

Editorial

The “war on terror” has become one of those discursive moral high grounds that, in reality, serve as a smokescreen to conceal the imperial ambitions of a political elite. While the corporate media generally supports this elite by (mis)informing the general public about the war’s “progress,” more pertinent threats fail to attract the same kind of political attention (and general hand wringing) associated with the “green menace.” I could be referring to global warming, which some scientists consider one of the greatest threats to human life, or to the spread of such deadly diseases as the HIV avian flu virus. Actually, I am referring to organized crime and its links to biker gangs.

On 8 April 2006, the worst mass murder in recent Ontario history occurred near Shedden, a small southwestern town where the bodies of eight men were found in a local farmer’s field. Police arrested five people, including a Bandido motorcycle club member. The killings were club related, as the victims were members or associate members of the club. The Bandidos are a “outlaw” biker motorcycle club, held to represent that 1 percent who engage in criminal activity. As is usually the case, this minority wreaks havoc by its members’ involvement in car/motorcycle theft, drugs, prostitution, gun trafficking, and similar criminal activities. They also contribute to gun-related deaths and maimings, drug addiction, and theft.

Given this reality, biker gang-related activities are of grave concern to community health and safety. And yet the West’s public venom is mostly preserved for Muslims, most of whom are peace-loving people seeking to live quiet productive lives in safe neighborhoods. It is this overarching discourse of the supposedly “evil” scourge of Muslims against the backdrop of the more tangible, long-term, and widespread threats of organized crime that is worrying on at least two fronts. First, its demonization of Muslims makes their lives in the West an increasingly problematic experience and, second, it focuses the public’s attention on an abstract threat (“terror”) while diverting attention from more tangible (if intractable) threats, thereby allowing the United States’ neoconservative imperial ambitions to proceed.

Maligning Muslims and Islam is reaching a dangerous level of acceptability in the United States and elsewhere in the West, even at the level of political discourse, and is buttressed by a largely supportive general public. The result: no-fly lists, racial profiling, and the jailing and torture of Muslims.

As far as Muslims are concerned, the political will is heading in the wrong direction. If the public and the politicians would focus more on such real issues as gang-related violence, guns, and drug addiction, they would have a positive impact on quality-of-life issues for more people than this abstract and generally negative imperialistic “war on terror” ever will.

A few Canadian security experts and politicians are raising concerns along these lines. After the Bandido incident, there was some press coverage of a suggestion from Ottawa South Liberal MP David McGuinty that the Hells Angels biker gang be labeled a terrorist organization. Such a label would give the police extraordinary powers that, some reports claimed, would virtually wipe out the group. The Hells Angels Ontario chapter, currently involved in a public relations campaign to sanitize their image, vigorously protested his remarks.¹ Their website condemned the “political attack on our patriotism for political gain. ... We fight everyday for freedom and the virtues that this society is supposed to hold dear,” said the statement, posted on Real Deal News (www.redwhiteclothing.ca).²

The RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) cast doubt on McGuinty’s efforts by suggesting that the Hells Angels would not knowingly abet terrorists. Bob Paulson, RCMP chief superintendent of major and organized crime intelligence, said the Hells Angels are motivated by greed, not political or ideological goals: “The features that distinguish them is a degree of structure and rules.”³ Derek Lee, an Ontario Liberal MP and justice committee vice-chairman, echoed this, noting that the “Hells Angels are separated from terrorists in law because they are not driven by ideological or political goals.”⁴

This distinction between greed- and ideological-based criminal activity is worrisome, especially for Muslims, for “terrorism” has yet to be clearly defined. While this focus on the Hells Angels’ criminal activity and other aspects of organized crime is laudable, the Hells Angels did raise a legitimate point: Mention the “T” word the website worried, and we are all targets of an expanding police state. Since the “war on terror” is casting a wide net that entraps many innocent Muslims, demonizing a venerable world religion, and turning non-Muslim western populations against their Muslim neighbors, these legal distinctions are a serious matter. Do we really know that a Muslim who joins an alleged Muslim terrorist group is not motivated by “greed” (e.g., a lust for power)? How can we be sure that such Muslims are not criminals jumping on the “terrorist” bandwagon? (The late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was an imprisoned petty criminal when he was recruited into al-Qaeda.)

On the other hand, while the means may be abhorrent, how can we be sure that a political goal claimed by a “terrorist” is not a laudable one? And

where does that leave terrorism practiced by governments? Do only non-state actors commit “terrorism”? What is the “shock and awe” policy of the United States’ military in Iraq, whereby the entire male population is imprisoned for months in the search for one suspect, whereby towns are bombed relentlessly and innocent civilians are killed at wedding parties, if not terrorism?

Thus, while attention to the criminal activity of biker or other gangs is laudable, we should be careful about the ever-expanding use of the word *terrorist*, as the legislation enacted to protect against terrorism is seriously eroding civil liberties in western countries. Muslims are paying the highest price to date, but history is full of examples of what happens when the state expands its powers at the expense of civil liberties. Ontario Liberal MP Derek Lee noted that the distinction in law between terrorism driven by ideology versus criminality driven by greed will disappear over time. While it would be preferable to extend the notion of criminality, rather than the politically driven and latently anti-Islamic concept of terrorism, he rightly states: “The techniques they use are often very similar. From the point of view of the public, it doesn’t make much difference.”⁵

With this in mind, it is useful to continue the academic exploration of the ideologies said to be behind today’s “terrorists.” Helena Kaler’s “Islamic Responses to Modernity: Ayman al-Zawahiri and Farid Esack” is a finely drawn comparative study of two Muslim thinkers. While some may find it distasteful, given the two individuals’ widely divergent interpretations of Islam, Kaler demonstrates that comparing apples and oranges sometimes yields insights about both. She suggests that despite their radically different conceptions of an ideal Islamic society and the means with which to establish one, they both utilize a thoroughly modern intellectual framework. She suggests persuasively that Islamists like al-Zawahiri implicitly accept modern notions of political power even as they attempt to chart an anti-western and “truly Islamic” polity.

The unfortunate linkage of contemporary Islamic religious practices to medieval backwardness and opposition to modernity is evidenced in Turkey, where women who wear the hijab are denied access to government jobs and education in the belief that wearing it is an un-modern, even an anti-modern and an anti-Turkish, statement. In “Populism and Secularism in Turkey: The Headscarf Ban Policy,” Erin Tatari investigates the origins of this problem through a combination of process-tracing theory, historical institutionalism, and political-cultural theory to great effect.

Seyfettin Erşahin’s “Westernization, Mahmud II, and the Virtue Tradition” shows how Mahmud II’s attempts to reform the Ottoman Empire

along western lines required the ulema's support to deal with the ensuing opposition. His article illustrates the traditional Islamic position that obedience to the ruler was preferred to the chaos of (violent) rebellion. While scholars of Middle Eastern and Islamic history will be familiar with this position, it comes as something of a corrective to the more uniformed view (viz., the mainstream western popular cultural view) that concludes, based on the actions of Muslims committed to bringing about an Islamic state through violence, that Islam in its very essence promotes violence. To understand how the traditional ulema encouraged Ottoman subjects to accept Mahmud II's reform package is also to understand how novel is the modern Muslim jihad against governments led by Muslim rulers. This connects Erşahin's paper to Kaler's article.

With the United States currently spreading its empire from the barrel of a gun, it is something of a painful irony to observe that its supporters insist that this course is being pursued to spread "freedom" and oppose Islam's "barbaric" civilization, which they accuse of having been spread by the sword! If the latter were true, as some western scholars and Christian apologists have long claimed, this would simply be a case of the pot calling the kettle black. However, careful scholarship has always opposed this popular culture view of Islam. Aliaa Dakroury's "Communication and the Rise of Early Islamic Civilization (570-632)," is another fruitful refutation of such a perspective. Following Marshal Hodgson's periodization of Islamic history, Dakroury takes an in-depth look at the environment in which Muhammad (peace be upon him) first disseminated the Revelation. She focuses on the role that communication played in Islam's initial spread and subsequent rise during Muhammad's lifetime.

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Notes

1. www.gazette.rcmp.gc.ca/article-en.html?&lang_id=1&article_id=224.
2. Jorge Barrera, "MP revs up biker battle: Ottawa South's McGuinty pushes for terrorist tag despite online claims of patriotism from Hells Angels," *Ottawa Sun*, 17 May 2006 <http://ottsun.canoe.ca/News/OttawaAndRegion/2006/05/17/pf-1583517.html>.
3. *Ottawa Sun*, 12 May 12 2006. posted on <http://bikernews.obworld.com/index.cfm?d=news&p=read&newsid=1643>.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.