

Response to the panel on New Political Religions

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Thanks to Ellis for putting New Political Religions on the program and to the panelists for taking time to read the book.

I would like to ensure there is some discussion so I will keep my remarks brief. First, let me situate NPR among the growing number of books on terrorism.

1. It is ♦ obviously ♦ a kind of homage to Voegelin's 1938 study Die Politische Religionen. You will recall that Voegelin said it was a novel way of looking at the social movements of the day, and particularly Nazism, as religious movements. He was especially concerned about the attractiveness of evil and how it can provide a kind of structure and purpose to the life of an individual but also of a community.

There were clearly elements of religious ritual surrounding the 9/11 attack ♦ even beyond the question of suicide. The use of ritual language to describe the killing, for example, of pilots and passengers indicates that whatever else 9/11 was, it was not simply a pragmatic sneak attack akin to Pearl Harbour ♦ though there are some obvious structural similarities with the events of December 7, 1941.

2. I have always been impressed with the hermeneutic strategy often associated with Leo Strauss, that we should try to understand a text ♦ and I would add, an act ♦ the way the author ♦ or the actor ♦ intended. What do terrorists think they are doing? What is the point of the killing?

Most of the discussion of modern terrorist activity, I believe, is concerned with the external questions of technique, or cause, or pragmatic purpose. This is very useful scholarship and by and large I have no serious quarrel with it. A book such as Robert Pape's Dying to Win, published earlier this year, discusses suicide terrorism in great detail. His assumption is that suicide terrorism is a political act undertaken in service to an intelligible pragmatic goal, particularly against democracies. This is true enough, but in my opinion, it is simply true only up to a point. For example, Shoko Asahara, the leader of Aum Shinrikyo, the organization that carried out the first terrorist WMD attack on the Tokyo subway system in 1995, also understood his activity as an act of "poa." And we know, as good Buddhists, this is improper.

There is also what might be termed a more theoretically astute Clausewitzian understanding of al-Qaida and the conflict between that organization and the US . The argument is that it is a variant of asymmetric war. By this reading, the current surge in the insurgency in Iraq , for example, has been compared to the Tet offensive during the Vietnam war. Again, I would say this is true, up to a point. Al-Qaida is a Clausewitzian organization insofar as its leadership understands war-making as serving political purposes. We all know the famous Clausewitzian maxim.

By this understanding the long-term goal of al-Qaida is to create (or restore) the caliphate to the dar al-Islam. The immediate goal is to demonstrate the vulnerability of the US and to force a response that would either increase the contempt of the ummah for America or its hostility. Either way, al-Qaida thought it would win.

Those goals are not preposterous, so it was conceivable to think that an ecumenic caliphate was akin to the IRA goal of a united and republican Ireland . Thus, for example, Fouad Hussein,

in his book Al-Zarqawi: al-Qaida's Second Generation, mentioned in Spiegel Online 12 Aug. 2005 , notes that al-Qaida has a seven-phase blueprint to move from the quiet desperation of 2000 to an ecumenic caliphate by 2020. It seems to me that this is not so much a plausible plan of action as a typical prophetic document that can be amended in the typical ways "when prophecy fails."

But more to the point, as Yassin Musharbash, the Spiegel Online author noted, "it's harder than ever to truly understand al-Qaida: the organization has degenerated into branches and loosely connected cells, related groups are taken in, and people who hardly had anything to do with al-Qaida before, now carry out attacks in its name. It is hard to imagine orders which might come right from the top because Osama bin Laden spends all his time struggling to survive." I will come back to the organizational question in a few moments.

With respect to the loose affiliation of al-Qaida terrorists operating in Europe one can say at least one thing: Europe supplies softer targets than America , which means the al-Qaida estimate regarding the win-win response by the US was wrong. Not only has America fought back but it doing so has not inspired an increase in effective hostility ❖ and ineffective hostility does not count for much. I would add that I am not sure the degradation of al-Qaida has much to do with Homeland Security. There is a defeatist tinge connected to Homeland Security, at least from a Clausewitzian perspective because ❖ to misquote Patton ❖ the whole point of war is to make some other poor bastard worry about his homeland security.

But, returning to the whole purpose of an ecumenic caliphate, those of us who remember the argument of The Ecumenic Age know that such an organization involves more than world-wide religious uniformity because the entire enterprise contains an unacknowledged and unlimited

spiritual aggressiveness to it. But this is the special province of Michael Franz so I will say no more.

The great virtue of this Clausewitzian interpretation of al-Qaida is that it clarifies a lot of silliness. For example, the establishing of an ecumenic caliphate has nothing to do with Iraq , Afghanistan , or Palestine as motivating factors for the salafist jihad ♦ and jihad is not the correct word to describe Islamist terrorism. None of the al-Qaida operatives captured to date has a plausible or rational strategy to advance the interests of Palestinians, Iraqis, or Afghanistanis. One could make the same argument regarding the presence of infidel troops ♦ the famous Crusaders and Zionists ♦ in the holy land of the two mosques. So far as I can see, these pragmatic instances of injustice or simply of grievance are occasions to be exploited by terrorists not issues to be settled by negotiation.

Let me mention one other account. Oliver Roy has argued that al-Qaida's fighters, who hail mostly from Saudi Arabia , Pakistan , Egypt , North Africa , and even Chechnya ♦ not Afghanistan , Iraq , and Palestine ♦ do most of their killing outside the Middle East . They are, moreover, mostly semi-westernized Muslims who became salafists because of their experiences in the west ♦ either as a refusal to adjust to western societies or because of a refusal by western societies to accept them. Either way they are a "lost generation" and "their vision of a global ummah is both a mirror of, and a form of revenge against, the globalization that has made them what they are." Again, this may be true enough, but one may also ask: why are they "lost"? Must "globalization" be responsible? Have they in fact been "made" rather than persuaded? Do they lack all ability to choose?

3. I used, instead of psychological or Clausewitzian terms, which in one way or another are somewhat external to the self-understanding of the terrorists, initially, a conventional analysis of what might be called "the history of Islamic political ideas." Here, of course, one must acknowledge the outstanding work of scholars of Islam ♦ or rather, of specialists writing in European languages. There is plenty of material to read.

Second, I used two terms borrowed by Voegelin from Schelling and from Robert Musil and Heimeto von Doderer ♦ pneumopathology and second reality ♦ respectively to analyze the specialized studies of "Islamic political ideas." I won't try to summarize anything but urge you to purchase NPR at the special convention price.

4. My fourth and final point is pretty straightforward. Al-Qaida is a network and this kind of organization has its own strengths and weaknesses. Here some excellent work has been done at RAND , particularly on the problem of how a hierarchy such as a western army deals with a network. Some of the limitations of hierarchy can be overcome by modern communications technologies, but Clausewitzian fog and friction never really disappear even when operations are informed by networked structures.

The great advantage of a network, as white supremacist militiaman Louis Beam put it, is that his people "know what they have to do." So do Osama's, even when they ignore operational security, as did the 7/7 attackers in London , or were simply incompetent as were the terrorists involved in the botched attack two weeks later. They know what to do because they subscribe to an animating narrative, not because bin Laden or al-Zaquiri gives them an order. This aspect of a network answers the puzzlement of Yassin Musharbash in Spiegel Online. It also explains why al-

Qaida is a social-capital-intensive organization: its operatives trust one another because they participate in the same imaginative story.

But the story they share, I suggest, is a lie, and they know it. This is the core of the salafist pneumopathology. In the most commonsense way, Prime Minister Blair made this point in his July 26 news conference ♦ in fact he made the point three times, though it is not clear the press got what he was saying. First, he said, the salafist terrorists (my term, not his) were not like the IRA. Their demands "are just none that any serious person could negotiate on, and that's just an end on it." Second, the problem is "not just their methods, but their ideas." He repeated this several times. Third, "it is just a lie when they say that people have got no option but to engage in terrorism. They do have an option." And fourth, it is particularly foolish to think that "if we did something different, these people would react in a different way."

These are not the words of a sophisticated Voegelinian political philosopher but of a British Prime Minister and, quite frankly, they are pretty accurate.

A second way of dealing with the salafist story is rather like the advice of St Thomas to his fellow Dominicans as they trudged across the Pyrenees to deal with heretics and Jews in Spain : argue on the basis of scripture. This has been done in bin Laden's backyard, at Sanaa in Yemen , by a very brave Islamic judge and scholar, Hamoud al-Hitar. He made a deal with the terrorists: if he could show them on the basis of the Koran that terrorism was wrong, they would stop. If they could show him they were right, they could get out of jail. By and large, according to a Christian Science Monitor report last February, al-Hitar has persuaded former al-Qaida to renounce violence and get a job.

As a longer-term strategy there is the problem of the historicity of the Koranic text to deal with. This is a familiar story and, interestingly enough, it is also centered in Sanaa. I discuss it briefly in the Appendix. Nasr Abu Zaid deals with the problem on purely hermeneutic grounds as well and recounts the story in an interesting new book, Voice of an Exile.