

## **DEMOCRACY, URBANIZATION AND TERRORISM:**

**WHAT HISTORY CAN TELL US**, *Arnaud Blin, 29 august 2007*

As we are still in the aftermath of the 2007 French presidential elections, I thought I would start with a quotation from Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy, who said during the unveiling of his foreign policy that “terrorism is the enemy of democracy.” This rather obvious statement, with which most of us agrees, leads to a fundamental question : ¿Why is terrorism a threat to democracy?

I do not purport to give you a definitive answer to that question but I will start the debate with a couple of leads that might help to launch our debate. I think, first of all, that terrorism appears menacing because democracy has vanquished other threats, starting with the far greater menace that was posed by totalitarianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because, also, democracy has spread and reinforced itself in every region of the world. And while such things as nuclear proliferation or rapid environmental degradation constitute a danger, they are menaces that can be suppressed through energetic political action and collective cooperation. Terrorism, on the other hand, is the exact reverse. Like the pitbull that bites even harder under pain, terrorism grows more menacing as its enemies grow stronger and as the realization of the goals of its perpetrators grow dimmer. In essence, as democracy spreads and develops even further, as it will in the coming decades, so will terrorism.

In the Middle East, terrorism will inevitably accompany the blooming of democracy, if such a blooming occurs, trying at every step to trip the architects of liberty and prosperity. The great paradox of the Irak war is that in the name of the war on terror and the democratic peace, this conflict is serving as the breeding ground for new generations of terrorists who, with time, will do their evil deeds not only in Irak but throughout the region and throughout the world, much like the resistance fighters of Afghanistan did at the end of their conflict.

¿Should we be surprised? Probably not! For the history of modern terrorism has all but repeated itself for a century and a half with generations of terrorists succeeding other generations, each one emerging with internal revolutionary conflicts and inter-sate wars.

In essence, conflicts constitute a cycle of life that often destroys existing movements while often providing breeding grounds for others. International rivalries often act as a beacon for terrorist movements. Italy, Germany and Bulgaria backed fascist terrorist groups in the Balkans in the 1930's. Iran, Libya or Syria have done likewise since the late 1970's with those groups that have dominated headlines since. Islamic terrorism, for instance, emerged form the two main events of 1979, the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both of which challenged the *status quo* imposed respectively by the West and the by Soviet Union.

Revolutions and wars are caused and in turn produce resentments that fuel terror

tactics. One such outstanding resentment among radical islamists is against the nation-state, which today is embodied by the notion of democracy. It is interesting to note in this respect that one of Ben Laden's main grievances is against Kemal Ataturk, the founder of Modern turkey, who ended the Caliphate and installed in its place a modern secular state.

Given these lessons of the past, there are three points I would like to make.

**The first is that terrorism is here to stay.** Islamic terrorism, obviously, will be the main purveyor of terrorist attacks in the near future. Should its threat start to diminish and we should inevitably see the arrival of yet another generation of terrorists. One such generation could for example come out of radical anti-globalization movements. Nationalisms, here and there, have always been a major source of terrorist violence and nothing suggests that a new generation of nationalist terrorists will not emerge. Thus, while one should undoubtedly focus on Islamic radicalism, it will not be the last or unique source of terrorism.

**My second point is that we will not be able to eradicate terrorism,** at least not in the short and middle term. Terrorism is too complex, too diverse and too diffuse to be eradicated. And by having total eradication as our ultimate goal, we might in the end lose the will power to resist as this goal appears increasingly unattainable. **Rather, terrorism should be contained.** In other words, its effects,

which try to transform psychological shock into political victory, should be minimized as much as possible.

**My third point is that,** if terrorism is an enemy of democracy, **it is primarily a threat to emerging democracies.** In other words, it threatens not democracy as such, but the idea of progress that manifests itself through democracy. As an enemy of progress, terrorism will engage humankind wherever it sees democracy moving forward.

Which leads me to ask this fundamental question : **how have democracies fared against terrorism and more specifically against global terrorism?**

Looking back in history, it seems clear to me that most governments have the utmost difficulty in reacting to terrorism, at least initially, all the more so when they are democratic. Which is why terrorism ceaselessly preys on democracy. A democracy allows for all the freedoms necessary for a terrorist to move about. Protecting the rights of its citizens, it also protects those of the potential terrorist. Public opinion constrains the government through electoral sanctions, meaning that not reacting enough to a terrorist attack or overreacting can provoke the political death of an administration. The free media, in turn, is a formidable instrument for terrorists seeking to alter public opinion. Targeting civilians is easy and its psychological impact is great. All these elements, and more, explain why democracies repeatedly face successive waves of terrorists. Just as important, since terrorists are almost always motivated by an extremist form of ideology or religion,

they are usually bent on destroying democracy, and invariably see in its superficial weaknesses a sign of severe vulnerability.

Paradoxically, a solid democracy almost never succumbs to terrorism. Not because its governments react appropriately, since they rarely do, but because its citizens react positively to the psychological pressures brought upon by terrorists. For, on the one hand, terrorists seek to shock the public to the point of breakage while the public, in turn, seems to get more resolved as terrorists get more destructive and abominable. And while terrorists seem to gain enormous momentum with their initial tactical successes, they also tend to lose it rapidly with time, as successful attacks are increasingly difficult to organize. On the contrary, the initial popular reaction to a terrorist attack is shock, fear, and dismay followed, with time, by a resolve and will to resist.

Which means that in the end, while democratic countries sometimes, albeit rarely, yield to terrorism, they tend to survive through the assault and menace. On the other hand, generations of terrorists live and die, usually early, only to see new generations emerge whose goals generally remain as unattainable as those of the generations that preceded them. The fact that terrorists do sometimes succeed probably offers that glimmer of hope to those who try.

Thus, it is essential for established democracies faced with terrorism to make sure, first of all, that they do not themselves undermine their own democratic

structures in the name of the fight against terrorism. Indeed, it is very tempting to eat up at civil liberties when faced with terrorists who exploit these to their violent ends. Today, this is what both Vladimir Putin is doing in a semi democratic country and what George W. Bush has done in one of the world's oldest and more established democracies. Thus, while the traditional work of the police, perhaps the military, in infiltrating terrorist groups is vital, as is the need that services within countries and between countries communicate with each other, it is just as important that governments and parliaments make sure that democratic institutions are not encroached upon in the name of anti-terrorism. When all is said and done, Guantanamo and Abu Graib will have had more disastrous political effects than the planes crashing on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

Again, knowing that a zero-risk against a terrorist attack is impossible to achieve, the best that one can do, aside from reducing that risk as much as is humanly possible, is to minimize the political consequences that a terrorist attack can generate. While it is the nature of governments, including democratic ones, to perpetually seek to increase their power, it seems imperative that we now create more appropriate legislation not only to contain terrorism but just as importantly to ensure that the fight against terrorism is just that, and not another political tool exploited for various ends.

Terrorism is a multiform chameleon that preys on democracy. In order to fight it, democracies need to enlarge the number of actors who participate, from the citizen all the way to the higher rungs of the state. The state itself needs to define clearly the

roles of the executive, judiciary and legislative bodies for this type of conflict while the citizen needs to better understand the nature of the enemy. Terrorism might be the ultimate strategy of destabilization but democracy is, in effect, the ultimate process of stability.

## The city

If terrorism is the enemy of democracy, one could add that it is also the enemy of the city. Indeed, one of the striking features of terrorism is that it has always targeted city folk, beginning with the Zealots of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and continuing with the Assassins in the Middle Ages. The big city, during this age of proto-terrorism, was the theater of choice for these early terrorists. Bagdad and Cairo, amongst the larger and most advanced cities in the world during the Middle Ages, offered significant advantages to the terrorists. This is where government officials, the primary targets, lived and worked. This is where the information circulated more quickly. This is where panic could gain the most ground, and the fastest. In cities, these targets were much more vulnerable than outside.

Hence, very early on, do we find many of the characteristics of modern terrorism, with the large city as a central strategic point where one could extend the work done by traditional guerrillas in the countryside or, more likely, where one

could practice urban guerilla when one did not have the means to confront a traditional army.

For the city is where democracy is born and where it grows, as the Greeks have taught us. Modern democracy, as it manifests itself in the newly independent United States at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is essentially an urban activity. But the city is also synonymous with industrialization and modern capitalism. For revolutionaries of all sorts, the city is where all the impurities of the modern world are concentrated. The deconstruction and the reconstruction of society thus falls on the city. It is in the city that bomb throwers of all kinds enact their propaganda by deed. It is here that the great national newspapers will magnify their attacks. It is here, the terrorist hope, that panic will strike the masses and lead them to revolt. It is in the cities that political leaders, members of royal families or famous industrialists will fall victim to their attacks. It is in the cities that the mere sound of the bomb will resonate the furthest. It is in the city that the anonymous “bourgeois” will be killed, just because he belongs to a hated social class. The “bourgeois” target of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, somewhat underutilized in a terrorist environment that, at the time, essentially confines itself to tyrannicide, is a precursor to the civilian victim of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century who will become the target of choice of terrorists.

Terrorism, as you are well aware, is essentially a psychological war between those who control the entire physical might of a given society and those who have no

means at all, and even less legitimacy. For the latter, the city thus constitutes for all practical purposes the only theater where such a confrontation is possible. In an activity where symbolism and representation is essential, the city is the biggest symbol of all. For that matter, the big city is the ultimate symbol. For the revolutionary, it is the symbol of everything that needs to be purified and eliminated. For the government, it is the symbol of its power and its legitimacy. Thus, the largest and most visible cities have always been the center stage for terrorist and counter-terrorist activities.

Today, the terrorist equation has not varied much. New York, London, Madrid or Paris were at the center stage of the great terrorist waves of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and 100 or 150 years later, still have to fend off terrorist attacks. And while we often hear that the novelty of contemporary terrorism is that it is a trans-national phenomenon, this has always been so. Early on, and particularly during the 1880's and 90's anarchists from various countries moved about, planting bombs or instigating attacks in foreign countries, profiting, as today, from the great movements of large immigrant populations.

Before terrorists claiming nationalistic objectives came to dominate the field after World War I, terrorism, much like today with the Al-Qaeda networks, was characterized by small groups operating for the most part independently but linked to some kind of ideology. For Ben Laden, as for the early revolutionaries, the

metropolis of the industrialized world is the symbol of all evil. And as such, it remains logically the main target of the terrorist. The city dweller constitutes the anonymous human face of modernization, urbanization and liberal democracy and thus represents an even greater evil than the head of state who is but a tool of the all-powerful citizen. In the fight between government and terrorist, public opinion has in essence become the main point of contact of the protagonists. The sky scraper, where thousands of individuals work to finance their modern life of consumerism, and the train or metro, where workers move freely about, represent the physical symbol of the economic might and individual freedom that radical islamists seek to destroy, in other words, the ultimate symbol of a contaminated and contaminating society.

In effect, post-industrial-modernization is even more linked to cities than industrialization, and the rich modern democratic state is more urban today than it was yesterday. Alas, if the city is where democracy is born and where it prospers, it has also shown a great resilience to terrorist attacks. Londoners, New Yorkers and Madrileños, while initially shocked, have shown a remarkable collective capacity to confront terrorism. It is interesting to note that Washington, which, as any one like myself who has lived there knows, is not really a city in the traditional sense, had a much harder time getting over September 11 than New York did, even though the attacks there were much less severe. The sense of belonging to a great urban community is perhaps as strong a sentiment as nationalism has shown to be in the

past. And with the erosion of the nation-state, this sentiment will probably grow in the future.

For, despite the talk of a global threat, only a very small number of places constitute in reality a target for global terrorists. And while one may ponder the disaster that an attack on a nuclear reactor might cause, the big cosmopolitan city, occasionally the tourist hub or the ubiquitous embassy, will still be the target of choice of terrorists. And while the strength of terrorism is that it has the power to threaten anyone, in anyplace at anytime, the fact of the matter is that, in practical terms, it does not. The city may continue to be the main target of terrorism. It is also where terrorism can ultimately be defeated. Once again, the city, far from being the Achilles heel of democracy, might prove to be its ultimate shield against the new Barbarians.