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***Democracy as Counter-Terrorism in the Middle East: A Red Herring?***

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# Democracy as Counter-Terrorism in the Middle East: A Red Herring?

Katerina DALACOURA\*

## ABSTRACT:

The shock of the 9/11 attacks had complex and profound effects on US policy in the Middle East. One result was the decision of George W. Bush's administration to place the discourse of democracy promotion at centre stage in its policy towards the region. This decision was based on the notion that the spread of democracy would serve as antidote to the emergence of Islamist terrorism and enhance Western security. This paper challenges the assumption that the causes of Islamist terrorism can be solely or primarily reduced to the political factors of exclusion and repression. The paper then argues that, if authoritarianism is not the cause of Islamist terrorism, we must look elsewhere for an explanation. Economic and social causes are not the main issue at play here either. Far from seeing them as irrational actors driven by religious or millenarian motives, Islamist terrorists – similarly to most other terrorist organisations, with some exceptions - are rational and calculating in their choice of tactics. Promoting democracy as an antidote to terrorism must be replaced by alternative policies. If we accept that Islamist movements adopt terrorist tactics for instrumental or strategic reasons, effective counter-terrorism will start from the understanding that Islamist terrorists are rational actors, who will always make cost-benefit analyses with regards to the use of terrorist tactics.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Islamist Terrorism, Democracy, Middle East, Countering Terrorism, Western Foreign Policy

## Ortadoğu'da Terörle Mücadele Aracı Olarak Demokrasi: Kandırmaca mı?

### ÖZET

11 Eylül saldırılarının şoku ABD'nin Ortadoğu politikaları üzerinde karmaşık ve kapsamlı etkiler yarattı. Bu etkilerden biri, George W. Bush yönetiminin bölgeye yönelik politikalarının merkezine demokrasinin desteklenmesi söylemini yerleştirmesi oldu. Bu kararın arkasında, demokrasiyi yayarak İslami terörizmin orta çıkışının önüne geçmek ve böylece Batının güvenliğini sağlamak yer almaktaydı. Bu çalışma İslami terörizmin sebeplerinin sadece dışlama ve baskı gibi siyasi unsurlara indirgenmesi varsayımına karşı çıkmaktadır. Makale İslami terörizmin sebeplerinin otoriteryanizm ve ekonomik ve sosyal sebeplerle ilintili olduğunu savunmaktadır. İslamcı teröristler, bir takım istisnalar dışında, benzer diğer örgütler gibi taktik seçimlerinin maliyetlerini hesap eden rasyonel aktörlerdir. Terörizmin panzehiri olarak görülen demokrasinin desteklenmesi anlayışının yerini alternatif politikalar almalıdır. İslami hareketlerin araçsal ve stratejik nedenlerle terörist taktikleri tercih ettiklerini kabul ettiğimiz takdirde etkin bir terörizmle mücadelede bahsedilebilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Terörizm, İslamcı Terörizm, Demokrasi, Ortadoğu, Terörle Mücadele, Batılı Dış Politika

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## Introduction

One of the many outcomes of the 9/11 attacks was a return to the debate about the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East region. Seemingly impervious to the various “waves” of democratisation, which swept other parts of the world, the Middle East remained mired in brutal and dictatorial political practices. Therein lay an important explanation for the emergence of Islamist terrorism now threatening the West with renewed vigour. This was not a new idea, of course. Many had previously drawn the connections between the authoritarianism and terrorism.<sup>1</sup> However, the neo-conservative cohort within the administration of George W. Bush, which became more influential after 9/11, placed much more emphasis on it.<sup>2</sup>

If one sees authoritarianism as a major cause of Islamist terrorism, it follows that democratization is its antidote:<sup>3</sup> This dictum now shaped US policy. The 9/11 attacks galvanized the Bush administration into offensive action in the Middle East, beginning with the intervention in Afghanistan. This was followed by the announcement of the intention to promote democracy in the region with renewed energy, with the explicit purpose of protecting US security.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years on, we can now take stock of US policy of promoting democracy as counter-terrorism in the Middle East. This paper debunks the assumption on which the Bush counter-terrorism policy was based, which was that authoritarianism in the Middle East was at least one important cause of Islamist terrorism. It suggests, in its stead, that an instrumental or strategic explanation of Islamist terrorism is more convincing. On the basis of this argument, the paper argues that promoting democracy as a way of countering terrorism is a red herring. It subsequently outlines an alternative approach, which can serve as the foundation for counter-terrorism strategies.

## The Causes of Islamist Terrorism<sup>5</sup>

Attempting to answer the question “what are the causes of Islamist terrorism” would be foolhardy. We can never fully and satisfactorily account for this complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. However there must be at least some attempt to systematize and understand its underlying causes, particularly if we are asked about ways of preventing and, ultimately, defeating or containing it.

<sup>1</sup> Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World*, London, Lynne Rienner, 2003. Although Hafez is not discussing terrorism but rebellion, the substance of his argument was that repression and exclusion led to extreme reactions. The bulk of Hafez’s research was completed before the attacks of 9/11.

<sup>2</sup> Katerina Dalacoura, “US Democracy Promotion in the Arab Middle East after 11 September 2001: A Critique”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 5, 2005, p.974.

<sup>3</sup> President George W. Bush, “Remarks by President George W. Bush at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy”, 6 Nov. 2003, <http://www.ned.org/george-w-bush/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary> (Accessed on 10 November 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Colin Powell, “The Middle East Partnership Initiative”, 12 December 2002, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2002/12/sec-of-state-colin-powell-the-us-middle-east-partnership-initiative> (Accessed on 10 November 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The material in this section draws on my book, *Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Many have sought the causes of Islamist terrorism in an extremist interpretation of Islam. In International Relations, and the social sciences more generally, increasing attention is given in recent years to the power of ideas, as opposed to material factors, in shaping political phenomena.<sup>6</sup> However, the argument that Islamic beliefs are the cause of political phenomena and the actions of Islamist or Muslim groups predates these social science debates. The view that Islam as a whole is inherently linked to violence and terrorism is hardly ever defended openly in academic works –though it seeps into them occasionally<sup>7</sup>– but it has wide and persistent popular appeal. More often, the more sophisticated view that only some interpretations of Islam are conducive to terrorist activities is adopted. However, I argue that this explanation of Islamist terrorism is inadequate. It tells us about the justification of terrorism but does not explain why one, as opposed to many other interpretations of a religious text or tradition, is being adopted. For this, we need to turn to materialist or structural explanations according to which ideas are epiphenomenal to the underlying reasons, which drive Islamist terrorism.

There are three categories of such explanations: political, socio-economic and instrumental or strategic. Political explanations refer specifically to authoritarian structures. With regards to the Middle East, where the attackers of 9/11 originated, the argument was made that the suppression of peaceful, alternative means of political expression and participation, and also the brutalization of individuals through long-standing oppression, encouraged them to turn to violent –and in some cases terrorist– methods of pursuing their objectives.

Despite being persuasive at face value, however, the evidence that Islamist terrorism is causally connected to authoritarianism in the Middle East is not consistent. We can observe this with reference to the three main types of Islamist terrorism in the Middle East: transnational (for example, *al Qaeda*); terrorism associated with national liberation (for example, *Hamas*); and terrorism in the context of domestic insurgencies (for example, the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, or GIA).

The beginnings of what came to be called “*al Qaeda*” can be found in the late 1980s in Afghanistan, when a group of radical individuals coalesced around Osama Bin Laden during the war against the Soviet Union. Bin Laden moved to Sudan in early 1990s from where he was expelled in 1996. After that, he returned to Afghanistan, where he struck an alliance with the Taliban. In the 1990s, a shift occurred in *al Qaeda* from targeting the “near” enemy (Middle East regimes deemed to have betrayed Islam) to the “far” enemy (the United States and its allies). By 2001 Bin Laden had become the focal point of a group of around one hundred operatives that was able to organize and carry out the dramatic 9/11 attacks. The overwhelming US reaction to the attacks, however, led to

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998; Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996; Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity and Institutional Rationality in International Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999. For a more recent example that includes the Middle East, see Toby Dodge, “The Ideological Roots of Failure: The Application of Kinetic Neo-Liberalism to Iraq”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> For a cogent example, see Walter Lacqueur, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.129-30.

the dismantling of *al Qaeda's* command and control structures. This caused a transfer of operations to local affiliates, which were inspired by *al Qaeda* and carried its ideological banner but were, to all intents and purposes, autonomous from it.<sup>8</sup>

Authoritarianism in the Middle East can be linked to *al Qaeda's* choice of tactics in multiple and subtle ways. Alienation caused by repression made some citizens of Middle East dictatorships receptive to Bin Laden's message. Once recruits joined the movement, the rootlessness of their existence, which was inextricably linked to their transnational mode of operation, reinforced their radicalization. Many of the stories of individual *al Qaeda* operatives conform to this picture. Moving around from country to country, existing in a "bubble" even when they stayed more permanently in one place, communicating with others in cyberspace rather than face-to-face, placed them in "spirals of encapsulation".<sup>9</sup> Increasingly they moved away from a mind-set conducive to negotiation and compromise. The personal stories of Ayman al Zawahiri, Abu Mus'ab al Suri and many others, including some of the 9/11 hijackers, illustrate such patterns.<sup>10</sup>

However, there are powerful reasons against accepting the view that such a mode of operation inevitably pushes individuals or groups to extremist action. The case of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* serves as counter-example. It has remarkable similarities to *al Qaeda* not just in its fundamentalist ideology but also in its transnational mode of existence and operation, which often isolates its members from society. However, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* has stayed away from the use of violence in general and terrorism in particular.<sup>11</sup> Rootlessness can but does not necessarily lead to extremism and the adoption of terrorist tactics.

The Palestinian *Hamas* has used terrorist methods in the context of waging a national liberation struggle against Israel. A careful tracing of its history demonstrates that, although they played a role, exclusion from the political process and repression were *not* the main reasons for the movement's decision, at various points, to employ terrorist tactics. *Hamas* emerged around the beginning of the Palestinian *Intifada* in 1988 but did not use terrorist tactics during the *Intifada*, despite repression by the Israeli authorities. It took part in acts of civil disobedience, such as demonstrations, stone throwing, blocking roads and writing slogans, and also targeted Israeli soldiers. However, *Hamas* gradually

<sup>8</sup> On *al Qaeda* generally, see Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, London, Penguin, 2007; Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, and *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011; Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11*, New York, Knopf, 2006; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, and *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; Thomas Heghammer, "Global Jihadism after the Iraq War", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> On *Hizb ut Tahrir* generally, see Alisher Khamidov, *Countering the Call: the U.S., Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and Religious Extremism in Central Asia*, Washington D.C., Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2003; Suha Taji-Farouki, *A Fundamental Quest: Hizb Al-Tahrir and the Search for an Islamic Caliphate*, Grey Seal, 1996.

started engaging in terrorist methods from 1991. Its paramilitary organization, the *al Qassam* Brigades, was created that year. This was partly in response to an increased Israeli crackdown in late 1990 and early 1991. However, the shift to violence and terrorism increased in reaction to the possibility of a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace, which followed the Madrid talks and the signature of the Declaration of Principles (“Oslo”) in September 1993.

*Hamas* has argued that the resort to terrorist tactics was a direct response to both Israeli repression in general and the Goldstein massacre in Hebron in February 1994, when an Israeli settler and right-wing extremist, Baruch Goldstein, attacked a group of Palestinians praying in the Cave of the Patriarchs, killing 29 and wounding more than a hundred.<sup>12</sup> This was partly true, as is the claim that it was a response to repression by the Palestinian Authority. However, the timing of the attacks cannot be wholly explained thus. Political exclusion did not cause the resort to terrorist methods either. *Hamas* escalated its attacks after refusing to participate in the January 1996 national elections on the grounds that they represented a legitimization of Oslo.<sup>13</sup> In the post-Oslo era of the late 1990s, popular support for *Hamas* declined. It rose again after the failure of Camp David negotiations in July 2000 and the start of the *al Aqsa Intifada* in September of that year. Terrorist methods used by *Hamas* were seen as a way of defeating Israel and increasing its popularity among the Palestinian population: this was the reason why they were used, rather than Israeli repression. In fact, severe repression by Israel after 2003 caused the *abandonment* of terrorist methods by *Hamas*.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of the GIA, which led a domestic insurgency against the Algerian regime in the 1990s, it can again be shown that political exclusion and repression did not play the determining role in the adoption of terrorist tactics. The emergence of the GIA is often traced to the history of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), and in particular the military coup which followed its imminent electoral victory in January 1992. However, the suppression and exclusion of the FIS following the coup led to its fragmentation. The kernel of the GIA had already formed before the suspension of the electoral process, as became clear in the Guemmar attack of November 1991. The core leadership of the GIA consisted of Algerian “Afghans” and in particular the extreme *al Muwabbhidun* group. For the various entities, which coalesced into the GIA in 1992-3, the coup of January 1992 was not the reason for taking up arms. Instead, it confirmed in their eyes the futility of the electoral process.

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<sup>12</sup> The massacre was not seen as the act of an individual but as part of Israeli repression more widely.

<sup>13</sup> Rejecting Oslo does not necessarily entail refusing to participate in the elections. Other opponents of Oslo did participate. See Cherif Ouazani, “Mort d’un juste”, *Jeune Afrique*, No. 2438, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> On *Hamas* generally, see Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, London, IB Tauris, 1996; Khaled Hroub, “A ‘New Hamas’ Through Its New Documents”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol., 34, No. 4, 2006; Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence*, London, Hurst, 2007; Ziad Abu-Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza: Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994; Glen Robinson, “*Hamas* as a Social Movement”, Quintan Wiktorowicz (Ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004; Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000; Don Peretz, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990; Menachem Klein, “*Hamas* in Power”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2007.

The suppression of the FIS led to the widening of the rebellion. The GIA expanded in May 1994 when two senior leaders of the FIS, Mohamed Said and Said Mekhloufi joined it. However, the suppression of the FIS and the move of some of its former members into the GIA did not cause the latter's rebellion or its choice of tactics. Indeed, the FIS established the AIS in 1994, which did not engage in the same kind of violence as the GIA and denounced the indiscriminate targeting of civilians.<sup>15</sup>

The examples above show that, although they sometimes played a role, repression and political exclusion were not the main explanatory factors behind the emergence of Islamist terrorism. Does it follow that other material or structural reasons were at play? Although appearing to be convincing, socio-economic explanations, which attribute the resort to terrorism to poverty, deprivation and desperation, do not hold up to scrutiny either. The information we have about most of *al Qaeda's* operatives suggests that they are not destitute or driven to despair for economic reasons. One could argue that the socio-economic plight of the Palestinians may have led to the decision of Hamas to use desperate measures. However, the link here is very indirect and does not explain why terrorist tactics were used or avoided at particular times. In the case of the GIA we can perhaps establish a stronger link between poverty and relative deprivation –and the seeking of economic gain– and terrorist tactics but, yet again, this does not explain the timing of the decisions.<sup>16</sup>

The histories of the three groups used here as case studies demonstrate that instrumental or strategic accounts of why terrorist methods were adopted or abandoned are the most convincing. *Al Qaeda's* suicide attacks were driven by its leaders' calculation that they would lead to maximum concessions from Western democracies.<sup>17</sup> Hamas also chose terrorism at various points in its confrontation with Israel and the Palestinian Authority to achieve specific objectives at particular junctures: to undermine the Oslo process and increase its standing in Palestinian society. In the case of the GIA, extreme methods like the indiscriminate targeting of civilians were not the result of irrational or millenarian thinking but of a rational calculation that it would bring maximum benefits.<sup>18</sup>

### Democracy as a Red Herring

<sup>15</sup> On the GIA and the Algerian crisis generally, see Luiz Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War 1990–1998*, London, Hurst, 2003; Hugh Roberts, *Battlefield Algeria, 1988–2002: Studies in a Broken Polity*, London, Verso, 2003; John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005; Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria, Anger of the Dispossessed*, London, Yale University Press, 2007; Mohammed Hafez, "From Marginalization to Massacres: Explaining GIA Violence in Algeria", Quintan Wiktorowicz (Ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004; Stathis Kalyvas "Wanton and Senseless?: The Logic of Massacres in Algeria", *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War*. On the socio-economic causes of terrorism generally see, Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, "Education, Poverty, and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2003; Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*, New York, Columbia University, 2002; Saad Eddin Ibrahim "Egypt's Islamic Militants", *MERIP Reports*, No. 103, 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York, Random House, 2005. Gerges argues that these tactics were aimed at escalating the conflict into a re-creation of the conditions of the fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s, this time against the USA. Gerges, *The Far Enemy*.

<sup>18</sup> Kalyvas, "Wanton and Senseless?".

The core premise behind US democracy promotion in the Middle East in the post-9/11 period was that it would improve Western security. To that effect, the US government announced a series of measures such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in 2002. The United States was also a key player in the decision by the G8 to announce a Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) programme of promoting democracy in 2005. Increased funding and attention to democracy in the region was to be combined with greater diplomatic and political pressure on Middle Eastern regimes to democratize. The invasion of Iraq was partly framed as a means of promoting democracy. Although the main declared objective of the war was to eliminate the threat from Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, a secondary rationale was also offered by the United States and Britain in justifying the intervention: that democratizing Iraq would unleash a tsunami of democratic reform in the region.<sup>19</sup>

US democracy promotion in the Middle East fell victim, from the start, to tensions and frictions. Guantanamo Bay, extraordinary renditions and abetting torture, invading Iraq under what turned out to be false pretences (weapons of mass destruction were not found), all further de-legitimized the policy. Making democracy pivotal in US foreign policy discourse while linking it to US interests, and forcefully intervening in the Middle East to protect the latter, made the chasm between the rhetoric of democracy and the practice of serving US interests wider under Bush than under any previous US administration. It profoundly damaged the legitimacy of both the United States and the democratic ideals it purportedly stood for in the Middle East. Far from championing universal values, the policy of democracy promotion was perceived as a means of bolstering US interests to the detriment of regional ones. US democracy promotion was seen as wedded to US attempts to maintain political, economic, military and cultural dominance.<sup>20</sup>

As a result of these failures and contradictions, the policy of democracy promotion was gradually abandoned from around the middle of the 2000s. But there was another, more important reason for the change of direction: the realization that, in the short term, democracy promotion would lead to the strengthening of Islamist groups through the electoral process. In December 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt scored an important victory in the parliamentary elections by winning 88 seats. In January 2006, Hamas won the national elections in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In both cases, particularly the former, US pressure to respect democratic processes was partly a cause of its perceived enemies winning considerable power, to the detriment of its allies, Hosni Mubarak and Mahmoud Abbas.

This paper does not constitute an overall evaluation of US democracy promotion in the Middle East in the post-9/11 period. Instead, it is a comment on the flawed premise on which the policy rested. Democracy promotion as a way of countering terrorism in post-9/11 Middle East was a red herring because –as shown above– democratization

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005; Dalacoura, "US Democracy"; Michele Dunne, *Integrating Democracy Promotion into US Middle East Policy*, Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004; Council on Foreign Relations, *In Support of Arab Democracy: Why and How*, Independent Task Force Report, No.54, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Shadi Mokhtari, *After Abu Ghraib: Exploring Human Rights in America and the Middle East*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.132.



would not have solved the terrorism problem. Although this was not the only reason for the failure of the democracy promotion policy, it did impact negatively on it in important ways.

Linking democracy promotion to the security of the West instrumentalized and gravely undermined the former. In the short term, the claim that democracy in the Middle East and Western security were symbiotic allowed the US government to present it to American citizens as being directly in their favour. However, the negative consequence of this approach was that, as soon as democracy ceased to be in the US interest, support for it would wane. This is exactly what happened in the case of the Middle East. Diplomatic and political pressure on allied regimes in the region to countenance democratic reforms –in so far as it was employed at all– was quickly abandoned when it became clear that democratization was going to have negative consequences for Western interests by allowing Islamist electoral successes. This became evident with the Muslim Brotherhood and *Hamas* victories in Egypt and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as described above.

Disassociating democracy promotion in the Middle East from Western security and interests is particularly crucial in a region, which has been profoundly sceptical towards Western (in particular American), intervention for decades. Mistrust of the United States has been consistently high, as numerous opinion polls indicate.<sup>21</sup> Promoting democracy because it benefits the West is the wrong strategy, given the perception among Middle Eastern publics that Western governments have shown a disregard for the well-being and freedoms of the local people.

What are the implications of this view for democracy promotion in the Middle East? Does ending the use of democracy promotion as a means of serving Western interests mean it should be abandoned altogether? Not necessarily. Western governments and the United States in particular must emphasize once again that democracy is to be promoted and defended on the basis of universal principles and international norms, in other words that it must be treated as a good in itself which is in everybody's interests. This change of emphasis would allow them to defend democracy promotion effectively to sceptical Middle East public opinion, and regain some of the legitimacy lost in the post-9/11 period.

## Countering Islamist Terrorism

In tackling the threat of terrorism, Western governments must avoid the temptation to violate international norms and use “exceptional” measures. The policy of the Bush administration and some European states of extraordinary rendition and the suspension of the laws of war, as well as their complicity in harsh counter-terrorism measures and torture, may have had immediate benefits but its long-term consequences have been severe in that it de-legitimizes the West and the democratic values it purports to stand for. Putting one's own house in order and leading by example is the only way to tackle the terrorism problem, even though it may entail paying short-term costs.

A return to respect for universal principles and international norms as the

<sup>21</sup> Annual Zogby polls, available at the Arab-American Institute, <http://www.aaiusa.org/pages/opinion-polls/>, show consistently low opinions of the US since the early 2000s (Accessed on 20 December 2011).

foundation for promoting democracy, and its disassociation from the instrumental rationale of serving Western interests can have positive outcomes for a further reason. I argued above that authoritarianism is not the main cause of Islamist terrorism. But on this issue, as on all others in social science, reality is never black and white. In some cases, repression and exclusion from the political process do play a partial role. No Islamist movement or their origin is the same as the other, so policy makers must treat them on a case-by-case basis rather than pursuing a one-size-fits-all policy. For instance, in the case of *Hamas* repression and political exclusion were not the main reasons in the group's decision to use terrorist tactics or not. This means that democratization in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and inclusion of *Hamas* in political processes will not lead to the elimination of the terrorism problem. However, in the Algerian case, democratization may help to reduce the likelihood of a return to terrorism in the long run. Although the GIA's use of terrorist tactics had other causes and is not to be found in repression and political exclusion, the latter did play a role in widening the rebellion. Opening up the political process in Algeria –admittedly not a very likely prospect given the authoritarian nature of the regime– may help at least encourage some potential rebels to return to peaceful means of political contestation. This may be the right way of going forward in dealing with *al Qaeda* in the Maghreb, which emerged from the “merging” of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) with *al Qaeda* in late 2006-early 2007, and continues to present a latent threat in the wider North African region.

The view that there are many causes of Islamist terrorism in each given instance means that, as well as being formulated on a case-by-case basis, for policy to successfully counter terrorism it must also be multi-pronged. Only then will it be flexible and adaptable. For example, in some cases, an approach focusing on improving socio-economic conditions may be more relevant to reducing the chances of individuals turning to terrorism. Although it is yet another digression to think that resolving the socio-economic issues in the Middle East (even if it was within the power of the West to do so, which it is not) would eliminate the problem of Islamist terrorism, some linkages do exist, as we saw in the case of Algeria and the GIA discussed above.

I argued in the first section of this paper that instrumental or strategic explanations of why Islamist movements choose to employ terrorist tactics tend to be, on balance, the most convincing. Whatever the objectives of Islamist groups may be, and they vary widely, terrorism is at times (rarely, it must be stressed, given that most Islamist groups are non-violent) deemed by them a successful method in achieving them.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, it is abandoned when it becomes counter-productive. If this view is accepted, it follows that a successful counter-terrorism policy must ensure that the costs of using terrorist methods outweigh the benefits. To make decisions about maximizing costs and reducing benefits, the starting point is good intelligence. Unless we know the motives of the various groups, their internal debates and conflicts and the possibly diverse positions of their leaders, it is impossible to influence their choices and directions.

Seeing instrumental or strategic explanations as the most convincing implies that we view Islamist movements which use terrorist tactics as rational actors. This may

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<sup>22</sup> This interpretation is based on the view of terrorism as means, not end. See C.A.J. Coady, “The Morality of Terrorism”, *Philosophy*, Vol. 60, No. 231, 1985.

appear an obvious or uncontroversial point, except that it is often an implicit view that Islamist terrorists are blinded by irrational motives because they are driven by religion. If we go along with this latter view, we cannot really do very much about countering terrorism except attempt to eradicate it. If, on the other hand, we see Islamist terrorists are rational actors we can use both carrots and sticks and also, if needs be, negotiate with them.

Maximizing the costs of the use of terrorist tactics may involve punishment, the “sticks” mentioned above. Calibrating the response so that it is firm but not excessively harsh is a prerequisite for success. The starting point for effectively countering terrorism (as for successfully promoting democracy) is abiding by international norms and the universal principles of justice and good conduct. Although a harsh, repressive policy in some cases gives the impression of being effective in forcing a movement to give up terrorist methods, and violence in general, it may have long-term negative consequences. A relevant example is the Egyptian *Gamaa Islamiya* decision to give up violence in the late 1990s.<sup>23</sup> The recantations of its leadership may have been genuine but they were the outcome of harsh repression by the Mubarak regime. They did not involve a genuine reconsideration and internal debate about the violence previously used by the movement. Partially as a result, the terrorism problem re-emerged in the form of attacks in the Sinai in the 2000s.

There is an important strand in political science, which makes the case for dealing with terrorism as an expression of a political problem.<sup>24</sup> It demands that the wider context must be looked at and the grievances of the movement addressed. This is particularly the case with regards to Islamist movements. It rests on the point –which is correct– that Islamist movements which use terrorist tactics cannot be reduced to or simply be described as “terrorist organizations”. Islamist groups which may at times use terrorist tactics tend to have multiple dimensions and roles. Some are also political parties or movements and they can also carry out cultural, social, educational and welfare activities. It is an important point to approach these movements in their totality and not to reduce them to one of their many roles. *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* clearly are the most relevant examples here.

However, recognizing that Islamist groups which use terrorist tactics are complex movements does *not* preclude us from treating their terrorist acts as an issue of law and order. The post-9/11 decision by the Bush administration to deal with *al Qaeda* as a military opponent rather than a criminal entity played into the hands of its leadership and gave credibility and legitimacy to the movement. It also arguably made them view the use of terrorist tactics as effective in achieving their results (hence the multiplication of attacks in Madrid, Bali, London, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Maghreb, to mention but a few examples). It may even have extended the life of “*al Qaeda*” as an entity.

Instead of politicising those who use terrorist tactics or giving them belligerent

<sup>23</sup> Omar Ashour, “Islamist De-Radicalization in Algeria: Success and Failures”, *Middle East Institute Brief*, No. 21, 2008, and “Lions Tamed? An Enquiry into the Causes of the De-Radicalization of Armed Islamist Movements: The Case of the Egyptian Islamic Group”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Alex P. Schmid, A.J. Jongman and Michael Stohl, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories and Literature*, second edition, Amsterdam, Oxford, 1988; John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, London, Frank Cass, 2005.

party status, the aim should be to sanction their acts. This is often possible by isolating the secret paramilitary entities within broader movements, which are responsible for employing terrorist tactics. They are the ones, which must be outlawed, persecuted and prosecuted. Indeed this has been the policy –albeit for a brief one year period, 2002–3– of the European Union which sanctioned the military organization of *Hamas*, the *al Qassam* Brigades, not the entire movement.<sup>25</sup> Such a policy gives a clear signal that the enemy is not Islamism as such but the use of terrorist tactics by Islamist movements.

I made the point at the start of this paper that, in explaining the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism, we must discard “ideational” factors and focus, instead, on material or structural explanations. This was based on the view that Islam can be interpreted in a variety of ways and that ideas may justify but do not explain the decision by some Islamist to use terrorism and violence in general. However, although ideas are not the cause of terrorism, they are important in countering it. Particular interpretations of Islam are employed by those who use terrorist method to justify their actions. Such interpretations of the creed must be countered by those who hold a moderate and non-violent understanding of Islam. Throughout the Middle East, the Islamic world and in conversations between Muslims and non-Muslims the debate over the how Islam must be interpreted must continue. Winning this debate will be an important contribution in the battle against Islamist terrorism.

## **Conclusion**

The promotion of democracy in the Middle East by the Bush administration can be criticized from a variety of angles. It was big on words, short on substance. It mostly continued previous policies. It had little practical effect on the ground. It represented an even greater gap than usual between US rhetoric and practice, given that the US record (as shown in Guantanamo Bay, extraordinary renditions and abetting torture, invading Iraq under what turned out to be false pretences) was even more dismal than in previous periods, even as the democracy rhetoric became more shrill. However, the policy can also be criticized for diverting attention from the real reasons behind Islamist terrorism. We cannot locate the sources of Islamist terrorism in authoritarian political structures in the Middle East. The US policy of democracy promotion in the post-9/11 period which was based on that premise was also flawed for a variety of other reasons. It equated Western interests with democratization in the Middle East and therefore instrumentalized democracy in a way that undermined faith in it both as concept and as practice. This meant that, once it became clear that democratization was no longer serving Western interests, support for democracy waned. That we must promote democracy for its own sake and on the basis of international norms and universal principles is the first, important lesson of the post-9/11 period.

These flaws do not mean that democracy promotion must be abandoned altogether by the United States and other actors. Instead, US policy must, if anything, be based on universal principles (though these principles will inevitably frequently take second place to the national interest). This is a lesson that Barack Obama recognized

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<sup>25</sup> The paramilitary *al Qasam* Brigades were blacklisted by the EU in 2002 and the entire *Hamas* organization in 2003.

following his arrival at the White House in January 2009. Although US policy under his presidency has continued to demonstrate the tensions between the desire to support both existing US allies and popular forces that threaten to sweep them away –as became painfully obvious during the Arab uprisings of 2011 in particular– the move away from overtly linking democracy with US security has been positive. Obama has also attempted to put the US's house in order before promoting democracy elsewhere, though admittedly with mixed results

If democracy is not the solution to countering Islamist terrorism, what is? The argument developed in the first part of the paper was that Islamist movements adopt or discard terrorist movements on the basis of instrumental or strategic considerations. It follows from this that countering terrorism entails raising its costs. Treating Islamist terrorists as rational actors –as opposed to irrational ones blinded by religious belief– allows policy makers to make such calculations and use either sticks or carrots to counter terrorist practices.

The corollary of such an approach is that the problem of Islamist terrorism should be approached as a law and order issue. This does not mean that Islamist movements must not be treated as the complex political and social actors that they are. Instead, their terrorist acts must be punished. This may mean sanctioning those paramilitary sections within them, which employ violent or terrorist tactics, a policy that has been pursued by European governments over the past decade. The US policy of the 2000s of treating the Islamist terrorist problem as a “war” or cosmic struggle has backfired in that it increased the benefits associated with the use of terrorism.

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