

# Terrorism: Icon of Resentment

By Peter Stork

Terrorism, one of the complex and contradictory phenomena at work in the contemporary world, continues to defy one-dimensional explanations.

As a kind of “asymmetrical war” its roots go back to antiquity. In the first century, the “dagger-men” or *sicarii* warred against Roman occupational forces as contract killers in Palestine. The Assassins of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a breakaway faction of Shia Islam, waged war by eliminating key enemy leaders. This cult showed recognizable characteristics of terrorism as we know it today. Individuals went on suicide missions inspiring fearful awe in their enemies by waiting next to their slain victims to be killed or captured.

Parisian mobs murdered prominent officials and aristocrats in gruesome spectacles during the French Revolution. It was its “reign of terror” that first lent meaning to the words “terrorist” and “terrorism”. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Anarchists assassinated heads of state in Russia, France, Spain, Italy, and the United States, spurred on by radical political theories and improved weapons technology. These attacks on the nation state marked the beginning of political and ideological terrorism which rose to prominence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century under Communism, to be replaced in the 21<sup>st</sup> by the terror of militant Islamists.

Yet no amount of historical analysis takes our understanding of the terrorist paradigm beyond its banal violent-political ramifications. This article attempts to open another window.

Islamist terrorism is tied to a world different from ours. However, it would be fallacious to explain the paradigm out of this difference. Since the openly confessed religious motivation of many terrorists and their claim that their violence is beyond human judgment and reason because it is “sacred” is incomprehensible to secularized Western culture, they are easily written off as religious fanatics. Such a reading only sweeps the real question under the proverbial carpet.

Others see terrorists in the same light as anti-liberal, anti-Western and anti-capitalist revolutionaries. Although this view allows them to argue that the very nihilism, which once fed Nazism and Communism now feeds Islamism, whose logic absolutizes terror and reveres the desire for annihilation, it too misses the deeper and more disturbing anthropological question of what the terrorist paradigm actually says about us as human beings.

Renowned French/American cultural anthropologist René Girard has written extensively about how human relations are essentially relations of imitation driven by a reciprocal (mimetic) desire to possess what others have—violently if need be.

According to Girard, this propensity for imitation functions as the invisible hand in culture and society. Yet we are generally unaware of its presence, let alone of its potential for rivalry. One reason for this blind spot is that our imitative inclination is also the force behind all our striving for happiness, equality and recognition. As such, it locks us into an inescapable collective enterprise of never-ending reciprocal demands.

Since this acquisitive and competitive element in human beings exists not only between persons but also between countries and cultures, it renders highly implausible the concept that a “social contract” is the mother institution of human society. Rather, with Girard, the more we try to achieve happiness, success or “victory” however defined the more conflict-prone we become. Girard noted, for instance, that conflictual behavior increases in formerly oppressed groups following their liberation. The closer they came to reaching their goals, the more sensitized they became to the slightest inequalities. This heightened awareness of equality released the passion of envy, which in turn increased their readiness to engage in conflict.

If we apply mimetic theory to the paradigm of terrorism, new perspectives begin to emerge. First, we can dismiss the simplistic view that terrorism is attributable to the frustration in the third world which has caused the dispossessed to rally against the West under the banner of *jihad*. We only have to take into account the effectiveness and training of terrorist to note that they do not belong to a victimized underclass. Quite the contrary, they are the product of Western educational opportunities and

technological sophistication. Moreover, from the view point of their religion their murderous frenzy does not seem to qualify as *jihad* as Youssef Ibrahim noted in the *Middle East Times*: “We now watch on television hundreds of innocent Iraqis lying without limbs, bleeding in the street dead or wounded for life [executed by Iraqis]. If this is jihad someone got his religious education completely upside down”.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the phenomenon that deserves our attention, however, is the attitude of many terrorists to death. Certainly, in terms of their religion they model in their dying a form of saintliness, but even this status symbol does not fully explain why the call to suicide resonates so powerfully with relatively well-off and educated young men in the middle-class suburbs of the Middle East, as well as Western cities. Only when viewed through the lens of imitative desire, does their deathwish become more transparent: they go to their death not only to annihilate others, but in order to be copied!

Thirdly, violence, regardless of whether it is used for personal gratification or to bring about a better world, is justified as “sacred”, no matter how “heinous, irrational, or inexplicable” says Dawn Perlmutter, Director of the Institute for the Research of Organized and Ritual Violence. Her comparative studies of modern Satanists and terrorism has revealed numerous and compelling parallels. Both groups never regard their violence as “violation”, and both keep making absolutist demands as they see themselves mysteriously locked into a perpetual conflict with other ideologies.

Girard’s theory sheds light also on this feature. Terrorists are both attracted and repelled by the West. While they are often scandalized by its decadence, they find its power, wealth and freedoms irresistible. This double-bind leads them into a morbid and deadly (mimetic) fascination with their “antagonists” while its vengefulness hits out at life. But not at life per se, but at the inability to find real life among the welter of choices that an affluent consumer world presents as objects of desire, where true identity must nevertheless be found only in the other.

Thus the terrorist represents the icon of resentful humanity, the man of vengeance par excellence, who unconsciously—yet deceptively—projects his violence as *redemptive* violence, which he believes is able to transform the world. This mythological mindset unwittingly believes a lie. It therefore cannot respond to true reason. According to Girard, it belongs to the very nature of myths to conceal violence. Killing is ritualized, murder is

(mis)presented as “divine service”, and victims are cast in the role of scapegoats who as bearers of “the sins of the world” must be sacrificed if order is to be restored.

What does all this mean for the future?

Given the contagious (mimetic) nature of violence, the probability is high that through relentless provocations and retaliations violence may spin out of control. Since in this game no-one can tell when the price in terms of innocent victims is too high, humanity finds itself at a cross road. Which path will we follow, bifurcated as it is by the difference between presumption and hope?

Presumption says there are no foundations other than those of human decisions, humans are in control, all problems are soluble and we can secure our own future, with improved economics, higher education, and better (weapons) technology. Presumption neglects human destiny. Travelers along this path—whether political leaders or terrorists—display in their reactions the deep-seated hopelessness and despair, which lies at the core of the paradigm of presumption, their bravado notwithstanding.

Hope, on the other hand, takes a different posture. Marked by trust rather than the desire for control, it lives from the assurance that the universe is mysteriously in accord with humanity. Hope trusts that in the end all things will turn out well, even though not necessarily according to human foresight and effort.

However, when presumption and despair are on the loose, the number of victims and their suffering will multiply, just as the chances will increase that this unholy pair will beget the apocalyptic beast of unstoppable violence.

Since only true hope is able to dissipate our fears, and since only forgiveness can breach the cycle of resentment and vengeance, it points to the path that leads to life. Following it, however, means not to shrink from the human condition, but to face it head on beginning with our own participation in it. Or with apologies to William Shakespeare: ‘To repent or not to repent of our violent ways that is the question!’

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<sup>1</sup> Youssef M. Ibrahim, “Opinion: The Muslim Mind on Fire”, *Middle East Times* (Nicosia, Cyprus), 26 July 2005, International Edition. Ibrahim was a former Middle East correspondent of the New York Times