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**The Challenge of Talking about Terrorism –
The EU and the Arab Debate on the Causes of Islamist Terrorism**

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The Challenge of Talking about Terrorism - The EU and the Arab Debate on the Causes of Islamist Terrorism¹

Abstract

The Arab 'hegemonic debate' on the causes of Islamist terrorism nurtures (pan-) Arab, anti-western sentiments and delegitimizes criticism of the political status quo. The European Union's emphasis on multilateral means of conflict resolution and trade promotion leads to official pronouncements that barely address the Arab world's domestic problems, instead referring to international tensions such as the Arab-Israeli conflict as a particular cause of Islamist terrorism and the need for cooperation with Arab governments. By failing to challenge the official narratives of authoritarian Arab regimes the EU obstructs interests in the democratization of the region and the delegitimization of Islamist violence.

Introduction

Researching the coincidences between the government-condoned Arab debate on the ‘root causes’ of Islamist terrorism and the EU’s statements on that matter, we do not argue, or assume, that there would be a/one proper way of discussing or ‘representing’ terrorism and its causes. Indeed, we acknowledge that any kind of public and political attention to terrorism may function in favour of the terrorists’ strategic calculus simply by emphasising the phenomenon.² Due to asymmetric power relations between terrorist groups and well-established governments (authoritarian and democratic alike), each kind of discussion benefits the aspirations of the asymmetrically weaker part (in this case the terrorist groups). This raises the paradoxical and serious question of *how* to appropriately approach a discussion of ‘terrorism’ – even under the condition that the participants agree on a definition.³

When analysing debates, we intentionally avoid the term ‘discourse’ as it automatically resembles the Foucauldian concept of ‘discourse analysis’. While we try to avoid the broad empirical focus of Foucault’s concept, we do – though in a Foucauldian manner – recognize and use its achievement of directing academic analysis toward the distinct power aspirations which stand behind certain communicated world views and their terminologies as well as the power relations which might be their (un)intentional result.⁴ This perspective enables us to enquire into the political consequences of representing and talking about terrorism and to relate the Arab and EU statements on Islamist terrorism to their affirmation of authoritarian governance in the cases of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Our analysis concentrates explicitly on the portrayal of perceived causes of Islamist terrorism. We, therefore, evaluated general discussions on counter-terrorism only in so far as they allow conclusions on *how* causes of terrorism are construed. The selection of our examples was based

on the rationale that Egypt and Saudi Arabia enjoy considerable religious, cultural and political prominence in the Arab and broader Muslim world. In the context of the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian debate we analysed the semi-official Egyptian *Al-Ahram* newspaper and the privately owned Saudi *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*. While the latter has a broader regional outlook, the fact that its main revenue is generated within the Saudi market compels it to take ‘Saudi sensitivities’ into account. The inclusion of the English-language *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Egypt) and *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia) allowed us to assess the respective regimes’ strategies of shaping international opinion.

With regard to the problem of how to talk about terrorism, the EU – i.e. not its single member states – appeared to be a particularly intriguing choice as a case study, because it is the international actor most concerned with a balanced political language, with impartial diplomatic efforts and with anti-bellucose policies. However, we will point out that these efforts of ‘respectful objectivity’ and a global multilateral socio-political agenda initiate the problem of ‘talking about terrorism’ in such a way as it conflicts with the EU’s commitments to, and rhetoric of, democratic rule of law and human rights. Documents studied in the EU context are speeches by EU officials, primarily from and on behalf of the EU Commission as well as EU policy papers and declarations.

To limit the amount of the available Arabic material, while at the same time allowing for time- and space-related shifts in arguments, our research focused on specific time frames. These are the first two weeks after the attacks of 9/11, on a housing compound for foreign nationals in Riyadh in May 2003, after the bombings in Madrid in March 2004 and London in July 2005, as well as after the attacks on tourist resorts in Egypt in October 2004 and July 2005. This allowed us to generate sufficient material to make general observations about the way those various incidents were being framed in influential Arab news outlets.

While emphasizing the anti-liberal tone of the dominant Arab arguments on Islamist terrorism, we do not offer an attempt to establish the latter's 'root causes'. Instead, we focus on the question of how the construction of and emphasis on possible 'root causes' reflects and serves particular political agendas. Our conclusion is that although the European Union and the authoritarian governments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia are very different international actors with regard to their institutional set-up, foreign policies and self-perception they end up supporting comparable narratives on the causes of Islamist terrorism. By confronting the examples of the prevalent Arab arguments with marginalized liberal Arab interpretations of the analyzed events, we attempt to highlight the extent to which the EU's reluctance to more openly make the internal (political) predicaments of the Arab world a subject of discussion is helping to sideline alternative, anti-authoritarian Arab voices.

The Authoritarian Arab Interpretation of the Causes of Islamist Terrorism

Islamist Terrorism as a Result of Western Aggression

What is striking about the way the Egyptian newspapers *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Ahram Weekly* cover domestic and international Islamist violence is that irrespective of the political context and likely perpetrators of the particular attack the reader is always reminded of a history of 'western aggression' against the Arab and Muslim world. Depending on the author, this might also include references to specific U.S. foreign policies and often the very existence of the state of Israel.

On September 11, 2001, Osama Bin Laden's choice of targets obviously facilitated exactly this kind of framing that became prevalent in the Arab world. Representing an often repeated sentiment, *Al-Ahram's* daily columnist Salih Muntasir and guest commentator Muhyi ad-Din

‘Amirmur claimed that on that horrific Tuesday morning the United States tasted the ‘fire which it burned others with’⁵ and ‘experienced for the first time on its soil a situation of war, which many countries had suffered from that had been exposed to American bombardments in the last century, from Germany to Japan, from Vietnam to Baghdad.’⁶ Prominent Egyptian commentator Salama Ahmed Salama explained to his western readers that Islamist terrorism had thus simply to be understood as a reaction to western provocation and the U.S. ‘planting the seeds of terrorism in the Middle East (by endorsing Israel’s policies),’⁷ a statement he reiterated after the terrorist attacks in Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005.⁸

Another line of this argument depicts Israel as the beneficiary of the spread of Islamist terrorism through its instrumentalisation of U.S. power. After 9/11, Karim Baqr Adwani claimed that the Zionist lobby pushed the United States to precipitously enter a war ‘with no limit in time and space.’⁹ Former PLO press officer Bassam Abu Sharīf criticized what he perceived to be ‘Ariel Sharon’s attempts to exploit the criminal operations in America’ to influence American public opinion against Muslims and Arabs and prominent columnist Samir Attallah portrayed the Sharon government as the cause and greatest beneficiary of the U.S. ‘catastrophes’.¹⁰

The extent to which these attempts of Arab nationalist and Islamist commentators to link their ideological preferences to the threat of terrorism fall in line with the interests of the ruling elites is highlighted by the fact that *Al-Ahram*’s editors explained the terrorist attacks of Riyadh, Madrid, and London with the United States’ ‘blind partisanship toward Israel’ as well as the latter’s ‘crimes against the Palestinians’ and ‘its threat to the Arab countries’.¹¹ This line of reasoning reflects the interests of the Arab regimes insofar as it not only allowed them to externalize the ‘root causes’ of Islamist terrorism, but also to delegitimize the latter in a manner that avoids any need to address domestic conditions that might have caused the emergence of Islamist radicaliza-

tion in the first place. By portraying Islamist terrorism as the result of western policies in general and Israeli policies in particular, the Egyptian and Saudi government try to rid themselves of any kind of responsibility and circumvent the question as to whether the lack of venues for peaceful political participation, the increasing dominance of narrow interpretations of anti-modern religious thinking as well as the anti-western hegemonic debate itself might be factors in the emergence of Islamist terrorism. In other words, Islamist terrorism is simply an 'understandable' defensive reaction to western aggression, but amounts to the wrong strategic choice as it only serves Israel's objectives. This last aspect was particularly stressed in the authoritarian framing of those Islamist terror attacks that took place in the Arab world itself.

For instance, in the aftermath of the second terrorist attack on the Egyptian Sinai peninsula within a year, *al-Ahram's* 'Atif al-Ghamri editorialized in the summer of 2005 that the terrorist activities in the region occurred in response to the U.S. presence in Iraq and benefited Israel as the domestic destabilization of Arab countries would eventually clear the way for Israel's drive toward regional hegemony.¹² His framing resembles *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat's* attempt to delegitimize Islamist terrorism by lambasting the perpetrators of the attack in Riyadh for engaging in 'meaningless' terrorism at a time when 'sensitive circumstances' (i.e. Saddam Hussein had been toppled only a couple of days earlier) necessitated 'solidarity among all Muslims and Arabs, between governments and people.'¹³

On a more general level, the debate supported by authoritarian Arab governments includes frequent references to a supposed general western anti-Muslim attitude. Given their precarious domestic legitimacy, Arab governments are accepting the close association with particular interpretations of Islam as long as these serve to support existing power structures.¹⁴ This goes hand in hand with the attempt to present themselves as the guardians of Islam and Muslims in general. In

the time frame covered in our analysis this was especially prevalent in the Saudi debate. In his newspapers' initial reaction to the events of 9/11, *Arab News*' editor-in-chief Khaled al-Maena explained to his English-speaking global audience that 'terrorists have no religion and country'.¹⁵ This reasoning may be understood as a deliberate distraction from possible links between terrorist violence and the nationalist Wahhabi interpretation of Islam that forms one of the pillars of the Saudi monarchy's claim to power. It therefore did not come as a surprise when the Saudi minister of the interior, Prince Naif, announced in October 2001 that no 'western smear campaign' would prevent the Saudi government from 'following the sharia'.¹⁶ One year later, his close relationship with the religious establishment led him to publicly state that he considered 'the Zionists' to be responsible for the attacks of 9/11 and called the Muslim Brotherhood the origin of all problems in the region.¹⁷ This statement reflects a central streak of internal Saudi-Arabian discussions. In order to absolve the pro-government Wahhabi clerics of any responsibilities for the domestic and global escalation of Islamist violence, their defenders point to the fact that the fateful method of *takfir*, i.e. the denunciation of other Muslims as infidels, had been 'invented' by radical 1970s splinter groups of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁸

The discussion of possible links between specific interpretations of Islam and terrorist violence was further discredited by commentators such as Salama Ahmad Salama, who in both his English and Arabic columns depicted a post-9/11 'war hysteria' that had supposedly generated the search for a 'scapegoat' and 'waves of racist hatred' against Arabs and Muslims living in the West.¹⁹ The anti-Semitic overtones detectable in many commentaries that try to link Israel to Islamist terrorism became even more pronounced when prominent Lebanese commentator Samir Attallah used his column in *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* to claim that 'the Arabs in America feel that they are being targeted like the Jews in Germany before the war'.²⁰ When Islamist commentator

Fahmy Howeidi called for an ‘international alliance against hatred’²¹ he was not talking about the hatred that prompted nineteen young men to commit mass murder on 9/11, but referred to what he described as the ‘anti-Islamic hatred’ instigated by the ‘Jewish lobby’. He quotes ‘western’ examples of acts of anti-Islamic hate and jingoistic statements, which then support his construction of the image of a ‘campaign’ (*himla*) that conveys carries forward the very narrative of Muslim victimhood upon which, again, terrorist recruiters feed.²²

Turning the Arab State from Cause into Cure

Authoritarian governments in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia benefit from these debates not only through the externalization of ‘root causes’ of terrorism and its delegitimation as promoting the agenda of ‘foreign’ powers. The construction of a linkage between Islamist terrorism and international crises that can (only) be addressed through multilateral diplomacy under the lead of Arab countries also turn these regimes from possible ‘causes’ into definite ‘cures’.

With the attack in Riyadh coinciding with former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell’s attempt to gather regional support for the ‘Road Map’ to peace between Israelis and Palestinians,²³ the coverage of, and symbolism associated with, terrorism allowed these regimes to highlight what they would like the international community to view as their essential role in solving regional conflicts. By linking Islamist terrorism to external forces of the Arab-Israeli conflict (and eventually to the war in Iraq), the Arab world’s pro-Egyptian and pro-Saudi intellectual elites could claim that Cairo’s long-established diplomatic bona fides and Riyadh new-found impact allow them to play a central role in any meaningful attempts of western countries dealing with their security concerns.²⁴ It is therefore not surprising that every major terrorist incident of the last six years was followed by an editorial in *Al-Ahram* calling for an international conference under

Egyptian auspices.²⁵ After 9/11, Ibrahim Nafie, *Al-Ahram*'s editor-in-chief, hailed Hosni Mubarak as 'the first world leader to caution that terrorism had become one of the most pernicious forms of organized crime' and called for an international conference that amongst other things should work toward a distinction between 'terrorism' and (Palestinian) 'national liberation'. Nafie's declaration that Egypt, a 'pivotal regional power', could provide the Arab world with a 'voice in channelling international anti-terrorist efforts' underscores the extent to which the official Egyptian terrorism debate is dominated by attempts to demonstrate this country's regional and global importance.²⁶ From a European perspective, Nafie's claim that Egypt, which has been subject to a special investigation of the United Nations committee set up under the authority of the global convention against torture,²⁷ possesses a 'storehouse of ideas concerning the legal and logistical requirements for organizing a global conference to formulate a comprehensive international anti-terrorist convention' immediately raises the question of whether those ideas are compatible with human rights norms. *Al-Ahram* followed a similar logic based on the portrayal of anti-Muslim sentiment by praising President Mubarak for raising his voice against the 'calls for revenge' that supposedly singled out Arabs and Muslims in the western world. According to *Al-Ahram*, western governments can prove their good will towards the Muslims and Arabs by agreeing to an international conference under Egyptian auspices.²⁸ Thus, the image of 'the' anti-Muslim West in general and the call to take into account external forces with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular serve the interest of the authoritarian regime in Cairo in polishing its domestic and international credibility after its dictatorial crackdown that aimed to ensure the transition of power from father (Hosni Mubarak) to son (Gamal Mubarak), an action that runs counter to any democratic norm.

The prevalence of the notion that the overall goal of western policy is the weakening of Arab societies also allows the authoritarian Arab governments to delegitimize any western attempt to use its leverage in order to force them to open up avenues of peaceful political participation in counter-terrorist policies. Some days after the attacks of 9/11, *Al-Ahram* published an editorial which delineated a long list of issues that had to be addressed in the fight against terrorism. On the domestic front its authors counted among the most important things equal political, social, and judicial rights; the development of an open democratic system, which provides the opportunity for political engagement for all citizens; and efforts against unemployment.²⁹ While this might sound like an invitation for western engagement, the subsequent section of his editorial stresses the limits of possible western influence. The call to respect the ‘sovereignty of countries and peoples’, to distance itself from the ‘arrogance of power’ (*ghatrasat ul-quwa*) as well as the ‘violation’ (*intihāk*) of the rights of other powers closely resembles those phrases which Middle Eastern potentates and their nationalist allies use to deflect any external call for or support of domestic reforms in their countries.³⁰

When the United States (more forcefully than the EU) started to discuss the necessity of political reform in the Arab world, long-time *Al-Ahram* columnist Hani Shukrallah criticized ‘western pundits’ and ‘Arab neo-liberals’ for their suggestion that Arabs and Muslims should start looking for domestic reasons for terrorist violence. Instead, he claimed that events such as ‘the Taba bombings are directly and most profoundly connected to the ongoing butchery in Palestine and Iraq at Israeli and American hands.’³¹ In another opinion piece Salama Ahmed Salama managed to feature all the typical elements of the dominant voices in the Arab debate in an ideal-type manner in his attempt to discredit the Greater Middle East Initiative³² and to deny Israel’s right to exist:

‘Maybe it has been the essential mistake in the treatment of the phenomenon of terrorism that the whole world marched after the American understanding, which was prevalent after the events of September and which considered terrorism as a revelation of the backwardness, tyranny and ignorance in the Arab and Muslim world. Therefore its solution was the transport of the battle into the heart of the region, beginning with the assault on Afghanistan, leading to the occupation of Iraq, and the decree of a reform program, whilst the true causes of terrorism have been ignored. They are rooted in the fights which were triggered by the colonialist, expansionist Israeli existence and what resulted from it.’³³

The Liberal Counter-Narrative

The arguments of the nationalist and Islamist side of the debate stand in stark contrast to those of the limited number of liberal commentators such as Egyptian Muhammad as-Sayyid Sa’id and Kuwaiti Ahmad ar-Ruba’i who criticized the ‘gloating and lack of sympathy’ and ‘Schadenfreude’ towards the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.³⁴ Interestingly, both felt compelled to link their morally-based critique with a utility-based argument about the possible negative effects such public celebrations might have for the PLO in particular and the Arabs in general.³⁵

In their critique, as-Sayyid Sa’id and ar-Ruba’i were joined by Egyptian commentator Mamoun Fandy who used his column in *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* to pounce on those who criticized the crimes of 9/11 while trying to rationalize them. For him the fact that U.S. politicians defended American Muslims and Arabs in an hour of ‘greatest rage and grief’ symbolized the ‘humanity’ of U.S. society.³⁶ Abdel-Moneim Said, liberal columnist and director of the *Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies*, declared the ‘claim that horrors happening to Muslims go unnoticed’ to be ‘as common as it is insidious’ which helps to create the ‘culture of alienation’ the organizers of terrorist attacks would feed upon.³⁷

After the terrorist attacks in London on July 7, 2005, 'Abdallah 'Abd as-Salam issued a stinging critique of those 'who hurry to criticize terrorism against civilians only to add that it is our duty to remember that the West is currently conducting a crusade against the Arabs and Muslims.' This would translate into telling the terrorists that their cause is just and that they 'only err with your targets'.³⁸ He points out that in the western world 'millions demonstrated against the Iraq war', that the terrorist attacks in London occurred when the leaders of the western world were discussing debt relief for many Muslim-majority African countries, and that the people in the West had been competing with each other to support the mostly Muslim victims of the tsunami catastrophe in late 2004.³⁹ For him, the only crime that is worse than a terrorist attack is the kind of discourse that tries to involve Muslims and Arabs in a holy war.⁴⁰

The discussions of the political role of Islam(ism) reflect the different Egyptian and Saudi claims to power. Whereas the Egyptian regime is binding itself ever closer to the religious elite of al-Azhar in their common struggle against Islamist *and* liberal opposition voices alike,⁴¹ some members of the ruling elite in Saudi Arabia have realized that *specific* interpretations of Islam undermine its power.⁴² The fact that liberal calls for a rigorous self-examination of religious elites are prevalent in the two analyzed Saudi publications can therefore be understood not only as a means of brandishing the kingdom's international image, but also as a means of influencing the new domestic discussion about the role of Islam.

Here, the events of May 2003 proved to be particularly influential in broadening the boundaries of what was acceptable to be discussed in the Saudi context. This situation was made possible through the fact that – in contrast to Egypt – the schism between proponents and opponents of political and societal reforms is not equivalent to the frontline between regime and opposition, but is represented in both. This enabled *Arab News* to describe the attackers as 'the new fas-

cists'.⁴³ The linking of Islamism with Fascism was picked up by Amir Taheri who saw similarities between Islamism and Fascism inasmuch as both would emphasize the abstract community at the expense of the individual, with Islamist thinkers like Khomeini, Qutb and Mawdudi being 'more influenced by Western totalitarian ideologies than by classical Islamic thought.'⁴⁴ *Arab News* even urged its readers to come to terms with the fact that 'we have a terrorist problem here' and criticized Saudi Arabia for having tried to ignore the domestic aspects of the events of 9/11, instead clinging to the 'fantasy' of Israeli or CIA involvement. It also criticized any attempt to differentiate between acceptable terrorism in Israel and Russia and the terrorism taking place in Saudi Arabia and called for putting an end to the 'cult of suicide bombings'.⁴⁵

The expanding scope of the permissible within the Saudi debate became notably visible in *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat's* commentaries on the terrorist attacks in London. British guest commentator Adel Darwish, who also publishes in *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *Time*, described al Qaeda's goal to be 'terrorism for the sake of terrorism' and called upon the leaders of the Arab countries, their political parties, religious dignitaries, and intellectuals to unequivocally condemn terrorism: 'We await the condemnation of every form of terrorism from the top of the mosques' pulpits.'⁴⁶ *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat's* Amir Taheri detected the basic problem in the 'speech of those who divide humanity into 'believers' and 'non-believers' and spread hatred of other religions'. According to him, it is therefore necessary to develop a new religious speech which stresses the value of human existence and the value of life.⁴⁷ Egyptian Liberal Magdi Khalil explicitly agreed with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's statement that the solution to the problem of terrorism could ultimately only be found within the Islamic world itself.⁴⁸ Mamoun Fandy joined in with the declaration that the only two things that could eventually end this form of terrorism were Osama Bin Laden's 'expulsion from Islam' and the end of western naivety toward the Is-

lamists.⁴⁹ That this line of reasoning fell within the general view of an important fraction within Saudi Arabia's political elite is demonstrated by a joined op-ed of then-Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the UK, Turki al-Faisal, and Lord Kerry who portrayed al-Qaeda as 'unislamic' and called upon the western countries to protect peace-loving Muslims and prevent extremists from exploiting western liberties.⁵⁰

The EU Debate

Focus on International Conflicts and Cooperation

Given the authoritarian Arab governments' skilfulness in playing on the (increasing) European fear of being branded anti-Muslim, official EU statements tend to retreat to the safer rhetorical ground of stressing the link between the rise of Islamist terrorism and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Throughout individual speeches and articles by EU politicians as well as papers from EU institutions, the unsolved nature and increasingly violent conduct of this conflict is presented as one of the main reasons for the emergence of Islamist terrorism. The conviction that both are directly intertwined, and that, consequently, the fight against terrorism has to go hand in hand with a successful settlement of the conflict is, for example, clearly expressed in the European Security Strategy which was drawn up under the authority of the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, and adopted by the Brussels European Council, i.e. the gathering of the heads of state or government of the member states of the European Union and the president of the European commission, in December 2003 as an European counterpoint to the Bush administration's National Security Strategy of 2002. It claimed that '(t)he most practical way to tackle the often elusive new threats will sometimes be to deal with the older problems of regional conflict',⁵¹ and culminated in the statement that the '(r)esolution of the Ar-

ab/Israeli conflict is a strategic priority for Europe. Without this, there will be little chance of dealing with other problems in the Middle East.⁵² This point was also stressed by former EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gies de Vries who had been appointed to this position in response to the Madrid train bombings. He portrayed getting ‘the Israeli-Palestinian peace process back on course’ as ‘a central component of any strategy to combat terrorism’.⁵³

In an article Javier Solana published in the *Financial Times* in the immediate aftermath of the Madrid bombing, he also combined ‘our determination to understand and tackle the factors behind terrorism’ with an elaboration on the need for ‘addressing the legitimate needs of the Palestinian people’ which ‘would deal a heavy blow to terrorism.’⁵⁴ The extent to which he adopts the point of view of the authoritarian Arab governments, i.e. that it is not their domestic failings, but the external source of the Arab-Israeli conflict that supposedly brings about terrorism, is evident by the fact that he mentions ‘good governance and the rule of law’ only as an afterthought in the context of the ‘fight for regional stability.’⁵⁵ In another article on what he termed the ‘Intelligent War on Terror’, Solana completely omitted any mention of democracy and human rights when arguing that ‘(r)egional conflicts cause anger and resentment. The unresolved Arab-Israeli problem leads to the rise of radicalism and extremism.’⁵⁶

In its 2002 appraisal of the EU’s counterterrorism policy, the European parliament seemed to share this view by declaring that ‘solving the Middle-East conflict in accordance with UN resolutions is an essential element in the fight against terrorism’ and that ‘the political dialogue should focus more sharply on particular countries having key regional roles, such as India, Pakistan, Iran and the Arab states, and that relations with these countries be strengthened through appropriate instruments of cooperation and assistance.’⁵⁷ In a striking allusion to the pro-authoritarian voices within the Arab debate, it linked in a resolution of February 2007 Islamist terrorism not

only ‘to inherent conflicts within the Muslim world’ but also ‘to struggles for power and natural resources, including oil.’⁵⁸

What is critical with these associations and thematizations is that the overt emphasis on ‘global’ or ‘regional’ problems not only fails to address the distinctive role of Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes themselves as a possible cause of terrorist violence. While the popularity of Islamist propaganda is obviously helped by graphic images of violence that seem to validate radical interpretations of western and Israeli intentions, the Arab governments use the conflict to forestall the discussion of domestic issues. If one accepts the argument that firstly Islamist terrorism is linked to the state of the Arab-Israeli conflict and secondly regional conflicts are solvable only in multilateral engagements with a region’s main players, then the authoritarian Arab governments are able to connect their own existence with the fight against Islamist terrorism.

Thus, by contextualizing Islamist terrorism as a phenomenon more or less directly linked to the international arena, the EU helps to turn ‘regional stability’ into a euphemism for the continued support of the authoritarian Arab status quo.

Framing Domestic Arab Issues in Terms of the EU’s Trade Strategy

For a long time the so-called Barcelona process, launched in 1995, was treated as the central channel of EU engagement with its southern neighbourhood.⁵⁹ Its importance for our analysis lies in the fact that long before the manifestation of transnational Islamist terrorism through the attacks of 9/11, in Riyadh 2003, in Madrid 2004, in London and Egypt 2005, the fight against terrorism moved up to the top of the international agenda. The representatives of the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, member states of the European Union and non-European Mediterranean countries issued a joint statement that mentions many of the aspects

covered in the contemporary Arab and European debates on counterterrorism and its relation to political reform.

One of its most striking features was the fact that the tension between notions of political reform and sovereignty had been solved in favour of the latter. This was the case when the signatories pledged to ‘develop the rule of law and democracy in their political systems, while recognizing in this framework the right of each of them to choose and freely develop its own political, socio-cultural, economic and judicial system’ and to ‘respect their sovereign equality and all rights inherent in their sovereignty.’⁶⁰ Any lingering chance that the Barcelona statement might create (rhetorical) leverages for political reform was removed by the language on counterterrorism cooperation stressing the focus on ‘stepping up exchanges of information and improving extradition procedures’ as well as ‘ratifying and applying the international instruments they have signed, by acceding to such instruments and by taking *any other appropriate measure* (emphasis added).’ By adding acceptance of ‘the need for a differentiated approach that takes into account the diversity of the situation in each country’, Barcelona gave the authoritarian Arab governments the green light for any policy they deemed necessary to fight terrorism. This was especially worrisome given the Egyptian government’s broadening of the definition of terrorism to muzzle any form of peaceful political opposition.⁶¹

These profound inconsistencies in the EU’s official rhetoric became apparent again in the already mentioned European Security Strategy. On the one hand, it admits that the ‘Mediterranean area generally continues to undergo serious problems of economic stagnation, social unrest and unresolved conflicts’ and that ‘the pressures of modernisation, cultural, social and political crises, and the alienation of young people living in foreign societies’ have to be considered as the causes of ‘the most recent wave of terrorism’;⁶² on the other hand, however, it completely omits

any mentioning of democratic reform from the call for ‘continued engagement with Mediterranean partners, through more effective economic, security and cultural cooperation in the framework of the Barcelona Process.’⁶³

It was only with the terrorist attacks in Madrid, ‘Europe’s 9/11’⁶⁴, that the EU moved toward stressing the linkages between the authoritarian Arab government’s failures and Europe’s security. The ‘Declaration on Combating Terrorism’, which the European Council had issued two weeks after the terrorist attacks in Madrid, included a section on ‘the factors which contribute to support for, and recruitment into, terrorism’ that hinted at an understanding of the causes of Islamist terrorism that is more in line with the assessment of Arab liberals. Specifically, the European Council called for both the ‘more efficient use of external assistance programmes to address factors which can contribute to the support for terrorism, including in particular support for good governance and the rule of law’, as well as for the development and implementation of a ‘strategy to promote cross-cultural and inter-religious understanding between Europe and the Islamic World.’⁶⁵ Also, Javier Solana admitted in a speech at the East West-Institute’s Second Annual Worldwide Security Conference in February 2005 that ‘we need a comprehensive strategy tackling both the manifestations and the underlying causes of terrorism, such as political alienation and radicalisation.’⁶⁶

The final version of the EU’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy of December 2005 remarked that the conditions which ‘may make the radical message more appealing (...) include poor or autocratic governance; rapid but unmanaged modernisation; lack of political or economic prospects and of educational opportunities’.⁶⁷ However, it mentions democratization only as an afterthought to ‘the provision of assistance to priority third countries - including in North Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia’ and relegates the matter to ‘the dialogue and alliance between cultures,

faiths, and civilisations.⁶⁸ As such it represents a variation of Gies de Vries' noncommittal pledge to strengthen the EU's 'links with moderate and modernising Muslims in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia on the basis of a shared commitment to democratic values'.⁶⁹

A couple of weeks before the London terrorist attacks of July 2005, the European Parliament signalled its understanding of circumstances conducive to the emergence of Islamist terrorism by describing what it regarded as effective preventive counter-terrorism measures. Specifically, it mentioned 'the promotion of new initiatives for peacemaking and mediation in societies which are marked by conflicts and division, by adopting long-term trade, aid and investment policies that advance the fight against poverty and help strengthen democratic institutions and transparency at national and at global level through initiatives which may contribute to these goals'.⁷⁰

This statement is significant in the sense that it largely reflects the interests of those political and economic elites that constitute or support the authoritarian Arab governments. By focusing on regional diplomacy and mentioning democracy only as the product of trade, aid and investment policies, the European parliament relegates the domestic set-up of the Arab countries to the status of tertiary concern.

In late 2002, it had already declared that 'the fight against terrorism can never be won unless combined with a broad alliance aimed at eradicating poverty and installing democracy, respect for the rule of law and human rights worldwide' since terrorism's root causes were 'poverty, human rights infringements, oppression and forcible relocation of persons, and lack of education'.⁷¹ By connecting poverty with terrorism, even though this contradicts empirical evidence,⁷² the EU links its interest in trade with the fight against terrorism. It also plays in the hands of the political elites in Cairo and Riyadh who are interested in setting up and diversifying their economic links with the EU.

The extent to which Cairo is playing on European interests and sensitivities is highlighted by the swift and devastating way Egypt's ruling elite and their media allies reacted in early 2008 to the European Parliament's stinging critique of the human rights situation as well as the arbitrariness of governmental and judicial decisions in Egypt.⁷³ The Egyptian parliament, for example, threatened to cancel diplomatic relations with the EU and with the Euro-Mediterranean Council which is part of the aforementioned 'Barcelona Process'. Egyptian foreign minister Ahmad Abu Al-Gheit rejected the European Parliament's resolution as 'arrogant' and 'ignorant' and proclaimed that Egypt would boycott scheduled political consultations with EU officials. Hosni Mubarak's assertion that '(w)e will never agree to interference in our country's internal affairs' and that 'Egypt is implementing its reform agenda in accordance with its own values and experience, and without (importing) anyone else's experience, or adopting an agenda that is at odds with its values, principles, and experience'⁷⁴ demonstrates a remarkable linguistic affinity to the document that initiated the Barcelona process. Fathi Sorour, speaker of the Egyptian national assembly, countered with a call for the concentration on 'Islamophobia in Europe' and 'Western hostility against Islamic values' to be undertaken by the Union of Muslim Parliaments and pointed to support from the Damascus-based Arab Parliamentary Union that condemned the European Parliament's resolution 'which comes at a time when it turns a blind eye to Israeli atrocities in Gaza Strip'.⁷⁵

On the other hand, Mubarak's regime did hesitate to accept a 558 Million Euro aid package through the EU's Neighbourhood Partnership program. This decision was obviously made easier when the Commission assured that the program was based on 'Egypt's own reform agenda in the economic, social and political areas'⁷⁶ and EU foreign affairs commissioner Ferrero-Waldner

pledged that the EU will be ‘a loyal and sensitive partner, respectful of the sincerity of your commitment to the shared principles, supportive of your efforts to modernize and to reform.’⁷⁷

According to the independent European Policy Centre (EPC), the EU’s reluctance to bring domestic sources of terrorism more forcefully into the discussion is directly linked to the concern that the application of the very principles which are sacredly upheld as EU governance such as democratization and the strengthening of civil society, can, at least momentarily, open avenues of political participation and increase the space for elements of radicalization, terrorism and instability. As Fraser Cameron puts it: ‘(The) dilemma for the EU – and for the US – is that accelerated promotion of democracy and human rights in the Arab world risks undermining existing regimes that are sometimes helpful in counter-terrorism, and could lead to Islamic fundamentalists taking power who will then disregard democracy and human rights.’⁷⁸

Following this perspective, both strategies of either democratization *or* cooperation with the established regimes would lead to human rights problems and a subversion of the principles of EU governance, either directly or indirectly. The only difference being that in the case that the EU supports secular authoritarianism, its other regional interests are perceived to be more likely guaranteed. However, by framing the problem in this way, the EU falls into the rhetorical trap laid out by the authoritarian Arab governments of the false choice between authoritarian stability and Islamist chaos.⁷⁹ As the small minority of Arab liberal voices suggests, there exists a third option of protecting human and civil rights that underpin any vibrant civil society and which would protect the blossoming of alternative (liberal) forms of thinking about Islam’s role in politics and society. This raises the question of how the hegemonic Arab debate and the EU’s official statements frame the political role of Islam(ism) in the emergence of Islamist terrorism.

Avoiding the Culture Clash – Political Correctness and Islamist Terrorism

The EU's organs take great care in distinguishing between those Islamist ideologues who justify violence and terrorist acts and the vast peaceful majority of Muslims living in both the EU and the Arab world. With this sensible and prudent distinction, EU politicians help to fight a general portrayal of Muslims as radicals and their general susceptibility to terrorism. The empirically unfounded talk of a 'clash of civilizations' does not only undermine inter-communal relations within the EU, but also the external policies toward Arab and Muslim countries in general.

This issue became all the more pressing with the post-Madrid focus on the inner-European situation of Arab and Muslim communities. It highlighted the connection between 'home grown' terrorism and radicalization within EU countries and the discussion of their reasons, which can indeed partly be found in deficiently conceptualized national and EU immigration politics, past and present,⁸⁰ and the Middle East's 'home grown' problem of 'failed' or 'belated' modernization.

This matter is stressed in the above-mentioned European Council's post-Madrid strategy paper which called for an investigation into 'the links between extreme religious or political beliefs, as well as socio-economic and other factors, and support for terrorism'.⁸¹ This realization culminated in a preliminary statement of the Council of the European Union, as the council of ministers representing the EU's member states, that '(i)n the context of the most recent wave of terrorism, for example, the core of the issue is propaganda which distorts conflicts around the world as a supposed proof of a clash between the West and Islam.'⁸²

The problem with the official European approach is that the policies flowing from this understanding fail to address the link between this phenomenon and the interests of the authoritarian governments. A policy that focuses on 'getting our own message across more effectively' and 'engaging with civil society and faith groups that reject the ideas put forward by terrorists and

extremists that incite violence’ as well as the development of a ‘non-emotive lexicon’⁸³ might be suitable for the intra-European context, but will remain insufficient as long as the Arab world’s authoritarian governments nurture countervailing rhetoric in pursuit of their own interest in regime survival. Given the frequently highlighted transnational dimension of Islamist terrorism as well as the linkages between radicalized individuals and groups in both the immigrant communities and the respective countries of origin, this approach seems one-sided and thus doomed to fail.

The zeal for political correct language in addressing the political ideology based on a selective reading of Islamic precepts must go hand in hand with attempts to address what Arab liberals criticize as the complicity of many religious authorities in the Middle East in the handy availability of justifications for terrorist violence. As demonstrated above, the images of western aggression do not only serve the Arab governments’ attempt to delegitimize foreign calls for political reform, they also serve the interest of traditional religious elites in delegitimizing alternative liberal religious thinking. That means that as long as authoritarian Arab governments openly support anti-western images in an effort to stem the tide of political reform, no level of linguistic hygiene on the part of the EU can prevent the distortion of its domestic and foreign policies.

Conclusion

While there is an obvious divide between the Arab and EU debates regarding the assessment of past and present forms of western politics, both merge in the statement and concession that past forms of western imperialism and enforced modernization are responsible for contemporary radicalization in the Arab world. The underlying analysis fits well with the EU’s focus on multilateral means of conflict resolution and trade promotion as counterterrorism strategies. From the

perspective of political reform in the Middle East the problem arises that it ends up negotiating the debate into rhetorical territory easily amendable to the interests of the authoritarian Arab governments. While there are certainly external factors at play, both debates manage, or at least play a certain role in, producing and sustaining a red herring that legitimizes, or, as in the case of the EU, does at least not strictly delegitimize the emerging Islamist terrorist violence which claims to arise from conflicts such as the one between Israel and its Arab neighbours.⁸⁴

Marginalized liberal and self-critical voices in the Arab world coincide with cautious assessments from within the EU that are also prepared to focus on totalitarian aspects of radical and violent Islamist movements. Both debates can be characterized by a critical inward focus on their own societies in order to make out causes for terrorism instead of looking for such causes in foreign countries/regions and thereby distracting (intentionally, or not) from problems at home.

The distinctions between radical, totalitarian aspects of Islamism and moderate, peaceful understandings of Islam are undoubtedly based on appropriate political judgement. However, the EU faces the problem that certain interpretations of Islam have lent themselves to the fortification of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world in exchange for a (relatively) free hand in the excommunication of divergent liberal religious views. This challenge became even more virulent with the post-Madrid and post-London recognition that what may be considered as the appropriate means of ‘defending Islam’ in some quarters of the Arab world can pose a problem through the conversion and transnational radicalization of migrant communities for the EU itself. It is at this point that a stronger focus within the EU debate on the critical, liberal voices in Saudi Arabia and Egypt could help overcome a way of talking about terrorism that (intentionally and/or not) nurtures a debate that supports the authoritarian regimes of Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

¹ The authors would like to express their gratitude to the British Academy for funding the research for this article.

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³ For a summary on the problems associated with the attempts to define terrorism, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 13-44.

⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality. With two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault*, ed. by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); also Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited and introduced by John B. Thompson; translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁵ Salih Muntasir, “Mahām Bush (Bush’s Missions)”, *Al-Ahram*, 16 September 2001.

⁶ Muhyi ad-Din ‘Amirmur, “Intiba’ātu ‘an infijārāt ‘amrīkī (Impressions of the American Explosions)”, *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 September 2001.

⁷ Salama Ahmed Salama, “Sore Spots”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 553, 27 September-3 October 2001.

⁸ “The terror being inflicted on the region by the US, the UK and the rest of Europe is what feeds local violence.” Salama Ahmed Salama, “Tributaries of Terror”, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 753, 28 July-3 August 2005.

⁹ Karīm Baqr ‘Adwānī, “As-Sadma wa-l-masdūm wa-murāja‘al-mawgi‘a (The Push and the Pushed and the Painful Revision)”, *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 15 September 2001.

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¹¹ “Al-irhāb ... al-bint al-murr li-ghiyāb il-‘adāla (Terrorism ... the Bitter Plant of Injustice)”, *Al-Ahram*, 17 May 2003; “Tajfīf Manābī‘ l-irhāb ... kaifa? (Drying up the Sources of Terrorism ... How?)”, *Al-Ahram*, 15 May 2003; “Al-Islāh al-watanī li-muwājihat natā‘ij al-harb w al-ya‘ṣ wal-irhāb (Domestic Reform in the Face of the Results of War, Despair, and Terrorism)”, *Al-Ahram*, 17 March 2004; “Tafjūrāt lundun wa-lhāja lil-āliyāt jadīda li-mukāfihat il-irhāb (The London Explosions and the Necessity of New Instruments in the Fight against Terrorism)”, *Al-Ahram*, 9 July 2005.

¹² ‘Ātif al-Ghamrī, “‘Irhāb .. harb ‘am jarīma (Terrorism .. War or Crime)”, *Al-Ahram*, 27 July 2005.

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¹⁴ For the Saudi case, see Alexander Bligh, “The Saudi Religious Elite (Ulama) as Participant in the Political System of the Kingdom”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 1 (February 1985) 37-50; for Egypt, Tamir Moustafa, “Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt”, *Middle East Studies*, 32 (2000): 3-22

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²⁰ Samir Attallah, “Qira‘atun fī l-rukam: min Kabul ila niu yurk (Reading the Clouds: from Kabul to New York)”, *ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 20 September 2001.

²¹ Fahmi Howaydī, „Daw‘a li-tahāluf ad-duwalī did al-Kirāhiyā (Call for an International Alliance against Hatred)”, *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, 17 September 2001.

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