Defining Terrorism for America: Jewish and Muslim Cases and Their Readings by the American Public

Salam al-Marayati

Howard Rosenberg, the *Los Angeles Times* media critic, offered this poignant observation about the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin: "Imagine the response if the killer were Arab. Imagine the explosion of rage in the United States, where already there exists a predisposition in some circles to see Arabs primarily as perpetrators of violence."[1] Rosenberg underscored the problem of a double standard in addressing reports of violence, a problem that has created a disparity of views on the subject of terrorism and threatens to obstruct the full integration of Muslims and Arabs into America's pluralistic society.

Ehud Barak, the current prime minister of Israel, provided another interesting viewpoint on terrorism and changing attitudes to its sources. In a television interview, Barak told Israeli television Channel Three that if he had been born a Palestinian, he would have "joined one of the terrorist organizations."[2] Using Rosenberg's hypothetical, imagine — had an American Muslim leader uttered Barak's statement — the outrage and the alarm, followed by an investigation of a possible terrorist network.

Terrorism in general is defined as the use of violence against noncombatants to influence public opinion in order to achieve a political goal. The definition of terrorism in the United States has been largely politicized, defined as what the "other," the Muslim World, is charged with doing to "us," the "Judeo-Christian" camp. American public opinion and, to a larger extent, American Jewish public opinion, do not recognize as terrorism violence perpetrated by Jews or other groups, though Americans in general and Jewish groups in particular tend, unfairly and inaccurately, to label violent acts as terrorism when they are associated with Muslims or Arabs even when they need not

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SALAM AL-MARAYATI is the director and one of the founders of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC).

be construed as acts of terrorism. The politics of terrorism is much like a football game involving cross-town rivals: when our guys take a cheap shot against them, it's part of the game, but when the other side does it to us, it's bloody murder and war. This form of divisiveness creates an environment of double standards in opinion- and policy-making vis-à-vis counterterrorism; it also exacerbates tensions in interfaith relations, particularly Muslim-Jewish relations, biases the Middle East peace process, and intensifies the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, has no room for terrorism, and Muslims, like Christians and Jews, must speak out against terrorism, especially if it is committed in the name of their faith.

Although religion was an undeniable element in the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir, the coverage of the violent crime did not impair the image of Judaism as a religion, whereas such an act taking place in the Muslim world would be read by the Western media simply as more evidence of the violent or primitive nature of Islam and, therefore, Muslims — a double standard. Distinctions in ideology, political commentary, and militant viewpoints were appreciated in the reporting. Terrorism was not deemed the central aspect of this story.

A legal defense fund and fan club for Amir were reportedly established.[3] Yet there was no apparent accusation against the American Jewish community as being sympathetic to religious violence, though such a presumption against the whole Muslim community would have been automatic if the assassin had been an Arab. Any campaign by Muslims to offer financial or emotional support for any terrorist or assassin would have been construed as un-American and antidemocratic.

A cursory look at major newspapers further elucidates the double standard in reporting on violence involving Jews and Muslims. For example, the *New York Times* ran two stories illustrating this disparity on December 6, 1995. One article, "Rabin's Assassin and 2 Others Indicted; Israel Ends Mourning," sits atop another story that reads, "French Police Arrest 19 in Raids Against Militant Islamic Groups."[4] The first story addresses political conflict and Israel's struggle with the assassination, while the other provides an image of a Western government in conflict with an orchestrated religious conspiracy. In a comparative analysis, when religion is an apparent motivating factor for violent incidents, religious labels were used 50 percent of the time for stories involving Muslims, 10 percent of the time for stories involving Jews, and a negligible amount for stories involving Christians.[5] At the very least, Muslims hope to raise awareness of this prejudice in the

media. All religious labels could be dropped in reporting, or a common yardstick of attributing religion can be applied to the reporting of violence motivated by religious extremism.

Using religious labels in reporting international conflicts and national crises involving Muslims has led to a negative association of Islam with violence. When the Bosnian conflict was addressed in the media throughout the 1990s, officials of the Bosnian government, the only government in the Balkans committed to a pluralistic democracy, were labeled as the "Muslim-led government," while the Eastern Orthodox Serbs and the Roman Catholic Croats were not identified by their religious affiliation. No reporter ever asserted that the ethnic cleansing and systematic rape of Muslim Bosnian women were part of a "Christian radical terrorist militant campaign."

The Oklahoma City bombing serves as a good example of how the double standard adds to the apprehension of Muslims that counterterrorism policy is targeting their community. Middle Eastern Muslims were the first suspects in the heinous crime of bombing the federal building, and an environment of fear and chaos ensued that was reminiscent of what had precipitated the internment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s. But when two white males were found to be guilty, the nation expressed relief (with some embarrassment on the part of the media), for the convicted were "us" and not "them."

The Antiterrorism Act of 1996 was passed overwhelmingly by Congress because of the public shock over the Oklahoma City bombing, but rather than deal with the underlying causes for that attack by "domestic" terrorists, the legislation primarily addressed "international" terrorists. A most important aspect of the counterterrorism bill was the provision authorizing the use of using chemical taggants to detect where explosives are purchased and by whom and when. The National Rifle Association lobbied against that measure, and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich was concerned about the safety of gun owners with chemical taggants in their ammunition.[6] The clause in the antiterrorism law allowing the use of secret evidence in U.S. courts was kept, with the result that more than twenty Muslims and Arabs in the United States are imprisoned without having been informed of the charges against them or of the identity of their accusers — a violation of the Fifth Amendment and a major concern to civil rights groups in the United States.[7] This clause parallels laws from the McCarthy era, when secret evidence was used against alleged Communist infiltrators in the United States.

American cultural antagonism to Islam is deeply rooted in West-

ern history's Euro-centrism, which has profoundly influenced American pro-Israel positions on the Middle East. Taking into consideration that terrorism is reported more as a political act than a criminal one, Islamic movements are viewed with suspicion by the West, even if they are democratic and adhere to international norms of human rights. The gulf of misunderstanding between Islam and the West widens with every terrorist incident.

That ideology of confrontation between Islam and the West predated the rise of the Soviet Union and its rivalry with the United States. Europe has perceived Islam as a problem from the days of the Crusades. Writer Karen Armstrong says that the term "Crusades" has been afforded a positive social connotation in modern times, even though it is rooted in one of the bloodiest, most barbaric campaigns in world history.[8] On the other hand, the term "Jihad," a general concept defined by Islam as striving for excellence and struggling for human rights, has consistently and simplistically been defined by the West as holy war against "infidels." While we witness efforts for social justice as "crusades" against poverty and "crusades" for charity, the term "jihad" has come to be understood simply as terrorism.

The stigma of terrorism has led to the depiction of Muslim people as somehow subhuman. Apparently, to the decision- and opinion-makers in the United States, the suffering of Muslim civilians at the hands of non-Muslims is not seen as an instance of terrorism, especially if the perpetrators are deemed integral to the geopolitical interests of the West. Examples include the ethnic cleansing of Bosnians, the systematic rape of Muslim women in Bosnia, the destruction of Chechnya, the genocide in Kashmir, the policy of collective punishment of Palestinian civilians in Palestine/Israel, and the continuous Israeli bombing of civilian areas of Lebanon — all viewed by Muslims as acts of terrorism. Serbia and Israel exemplify two different countries which have employed policies of military occupation — in Serbia's case actual genocide — but because they are part of "us," they are not considered perpetrators of terrorism, or perceived as international threats to Western society.

The American public was traumatized with the idea of terrorism "reaching our shores" in 1993 with New York's World Trade Center bombing. American Muslims carried the stigma as the group with the terrorist problem. Terrorism had been an instrument of intimidation and violence by many groups in the United States several decades prior to the World Trade Center bombing, but the level of alarm and anxiety was significantly heightened after 1993, even though the FBI

reported that the major sources of violent acts in America between 1982 and 1994 emanated primarily from Puerto Rican extremists, right-wing and left-wing militants, and Jewish extremists.[9]

Without the politics of the Middle East and Europe playing a critical role in the shaping of American public opinion, American Muslims would be seen as normal, like any other group containing both moderates and an extremist fringe within their community. Regardless of the origin and rise of extremism, the World Trade Center bombing became a watershed for American Muslims, who now had to come to terms with their own role in dealing with crisis: 1) the Islamic stand against terrorism must be clearly articulated and amplified in documents and public statements; and 2) the distinction between criticism of U.S. policy in the Muslim world and apologizing for extremist rhetoric and terrorism must be demarcated. While the need for these measures is understood within Muslim circles, it is time to open up to the rest of society and make such views available to non-Muslim political, media, and religious leaders.

There *is* a problem of Muslim extremism in many parts of the world. Its growth is commensurate with what the Muslim world perceives as American hatred and activism unfairly directed against Muslims. The masses of the Muslim world have been consistently disappointed by American Realpolitik. They praised Woodrow Wilson during his speech in the early twentieth century, when he presented his principles of freedom and self-determination as a conceptual framework for a post–World War I League of Nations. At that time in Egypt, for example, the Muslims struggling for liberation from British colonialism found in America's call for freedom a sign of hope. But disenchantment and betrayal replaced hope in the following key cases: the partition of Palestine that led to a stateless Palestinian people and to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the CIA's installation of the Shah in Iran after his father was democratically removed from power in 1952. Muslims then felt victimized, marginalized, and angered. Their sentiments became manifest in a militant fundamentalist expression.

Edward Djerejian, when he served as assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs in the Bush administration, offered a two-track approach in combating Middle East terrorism. He said, "On the one hand, we seek to address the political, social and economic conditions that serve as a spawning ground for extremist movements. On the other hand, we take vigorous action to deter, isolate, and punish terrorist groups and to deal firmly with states that support terrorism."[10]

In the 1999 report *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, issued by the U.S. Department of State, the predominant area of anti-U.S. attacks, as has been the case for several years, is Latin America (96 incidents).[11] The Middle East was responsible for eleven such attacks, representing only about 7 percent of the total number (169). Every region in the world except the Middle East reported an increase of terrorist incidents.[12] International terrorist attacks peaked in 1987 with 666 such events — reduced to 392 in 1999, primarily because of the demise of the Soviet Union and its state sponsorship of terrorism. Total fatalities of Americans as a result of international terrorist attacks in 1999 were five.

Still, fear of terrorism, and therefore of Islam, is higher now than before, and the conflict in the Middle East remains the major source of this tension. It has also been a source of apprehension in Muslim-Jewish relations.

Islam itself, not just Muslim extremists, has been perceived as a problem by Israeli leaders, especially those representing the far right. Benjamin Netanyahu depicts Islam in this light throughout his book, *A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World*. In his revisionist thinking, he asserts: "the [medieval] philosopher Moses Maimonides declared that the return to [the Land of] Israel was the only hope of an end to Jewish suffering at the hands of the Arabs, of whom he writes that 'Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase, and hate us as much as they.'"[13] This was the same Maimonides who was a student of the Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) of Cordova, and whose work, the Guide of the Perplexed, was considered "a great monument of Jewish-Arab symbiosis."[14] When he moved to Egypt from Spain, Maimonides was granted a position of "unchallenged authority"[15] and became the personal physician at the court of Saladin.

S. D. Goitein, a Jewish scholar from Hebrew University in Jerusalem, offered a point of view contrary to Netanyahu's: "In addition to a more favorable legal status, the Jewish people in early Islamic times enjoyed a complete economic and social revival, to which, however, the Arab contribution was indirect."[16]

Netanyahu also rejects the British Mandate's listing of Hagana, Irgun, and other Jewish activist groups in pre-1948 Palestine as terrorists, similar to the U.S. government's naming of several Muslim extremist groups on the present-day terrorist list: "This effort at symmetry readily reduces the Jewish resistance to the false cliché that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.' But terrorism can be reasonably defined. It is the deliberate and systematic assault on civilians, on innocent noncombatants outside the sphere of legitimate war-

fare. One could argue, in the case of the Jewish underground organizations, that a few isolated incidents could possibly qualify under the definition of terrorist, but there can be no question that the many hundreds of operations carried out by these organizations were indeed concentrated on military rather than civilian targets (including the British military headquarters, then housed in the King David Hotel)."[17]

Extrapolating from Netanyahu's logic, therefore, Hezbollah should be granted the same status as a resistance group because its primary target was the Israeli military within Lebanon. By the same token, Israel's record in the West Bank and Gaza and Lebanon points to the targeting of civilians. In April 1996, the *New York Times*, for example, criticized Israeli military attacks that had led to the death of over 75 Lebanese civilians and the wounding of at least 100 others: "Israel's goal has been to create an unmanageable number of refugees in Lebanon, pressuring the Lebanese Government and its sponsors in Syria to restrain Hezbollah's attacks. As many as 400,000 Lebanese have streamed north from their homes since the Israeli raids began eight days ago."[18] Using Netanyahu's logic again, it is Israel that committed terrorism in Lebanon, using civilian targets in a deliberate and systematic manner. Of course, when Hezbollah attacks Israeli civilians, then we all agree that this is a case of terrorism. Moreover, Netanyahu would like to revise history again and dismiss the massacres of Palestinian men, women, and children in Deir Yassin and Kafr Kasm as aberrations in what otherwise was a Jewish military campaign against the British Mandatory regime, or simplistically as nonevents. Either way, this is delusional thinking, indicating why the Clinton administration had difficulty in dealing with an Israeli leader who misused history to fit his political paradigms.

Dr. Meyrav Wurmser, of the Middle East Media and Research Institute, points to the need for Israelis to look within themselves, themselves and examine their views on Zionism and not hold Islam responsible for the growing problems facing Israeli society: "One could say that the real clash of civilizations in the Middle East today is not between Jewish and Islamic civilizations, because it is not the strength of Islam which represents the most serious threat to Israel. Rather, it is between the Zionists and post-Zionists, within Israel itself."[19]

If the settlements in the Occupied Territories are among the major stumbling blocks in achieving peace between Israel and Palestine, then the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) is the most formidable force within that obstacle. Though virtually unknown to the Ameri-

can public, they have been successful in promoting a form of Zionist extremism that has "found its logical conclusion in the plot to blow up the sacred Islamic mosque and shrine on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem."[20] The products of this group include the militant settlement of Kiryat Arba, reportedly the home of Robert Manning, considered by Arab American and American Muslim leaders as the perpetrator of the bombing of the American-Arab Antidiscrimination office in 1985 in Orange County that led to the death of Alex Odeh. Brooklyn-born Baruch Goldstein, another product of this Zionist extremist camp, stormed the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron on Ramadan and killed dozens of worshipers. His shrine in the Kiryat Arba settlement has been a source of controversy between moderates and extremists in Israel. Baltimore-born Allan Goodman, charged with a deadly automatic rifle assault at the Al-Aqsa mosque in 1982, was deported by Israel to the United States, where he remains at large.[21] These extremists are American-born, some well educated. But their extremist view of *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel, a biblical term, they construe as Greater Israel between the Nile and the Euphrates) has led them to believe in their "goal to end what they felt was Islam's contamination of the holiest Jewish site, in preparation for the final redemption."[22]

American partisanship and confusion over the meaning of terrorism have undermined America's own interest in fostering peace and stability in the region. In the case of Sudan's characterization as a state sponsor of terrorism, anti-Muslim bias is obstructing efforts for conflict resolution. Former President Jimmy Carter recognized this when he attempted to arrange a cease-fire between the North and South of that country after ten years of civil war and two million dead. Carter said, "They declared Sudan a terrorist training center, I think without proof. . . . In fact, when I later asked an assistant secretary of state, he said they did not have any proof, but there were strong allegations. . . . I think there is too much of an inclination in this country to look on Muslims as inherently terrorist or inherently against the West. . . . I don't see that when I meet with these people. . . . I think this obsession with Islam is maybe too great."[23]

The U.S. government has been accused of terrorism against Sudan by notable figures in the Muslim world. Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt criticized the U.S. bombings of Sudan and Afghanistan after the East African embassy bombings: "The U.S. is no different from any terrorist group, violating international law and applying the law of the jungle instead. . . . The bombings of the U.S. embassies in

Nairobi and Dar es Salaam are despicable — of that there can be no doubt. But the U.S.'s attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan are hardly less reprehensible."[24]

Effective counterterrorism policy must include means to minimize violence and the fear of violence. Counterterrorism strategy, therefore, should incorporate an effort to isolate extremists from religious validation and not grant them the license to wreak havoc in the name of religion. When Christian fundamentalists bomb abortion clinics and kill physicians in the name of defending Christianity, the media do not identify that violent act as a holy war, even though Christian fundamentalists claim the Bible and God as their authorities for the killing and maiming of civilians; they do so openly and vocally in the courtroom as they are indicted and convicted. The same standard of distancing religious labeling from illegitimate acts of violence and hate should be applied equally to Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and any other faith.

Improved relations between Muslims and Jews have yet to be explored in a serious and in-depth manner. The continuing violence and bloody rivalry entangled with religion underscores the challenge for Muslims and Jews in America to achieve understanding of each other's values. We may not have the ability to change realities in the Middle East, but we can create an independent relationship that can help foster better relations here and now.

Some points from a Muslim leader can be useful in the development of this relationship: "From amongst humanity, Jews and Christians are the nearest to Muslims and are given the honorary title of People of the Book. They are fellow believers in the One God and the recipients of scriptures from Him. They share the belief in the line of prophethood, and many of our Jewish and Christian friends are taken by surprise when they learn that the biblical prophets are also Islamic prophets. The three religions share a common moral code. . . . In an Islamic state the legal dictum about the People of the Book is that 'they have our rights and owe our duties.' Muslims were warned against acts of bigotry or prejudice towards the People of the Book, and Prophet Muhammad himself said, 'Whoever hurts a person from the People of the Book, it will be as though he hurt me personally.'"[25]

The Muslim calendar does not begin with the birth of a person but with the birth of a nation, the first Islamic state in Medina. After accepting the leadership of that city, Prophet Muhammad drafted a covenant that included the following important clause: "The Jews of Medina are an *ummah* (community) alongside the believers [the Muslims]. The Jews have their religion and the Muslims theirs. Both enjoy

the security of their own populace and clients except those who commit injustice and crime among them. . . . Any Jew who follows us is entitled to our assistance and the same rights as any one of us, without injustice or bias. . . . Each shall assist the other against any violator of this covenant."[26] The Medina declaration established a premise of freedom of faith and religious practice within an Islamic society. Moreover, these contractual guidelines constituted a precedent and a set of parameters for Muslim-Jewish relations based on respect and justice — relations based not on the commonality of creed but on the common commitment to the ethical values of monotheism.

One hopeful sign is that with a growing Muslim community in America, a healthy Muslim-Jewish dialogue will develop positive outcomes for the United States and the world. Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser, senior analysts in the international policy department for RAND, state the following: "Muslim communities in the West are more likely to exert influence on their countries and cultures of origin than to receive influences from them; over time they may have a substantive effect on the perception of secularization and minority rights in the Middle East."[27]

The politics of the Middle East will not change in the short term because the conditions that have led to the current conflicts are not being directly addressed. Acknowledging the problem of differing views on these matters and allowing for a national discourse on domestic and international American policy will help advance the cause for human rights and democracy. That can only be achieved with the elimination of the double standard and the increase of political participation by American Muslims — including speaking out against terrorism and within the framework of a civilized and open dialogue between America's Jews and Muslims. These goals can be optimized with a review and reorientation toward the problem of terrorism and "our" view of the "other."

Notes

1. "From Rabin's Funeral, the Scene and the Unseen," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1995.
2. Haaretz, *"The Failure of Terrorism"*, March 7, 1998.
3. "Agency, In the Wake of Killing, Are Rifts among U.S. Jews Widening?" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, November 17, 1995, and "Fan Club for Rabin's Assassin Shocks Israelis," CNN August 14, 1996.
4 *Religious Labels and the Rabin Assassination*, a survey of U.S. media by the Muslim Public Affairs Council, Los Angeles, December 1995, p. 1.

5. Ibid., p. 5.

6. "Focus on Terrorism: The legislation; Dispute on Marking Explosives Stalls Effort to Reach Accord," *New York Times*, July 31, 1996.

7. Testimony of the American-Arab Antidiscrimination Committee to the House Judiciary Committee Re: HR 2121 (The Secret Evidence Repeal Act), Washington, D.C., May 23, 2000 (see also Statement of Professor David Cole, Georgetown University Law Center, *On the Use of Secret Evidence in Immigration Proceedings and HR 2121*, Before the House Judiciary Committee, May 23, 2000, http://www.house.gov/judiciary/cole0523.htm).

8. Karen Armstrong, *Holy War* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), see Introduction, p. x.

9. Data from the FBI's Terrorist Research and Analytical Center publications entitled *Terrorism in the United States 1982–1992*, and *Terrorism in the United States 1994*. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice. (Found in Rise of Domestic Terrorism and Its Relation to United States Armed Forces, Lieutenant Commander Steven Mack Presley, Medical Services Corp, United States Navy, 19 April 1996, Table 2, p. 11, http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/presley.htm).

10. Counterterrorism Chronicle, *Counterterrorism Policy*, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Los Angeles, March 1995, p. 1 (see also U.S. Information Service/Israel, "Djerejian Says War on Terrorism Requires New Thinking: Calls on multi-track approach to defeat terrorists," October 5, 1998, http://www.usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/armscontrol/archive/1998/october/def1005a.shtml).

11. Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., April 2000, Appendix C.

12. Ibid., p. 1.

13. Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place Among the Nations* (New York: Bantam, 1993), p. 32.

14. S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 146.

15. Ibid., p. 183.

16. Ibid., p. 7.

17. Netanyahu, p. 76.

18. "A Deadly Day in Lebanon," *New York Times*, April 19, 1996.

19. Meyrav Wurmser, "Israel's Struggle with — Itself," *National Post*, July 10, 1999 (http://memri.org/staff/struggle.html).

20. Gideon Aran, "Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism," in *Fundamentalism Observed* by Appleby and Marty (University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 267.

21. Associated Press, October 29, 1997, and Reuters, October 26, 1997.

22. Aran, p. 267.

23. "Carter Slates U.S. over Linking Islam with Terrorism," *The Pakistan Link*, Sep. 17, 1993.

24. "U.S. Terrorism," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August 27–September 2, 1998.

25. Hassan Hathout, *Reading the Muslim Mind* (American Trust Publication, USA, 1998), pp. 14–15.

26. Muhammad Haykal, *The Life of Prophet Muhammad* (American Trust Publications, USA, 1976), pp. 180–183.

27. Fuller and Lesser, *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p. 95.