



## The New Global American Dilemma and Terrorism

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### The “New Global American Dilemma” and Terrorism

Psychological research on terrorism suffers from two main weaknesses, both of which arise from well known weaknesses in mainstream psychology (Moghaddam, 2005a). The first weakness is a lack of powerful conceptual frameworks, and a reductionist-positivist reliance on data gathering on the assumption that data will allow us to mimic the success of the “real sciences” such as physics, and “real scientists” such as Einstein. Seldom have we bothered to notice that Einstein carried out thought experiments, not laboratory experiments. Of course experiments yielding data are needed, but there has to be a corresponding development in powerful theories.

Psychology journals have produced mountains of “data” about individual difference measures, and particularly since 9/11 we are drowning in oceans of information about terrorists (there is now an international “terrorism studies industry” generating more data than anyone can possibly keep up with); what we lack are conceptual frameworks powerful enough to interpret this information. The concept of *significance quest*, “an overarching motive propelling suicide terrorism” (Kruglanski, Chen, Deshesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009, p. 335), is integrative and potentially very useful in helping us interpret some of the information being accumulated on terrorism.

A second weakness of mainstream psychology is a tendency for researchers to split into “dispositional” and “contextual” camps, each camp supporting a competing picture of behavior as shaped by individual differences or contextual factors. Underlying this debate is the assumption that the contribution of dispositional and contextual factors is fixed. An alternative and more accurate viewpoint is to treat the role of both dispositional and contextual factors as variable. The role of cultural context in shaping individual behavior is not static; rather, this role

varies considerably across time and space. Presumably, the role and nature of a significance quest in relation to terrorism is also variable; this is an idea that needs further development.

My treatment of “context” is macro: a significance quest and terrorism should be assessed in the context of evolutionary transformations and globalization (Moghaddam, 2008a). In part one, I explore the varying role of cultural context through the concept of “degrees of freedom” (Moghaddam, 2005a). At present, the context of some of the most influential Islamic communities in terms of radical Islamic ideology, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and the tribal regions of Pakistan, is characterized by low degrees of freedom, rendering dispositional characteristics of less relevance toward understanding terrorism. The implication is that in present circumstances, terrorism emanating from some Islamic communities can best be understood through analysis of contextual characteristics, rather than attention to “individual difference” variables. However, it is possible that circumstances will change and render individual difference factors of greater importance in the understanding of future Islamic terrorism.

In part two, I argue that we must also consider the macro global and evolutionary context of a significance quest and its relation to contemporary Islamic terrorism. From this viewpoint, Islamic terrorism is a “defense mechanism,” albeit a dysfunctional one, adopted by fundamentalist groups who feel threatened by globalization. The experience of threat and relative deprivation among traditional and fundamentalist Muslims arises in the context of rapid “fractured” globalization, with its associated contradictions. Among the most important of such contradictions is the *New Global American Dilemma*, which arises from the enormous gap between American ideals and American practices in the realm of foreign policy. This is the main topic of the third part of the discussion.

Thus, while I see the concept of the significance quest as very useful, I argue that this concept should be applied to terrorism within the macro context in which Islamic terrorism is taking place, because under current circumstances it is the context, and not the characteristics of individuals, that determines terrorist actions. By focusing on the context, I am also highlighting the situation “from the terrorists’ point of view” (Moghaddam, 2006a), rather than the point of view of “outsiders” who view terrorist actions and attribute responsibility to individuals. A parallel contrast exists in the realm of torture: between those who view torture in places such as Abu Ghraib prison as arising out of the characteristics of certain contexts, and others who point to “a few bad apples” as the reason for torture (Moghaddam, 2007).

### **Degrees of Freedom and the Varying Power of Context**

A long-standing debate in research on human behavior is the relative contributions of dispositional and contextual factors (Moghaddam, 2005a). A continued criticism of mainstream research is that it has been unduly influenced by the

“individualism” of American culture and adopted reductionist accounts, in line with a “self-help” capitalist ideology (e.g., Hepburn, 2003). This criticism is accurate in so far as American psychology has for many decades constituted the “First World” of modern psychology and American values have permeated mainstream psychological research (Moghaddam, 1987), but the criticism is misguided in treating the influence of contextual (and disposition) factors as static. The concept of “degrees of freedom” helps to clarify this issue, and I will discuss this concept using the metaphor of a staircase to terrorism (Moghaddam, 2005b).

Consider a multistory building with a winding staircase at its center. People are located on different floors of the building, but everyone begins on the ground floor, where there are over a billion Muslims. Thought and action on each floor are characterized by particular psychological processes. On the ground floor, the most important psychological processes influencing behavior are psychological interpretations of material conditions, perceptions of fairness, and adequacy of identity. Hundreds of millions of Muslims suffer fraternal deprivation and lack of adequate identity; they feel that they are not being treated fairly and are not receiving adequate material rewards. They feel dissatisfied with the way they are depicted by the international media, and they do not want to become second-class copies of Western ideals. However, on the ground floor, degrees of freedom are large relative to degrees of freedom on the higher floors of the staircase to terrorism, and individual Muslims on the ground floor have a wider range of behavioral options.

Some individuals move up from the ground floor to the first floor, in search of ways to improve their life conditions. These individuals in no way see themselves as terrorists or even supportive of terrorist causes; they are simply attempting to feel better about themselves and to improve their situation. On this floor they are particularly influenced by possibilities for individual mobility and voice. Some of these individuals climb up to the second floor of the staircase, where they come under the influence of persuasive messages telling them that the root cause of their problems is external enemies, spearheaded by America. Individuals on the second floor are encouraged to displace aggression onto external targets.

Many of the individuals who climb up to the second floor of the staircase remain there, but some keep climbing up to reach the third floor where they adopt a morality supportive of terrorism. Gradually, those who have reached the third floor become divorced from the mainstream morality of their society, which generally condemns terrorism (this is also true in Islamic communities), and take on a morality that accepts that “the ends justify the means.” Those individuals who continue the climb up to the fourth floor adopt a more rigid style of categorical “us against them,” “good against evil” thinking. The world is now unambiguously divided up into “black and white,” and it is seen as legitimate to attack “the forces of evil” in any and every way feasible. Some of these individuals move up to the fifth floor, where they take part in and directly support terrorist actions.

The higher individuals move up the staircase to terrorism, the lower the degrees of freedom. In other words, the power of the context increases, and the

behavioral options decrease, on the higher floors. After an individual has become part of a terrorist group or network and has reached the highest floor, the only options left open are to try to kill or be killed or captured. Personality factors are less influential, and the context is all-powerful, on the highest floor. In contrast, on the lowest floors the degrees of freedom are greater, meaning that individuals have a wider variety of behavioral options and personality factors potentially play a larger role in who climbs up the staircase.

The significance quest subsumes personal causes, ideological reasons, and social pressures that influence suicide terrorism. The influence of these factors will vary on the different levels of the staircase to terrorism. For example, social pressure will increase (and degrees of freedom diminish) as the individual climbs up the staircase to higher floors. Individual differences regarding personal causes and commitment to ideological causes will be greater on the lowest levels of the staircase. The individuals who have moved up to the highest floors of the staircase to terrorism will be more similar to one another in that they experience far greater social pressure, and the ideological reasons leading them to be involved in terrorism will be more similar. However, very different personal causes might lead people to the higher floors of the staircase.

### **The New Global American Dilemma**

In interpreting suicide terrorism as an extreme case of significance quest, “an opportunity to catapult oneself to the pinnacle of cultural veneration by an act of supreme sacrifice for an ideologically touted cause,” Kruglanski et al. (2009, pp. 337–338) have rightly highlighted the cultural conditions which give rise to suicide terrorism. However, there is a bigger picture to consider. The cultural conditions of Muslim societies have not evolved in a vacuum. Rather, they have evolved in an international political order where a twentieth-century rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States eventually resulted in the United States dominating the world stage as the sole superpower at the start of the twenty-first century. In this new role, the United States faces major dilemmas.

The reductionist nature of modern psychology has resulted in a focus on dilemmas as situated in isolated minds, rather than as imbedded in the normative system shared by a collective (Billig, Condor, Edwards, & Gane, 1988). The alternative, more social approach to considering dilemmas is demonstrated in the research of the Swedish researcher Gunnar Myrdal (1898–1987), who discussed a dilemma confronting American society in the domain of race relations in his seminal study *An American Dilemma* (1944). According to Myrdal, the United States faced a dilemma because on the one hand foundational American documents (e.g., Declaration of Independence, The Federalist Papers, Constitution) claim that all humans are created equal and have the same rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but on the other hand even after the official end of slavery, racial segregation and discrimination continued in America.

The “American dilemma” identified by Myrdal did not reside in isolated American minds. Rather, this dilemma arose out of contradictions between two competing, collectively shared story lines. A first story line positions the United States as the “land of the free” and a place where everyone enjoys equality of opportunity. A second, equally powerful story line positions the United States as a segregated society, where group-based inequalities and discrimination are the norm. Both story lines are collaboratively constructed and collectively upheld by Americans. Myrdal argued, and history proved him to be correct, that the dilemma arising out of these two competing story lines would have to be resolved. The Civil Rights movement and desegregation legislation represent the official resolution of this “first” American dilemma.

But now the United States is confronted by a *new global American dilemma*, one arising out of two competing story lines at the global level. On the one hand, successive United States administrations have espoused that democracy and freedom are the rights of all human beings in all societies. Indeed, the invasion of Iraq by American led forces in 2003 was explained in terms of a “spreading democracy” mandate by the George W. Bush administration. On the other hand, the United States government has continued to support so-called “pro-American” dictatorships in a number of major Islamic societies, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This new global American dilemma is keenly felt in Islamic societies, where it is interpreted on the streets as “American hypocrisy.”

Following Myrdal’s (1944) logic, I have argued that the new global American dilemma will eventually be resolved through American support for democracy, even in the Near and Middle East (Moghaddam, 2008c). However, this dilemma will take decades to resolve, and in the meantime one of its consequences is the creation of conditions in which the radicalization of Muslim communities is more likely. This is because dictatorships in the Near and Middle East continue to crush secular prodemocracy opposition movements, leaving the mosque as the only space in which there is any possibility for collective antigovernment action. The result has been the religious monopoly of political activity and the rise of organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir in North Africa and Muslim Asia. Moreover, this radicalization has spilled over to Western Europe, as Muslim immigrants continue to identify with the “troubles” in the Middle East and displace aggression onto Israel and the United States.

It is in the context of the European Union that the need for making a stronger explicit link between significance quest and identity becomes clear. Various identity theories highlight the human motivation to achieve a positive and distinct identity, to be both favorably evaluated and different (see Moghaddam, 2008a, chap. 5). A question arises in the European context, where in practice “home grown” Islamic terrorism has been a greater threat than in the United States: Why is it that terrorism is more likely to represent an example of significance quest in Europe than in the United States? One way to tackle this question is through reference to the “distance traveled hypothesis” (Moghaddam, 2008b): Muslims

require less material and “intellectual” (e.g., education level) resources to reach Europe than to reach the United States, and fewer resources mean that they are less able to integrate into the adopted land. Further discussion is needed as to how significance quest is associated with resources and how such relationships influence identity and identification.

Thus, in the global context, it is impossible to make sense of a “significance quest” on the part of Muslims without first appreciating the perceived role of the United States in the continuation of dictatorships in so-called “pro-American” Muslim countries. But we should go even further in widening the scope and assessing terrorism in broader time and space perspectives.

### **Fractured Globalization, Catastrophic Evolution, and Islamic Terrorism**

In this final part of the discussion my goal is to place the significance quest in the wider global and evolutionary context. What aspects of the wider context lead to a significance quest associated with suicide terrorism? I focus on the ways in which globalization and cultural evolution are taking place.

Globalization is taking place in a “fractured” manner, one aspect of which is the coming into contact of groups with little “preadaptation” (Moghaddam, 2006). This “sudden contact” has resulted in catastrophic evolution, the rapid decline or even extinction of one or both groups making contact. The phenomenon of catastrophic evolution is well known in environmental studies and documented in declining diversity among animals and plants (e.g., see Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2008). But the implications of this evolutionary perspective need to be critically considered in more detail.

Sudden contact has been made possible through rapid advances in human transportation and communications systems. These advances have enabled groups of humans to “suddenly show up” on the doorstep of outgroups with which they have no previous history of large-scale contact. The history of Western colonization of Africa and Asia provides endless examples of this process, as well as its consequences. When Columbus arrived in North America, there existed about 15,000 languages in the world, but there are only about 6,000 still alive today, and most of these will be extinct by the end of the twenty-first century (Crystal, 2000). Numerous indigenous African, American, Australian, and Asian cultures and religions have disappeared, as is well known. What is less discussed is the defense mechanisms adopted by groups that face extinction.

Terrorism is a (dysfunctional) defense mechanism adopted by Islamic fundamentalists who perceive their way of life to be under threat and who view expanding westernization as representing a serious threat of extinction for them (Moghaddam, 2008b). The “significance quest” is not just an individual attempt at making oneself supremely significant, but part of a collective strategy adopted by a people who see the real possibility of extinction facing them. My personal experiences of interacting with radical Muslims in Iran prior to the 1978 revolution

is that they saw themselves in a life and death struggle against the westernization movement spearheaded by the “American puppet” Shah. Khomeini’s victory in Iran was seen by the Islamic fundamentalists as their lifeline to survival, against the “massive onslaught” of American influence. Exactly the same “life and death struggle” is being played out in Muslim communities around the world, with fundamentalists fighting for the survival of their way of life.

Terrorism is only one manifestation of the “significance quest.” Various “sacred carriers” (Moghaddam, 2008b), such as the Islamic veil, are also being used as defense mechanisms in this ongoing struggle. Sacred carriers serve to propagate the values and beliefs of a group, an example being the United States national flag, “Old Glory.” Like the Islamic veil, a national flag is “just a piece of cloth,” but this piece of cloth can take on great importance in the significance quest.

### Concluding Comment

Finally, a word of caution about typology is needed. Kruglanski et al. (2009) focus on suicide terrorism, but it is useful to also consider the various other specialties in terrorist networks. The suicide terrorist is an example of a terrorist specialization I term “fodder”; through an analysis of available evidence I have identified eight other specializations in terrorist networks (Moghaddam, 2006, chap. 8). These additional specializations include “source of inspiration,” “strategist,” “networker,” “expert,” “cell manager,” “local agitator and guide,” “local cell member,” and “fund raiser.” The significance quest is likely to be different in nature for many of these different specialist terrorist types.

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