which the Qur’an testifies—our hope against permanent enmity with God or with God’s self-appointed foot soldiers. In this view, the West would be seen as a mixed bag of good and bad, no different from any other society—including those in the Muslim world.

In the words of the 19th-century Muslim scholar Muhammad al-Kanemi, “No age and country is free from its share of heresy and sin, not even Egypt, Syria and all the cities of Islam in which acts of immorality and disobedience without number have long been committed.” Al-Kanemi rejected drawing a hard-and-fast line between truth and falsehood, between faith and disobedience, saying that only tolerance and mutual acceptance can avert permanent war brought on by the blind champions of revelation. He argued that religious intolerance is a form of disobedience, for it sets out to force the hand of God. Moreover, the Qur’an admonishes believers to be securers of justice and witnesses for God, and not to “let detestation for a people move you not to be equitable” (5:11).

On his own terms, bin Laden may be too implacable to be swayed by such arguments, but his sympathizers, cut off from personal contact with him and

reached out to by peace-loving Muslims, may not be. They might agree with the view that Muslims, too, are fallible beings, and so they should preach forbearance with all humanity when they call for fundamental faithfulness to scripture.

For balance, the West should make a commensurate modification of secularization as the alternative to religion—certainly not by way of a return to imposing religious adherence, but by way of overhauling the view that political freedom is somehow undermined by religious practice, and so is incompatible with it. James Madison, for example, affirmed in 1784 that the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience would be destroyed by the establishment of religion as an engine of civil policy. The infringement of religious freedom is not just an offense to the state, he said, but is an offense against God. There are sound religious reasons for religious tolerance, Madison argues.

[All] are to be considered as retaining an equal right to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience. While we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace the religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us. If this freedom be abused, it is an offense against God, *not against man* [emphasis in original]. The Christian religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them.

A religion not invented by human policy cannot depend for the truth of its claims on human enforcement. That, says Madison, demonstrates the innate excellence of religion, making religion worthy of the free assent of men and women.

Ironically, this tolerant view is anticipated in the injunction of the Qur'an to the effect that "there is no compulsion in religion" (2: 256). All of this is by way of saying that the Founding Fathers were prescient in intending that religion should never be suppressed in public life or in dealings with the rest of the world. Their brand of liberalism was not opposed to religion, only to its establishment, and so there is no reason why today a reconstructed liberalism that is respectful of religion should be in conflict with human freedoms or with the demands for intercultural encounter with Muslims.

The dramatic events of September 11 have concentrated the minds of many on how to move forward in a constructive way in relations between Islam's religious heritage and the West's liberal tradition. The competition between the two worldviews represented by Americanization and Islamization will not be moderated or even changed by the military attacks against Afghanistan, nor do such attacks make it easier to focus on underlying issues of misunderstanding and mistrust. Yet outside the ominous sound of exploding bombs and beyond the reach of guided missiles lie great tracks of the Muslim world that have, for their own reasons, embraced Islamization without demonizing difference. Similarly, above and beyond the din and spin of consumerism and fashion persists an enduring Western tradition of respect for freedom and tolerance of difference, religious or other.

Given the fact that Islamization has spread in the West under conditions of religious freedom such as Madison described, it is relevant to ask whether a similar prospect can be envisaged for Americanization in the Muslim world. In part that has been happening, as in the U.S. engagement with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states without a demand for secularization. Perhaps the world that the fundamentalists see in sharp and simplistic terms has shrunk rapidly from the combined effects of Americanization and Islamization, which between them have complicated life for simplifiers, backing them into a corner. If so, the recent spate of moves against the U.S., from the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979 to the September 11 attacks, reflects a crisis of weakness in the fundamentalist cause. It is that crisis that has prompted the recent attacks—a spectacular bid to bump up a falling stock. At any rate, given a choice, the majority of Muslims would likely prefer coexistence with the West and prosperity—which might explain why the zealots have fanned their demonology to ignite terrorism abroad and unrest at home.

The terrorist attacks should not, because of their evil character and deadly toll, absolve us from the difficult and complex business of seeking moral justification for our response. The whole point about our implacable and unquenchable opposition to the terrorists is that, in spite of the massive power at our disposal, we do not flinch from moral scrutiny.

That message needs to be taken beyond our shores to the world the terrorists infest. To be successful, the Western-led coalition must plug the gaps between wealth and deprivation, authoritarianism and powerlessness, men and women, privilege and indifference, knowledge and ignorance, and access and isolation, and strengthen people's faith in their own possibility. To do so would require the West to embark on

a long-term peace offensive abroad by securing local military structures in an alliance for constitutional rule, by supporting the cause of moderate Muslims at home and abroad, and by fostering democratic renewal and exchange throughout the Muslim world.