

---

Reproduced below is a text of a speech delivered by the late Eqbal Ahmad at the University of Colorado, Boulder, 12 October 1998. Eqbal Ahmad was Professor Emeritus of International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and served as a managing editor of the quarterly *Race and Class*. He died in 1999.

## ON 'TERRORISM'—THEIRS AND OURS

Eqbal Ahmad

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Jewish underground in Palestine was described a "terrorist." Then new things happened. By 1942, the Holocaust was occurring, and a certain liberal sympathy with the Jewish people had built up in the Western world. At that point, the terrorists of Palestine, who were Zionists, suddenly started to be described, by 1944-45, as "freedom fighters." At least two Israeli Prime Ministers, including Menachem Begin, can actually be found in books and posters with their pictures, saying "Terrorists, Reward —" The highest reward I have noted so far was 100,000 British pounds on the head of Menachem Begin. Then from 1969 to 1990 the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Organization, occupied the center stage as the "terrorist organization." Yasir Arafat has been described repeatedly by the great sage of American journalism, William Safire of the *New York Times*, as the "Chief of Terrorism."

Now, on 29 September 1998, I was rather amused to notice a picture of Yasir Arafat to the right of President Bill Clinton. To his left is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Clinton is looking towards Arafat, and Arafat is looking literally like a meek mouse. Just a few years earlier he used to appear with this very menacing look, with a gun at his belt.

In 1985, President Ronald Reagan received a group of bearded men. They were very ferocious-looking bearded men with turbans, looking like they came from another century. President Reagan received them in the White House. After receiving them he spoke to the press. He pointed towards them, and said, "These are the moral equivalent of America's founding fathers." These were the Afghan Mujahiddin. They were at the time, guns in hand, battling the "Evil Empire." They were the moral equivalent of our founding fathers! In August 1998, another President ordered missile strikes from the US navy based in the Indian Ocean to kill Osama Bin Laden and his men in camps in Afghanistan. I do not wish to embarrass you with the reminder that Mr. Bin Laden, whom 15 American missiles were fired at in Afghanistan, was only a few years ago the moral equivalent of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson! He got angry over the fact that he has been demoted from "Moral Equivalent" of US "Founding Fathers." So he is taking

out his anger in different ways. I have recalled all these stories to point out that the matter of terrorism is rather complicated.

Terrorists change. The terrorist of yesterday is the hero of today, and the hero of yesterday becomes the terrorist of today. This is a serious matter of the constantly changing world of images in which we have to keep our heads straight to know what is terrorism and what is not. But more importantly, to know what causes it, and how to stop it. The next point about 'terrorism' is that posture of inconsistency necessarily evades definition. If you are not going to be consistent, you're not going to define. I have examined at least twenty official documents on terrorism. Not one defines the word. All of them express it emotively, polemically, to arouse our emotions rather than to exercise our intelligence. One example is representative: 25 October 1984, George Shultz, then US Secretary of State, at the New York Park Avenue Synagogue, gives a long speech on terrorism — in the State Department bulletin of seven single-spaced pages, there is not a single proper definition of terrorism.

What we get is the following: 1. "Terrorism is a modern barbarism that we call terrorism." 2. is even more brilliant: "Terrorism is a form of political violence." Aren't you surprised? 3. "Terrorism is a threat to Western civilization." 4. "Terrorism is a menace to Western moral values." Does it tell you anything, other than to arouse your emotions? This is typical. They don't define terrorism because definitions involve a commitment to analysis, comprehension and adherence to some norms of consistency. That's the second characteristic of the official literature on terrorism.

The third characteristic is that the absence of definition does not prevent officials from being globalistic. We may not define terrorism, but it is a menace to the moral values of Western civilization. It is a menace also to mankind. It's a menace to good order. Therefore, you must stamp it out worldwide. You need a global reach to kill it. Anti-terrorist policies therefore have to be global. Same speech of George Shultz: "There is no question about our ability to use force where and when it is needed to counter terrorism." There is no geographical limit. On a single day the

missiles hit Afghanistan and Sudan. Those two countries are 2,300 miles apart, and they were hit by missiles belonging to a country roughly 8,000 miles away. Reach is global.

A fourth characteristic: Claims of power are not only globalist they are also omniscient. We know where they are; therefore we know where to hit. We have the means to know. We have the instruments of knowledge. We are omniscient. Shultz: "We know the difference between terrorists and freedom fighters, and as we look around, we have no trouble telling one from the other." - !!!!! Only Osama Bin Laden doesn't know that he was an ally one day and an enemy another. That's very confusing for Osama Bin Laden. I'll come back to his story towards the end. It's a real story.

Five: The official approach eschews causation. You don't look at causes for anybody becoming terrorist. Cause? What cause? They think to look means to be sympathetic to these people. The *New York Times*, 18 December 1985, reported that the foreign minister of Yugoslavia requested the Secretary of State of the US to consider the causes of Palestinian terrorism. George Shultz (in the words of the *New York Times*;) "went a bit red in the face. He pounded the table and told the visiting foreign minister, there is no connection with any cause. Period." Why look for causes?

Six. The moral revulsion that we must feel against terrorism is selective. We are to feel the terror of those groups that are officially disapproved. We are to applaud the terror of those groups of whom officials do approve. Hence, President Reagan: "I am a contra." He actually said that. We know the contras of Nicaragua were nothing, by any definition, but terrorists. The media also heed the dominant view of terrorism. The dominant approach also excludes from consideration, more importantly, the terror of friendly governments. To that question I will return because it excused among others the terror of Pinochet (who killed one of my closest friends, Orlando Letelier); and it excused the terror of Zia-ul-Haq, who killed many of my friends in Pakistan. According to my ignorant calculations, the ratio of people killed by the state terror of Zia-ul-Haq, Pinochet, and the Argentinian, Brazilian, Indonesian type — versus the killing of the PLO and other 'terrorist' types — is literally, conservatively, one to one hundred thousand. That's the ratio. History unfortunately recognizes and accords visibility to power or dominant groups, and not to weakness. In our time, the time that began with this day, October 12, Columbus Day, is a time of extraordinary unrecorded holocausts. Great civilizations have been wiped out.

The Mayas, the Incas, the Aztecs, the American Indians, the Canadian Indians were all wiped out. Their voices have not been heard, even to this day, fully. Now they are beginning to be heard, but not fully — only when the dominant power suffers, only when resistance has a semblance of costing, of exacting a price. When a Custer is killed or when a Gordon is besieged is when you know that Indians or Arabs were fighting and dying. My last point of this section: US policy in the Cold War period has sponsored terrorist regimes one after another. Somoza, Batista, all kinds of tyrants

have been US friends. There was a reason for that. Nicaragua, contra. Afghanistan, *mujahiddin*. El Salvador, etc. You shouldn't imagine that I have come to praise the other side, but keep the balance in mind. Keep the imbalance in mind and first ask ourselves: What is terrorism? Our first job should be to define the damn thing, give it a description of some kind, other than "moral equivalent of founding fathers" or "a moral outrage to Western civilization." Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: "Terror is an intense, overpowering fear"; terrorism, "the use of terrorizing methods of governing or resisting a government." This simple definition has one great virtue, that of fairness. It focuses on the use of coercive violence, violence that is used illegally, extra-constitutionally, to coerce. And this definition is correct because it treats terror for what it is, whether the government or private people commit it. Motivation is left out of it. We're not talking about whether the cause is just or unjust — but about consensus, consent, absence of consent, legality, absence of legality, constitutionality, absence of constitutionality. Why do we keep motives out? Because motives differ. Motives differ and make no difference.

I have identified in my work five types of terrorism. First, State terrorism. Second, Religious terrorism, terrorism inspired by religion — Catholics killing Protestants, Sunnis killing Shiites, Shiites killing Sunnis — God, sacred terror, you can call it if you wish. Three: Crime, Mafia. Four: Pathology — you're sick, want the attention of the whole world, you've got to kill a president — you terrorize, hold up a bus. Fifth, there is Political terror of the private group — be they Indian, Vietnamese, Algerian, Palestinian, Baader-Meinhof, the Red Brigade — oppositional terror.

Keep in mind one more thing: sometimes these five can converge on each other. You start with protest terror, you go crazy, you become pathological, you continue. They converge. State terror can take the form of private terror. For example, we're all familiar with the death squads in Latin America or in Pakistan. Government has employed private people to kill its opponents. It's not quite official. It's privatized. Convergence. Or the political terrorist who goes crazy and becomes pathological. Or the criminal who joins politics. In Afghanistan, in Central America, the CIA employed in its covert operations drug pushers. Drugs and guns often go together. Smuggling of all things often go together. Of the five types of terror, the focus is on only one, the least important in terms of cost to human lives and human property: Political terror of those who want to be heard. The highest cost is State terror. The second highest cost historically is Religious terror, although in the 20th century it has, relatively speaking, declined. The next highest cost is Crime; then Pathology. A Rand Corporation study by Brian Jenkins, for a 10-year period up to 1988, showed 50% of terror was committed without any political cause at all. No politics. Simply crime and pathology. So the focus is on only one, the political terrorist, the PLO, the Bin Laden, whoever you want to take. Why do they do it? What makes the terrorist tick?

First, the need to be heard. A minority group, the political, private terrorist. Normally, and there are exceptions, there is an effort to

get your grievances heard by people who have not been hearing it. A minority acts. The majority applauds. The Palestinians, for example, the super terrorists of our time, were dispossessed in 1948. From 1948 to 1968 they went to every court, knocked at every door in the world. Nobody was listening to the truth. Finally, they invented a new form of terror, literally their invention: the airplane hijacking. Between 1968 and 1975 they pulled the world up by its ears. They dragged us out and said: Listen, Listen. We listened. We still haven't done them justice, but at least we all know. Even the Israelis acknowledge. Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel, said in 1970, "There are no Palestinians." They damn well exist now. We are cheating them at Oslo — at least there are some people to cheat now. We can't just push them out. The need to be heard is essential. Mix of anger and helplessness produces an urge to strike out. You are angry, feeling helpless. You want retribution, to wreak retributive justice. The experience of violence by a stronger party has historically turned victims into terrorists. Battered children are known to become abusive parents and violent adults. You know that — that's what happens to peoples and nations. When they are battered, they hit back. State terror very often breeds collective terror. By and large Jews were not known to commit terror except during and after the Holocaust. Most studies show that the majority of members of the worst terrorist groups in Israel or in Palestine, the Stern and the Irgun gangs, were people who were immigrants from the most anti-Semitic countries of Eastern Europe and Germany. Similarly, the young Shiites of Lebanon or the Palestinians from the refugee camps are battered people. They become very violent.

The ghettos are violent internally. They become violent externally when there is a clear, identifiable external target, an enemy where you can say, "Yes, this one did it to me." Then they can strike back. Example is a bad thing. Example spreads. There was a highly publicized Beirut hijacking of a TWA plane. After that hijacking, there were hijacking attempts at nine different American airports. Pathological groups or individuals modelling on the others. Even more serious, when governments engage in terror they set very large examples. When they engage in supporting terror, they engage in other sets of examples. Absence of revolutionary ideology is central to victim terrorism. Revolutionaries do not commit unthinking terror. Those of you who are familiar with revolutionary theory know the debates, the disputes, the quarrels, the fights within revolutionary groups of Europe, the fight between anarchists and Marxists, for example. But the Marxists have always argued that revolutionary terror, if ever engaged in, must be sociologically and psychologically selective. Don't hijack a plane. Don't hold hostages. Don't kill children, for God's sake. Have you recalled also that the great revolutions, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Algerian, the Cuban, never engaged in hijacking type of terrorism? They did engage in terrorism, but it was highly selective, highly sociological — still deplorable, but there was an organized, highly limited, selective character to it. So absence of revolutionary ideology that begins more or less in the post-World War II period has been central to this phenomenon.

My final question is: these conditions have existed for a long time, but why now this flurry of private political terrorism, so much of it and so visible? The answer is modern technology. You have a cause. You can communicate it through radio and television. They will all come swarming if you have taken an aircraft and are holding 150 Americans hostage. They will all hear your cause. You have a modern weapon through which you can shoot a mile away. They can't reach you. And you have the modern means of communicating. When you put together the cause, the instrument of coercion and the instrument of communication, politics is made. A new kind of politics becomes possible. To this challenge, rulers from one country after another have been responding with traditional methods. The traditional method of shooting it out, whether it's missiles or some other means. The Israelis are very proud of it. The Americans are very proud of it. The French became very proud of it. Now the Pakistanis are very proud of it. The Pakistanis say, "Our commandos are the best." Frankly, it won't work.

A central problem of our time are the political minds, rooted in the past, and modern times, producing new realities. Therefore in conclusion, what are my brief recommendations to America? First, avoid extremes of double standards. If you're going to practice double standards, you will be paid with double standards. Don't condone Israeli terror, Pakistani terror, Nicaraguan terror, El Salvadoran terror, on the one hand, and then complain about Afghan terror or Palestinian terror. It doesn't work. Try to be even-handed. A superpower cannot promote terror in one place and reasonably expect to discourage terrorism in another place. It won't work in this shrunken world. Do not condone the terror of your allies. Condemn them. Fight them. Punish them. Please eschew, avoid covert operations and low-intensity warfare. These are breeding grounds of terror and drugs. The structure of covert operations, I've made a film about it, which has been very popular in Europe, called "Dealing with the Demon."

I have shown that wherever covert operations have been, there has been the central drug problem. That has been also the center of the drug trade. Because the structure of covert operations, in Afghanistan, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Central America, is very hospitable to drug trade. Avoid it. Give it up. It doesn't help. Please focus on causes and help ameliorate causes. Try to look at causes and solve problems. Do not concentrate on military solutions. Do not seek military solutions. Terrorism is a political problem. Seek political solutions. Diplomacy works. Take the example of the last attack on Bin Laden. They say they know what they're attacking, but they don't know. They were trying to kill Qaddafi; they killed his four-year-old daughter. The poor baby hadn't done anything. Qaddafi is still alive. They tried to kill Saddam Hussein; they killed Laila Bin Attar, a prominent artist, an innocent woman. They tried to kill Bin Laden and his men, not one but twenty-five other people died. They tried to destroy a chemical factory in Sudan; now they are admitting that they destroyed an innocent factory — one-half of the production of medicine in Sudan has been destroyed — not a chemical factory. Four US missiles fell in Pakistan: one was

slightly damaged, two totally damaged — one was totally intact. For ten years the US government has kept an embargo on Pakistan because Pakistan is trying, stupidly, to build nuclear weapons and missiles. One of the missiles was intact. What do you think a Pakistani official told the Washington Post? “A gift from Allah. We wanted US technology, now we have got it, and our scientists are examining this missile very carefully.” It fell into the wrong hands. So look for political solutions. Do not look for military solutions. They cause more problems than they solve. Please help reinforce, strengthen the framework of international law. There was a criminal court in Rome. Why didn't they go to it first to get their warrant against Bin Laden, if they have some evidence? Get a warrant, then go after him — internationally. Enforce the UN, the International Court of Justice. This unilateralism makes us look very stupid and them relatively smaller.

(from Q&A:) The point about Bin Laden would be roughly the same as the point about Sheikh Abdul Rahman, who was accused and convicted of encouraging the blowing up of the World Trade Center in New York City. *Jihad*, which has been translated a thousand times as “holy war,” is not quite just that. *Jihad* is an Arabic word that means, “to struggle.” It could be struggle by violence or struggle by non-violent means. There are two forms of the concept: the small *jihad* involves violence, the big *jihad* involves the struggles with self. The reason I mention it is that in Islamic history, *jihad* as an international violent phenomenon had disappeared in the last four hundred years, for all practical purposes. It was revived suddenly with US help in the 1980s. When the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, Zia ul-Haq, the military dictator of Pakistan, which borders on Afghanistan, saw an opportunity and launched a *jihad* there against “godless Communism.” The US saw a “God-sent” opportunity to mobilize one billion Muslims against what Reagan called the “Evil Empire.” Money started pouring in. CIA agents starting going all over the Muslim world recruiting people to fight in the great “*jihad*.” Bin Laden was one

of the early prize recruits. He was not only an Arab, he was also a Saudi — he was also a multimillionaire, willing to put his own money into the matter. Bin Laden went around recruiting people for the *jihad* against Communism.

I first met Osama bin Laden in 1986, recommended to me by a US official. I had asked, “Who are the Arabs here who would be very interesting?” (in Afghanistan and Pakistan) He said, “You must meet Osama.” I went to see Osama. There he was, rich, bringing in recruits from Algeria, from Sudan, from Egypt, just like Sheikh Abdul Rahman. This fellow was a US ally. He remained an ally. He turns at a particular moment. In 1990 the US goes into Saudi Arabia with forces. Saudi Arabia is the holy place of Muslims, Mecca and Medina. There had never been foreign troops there. In 1990, during the Gulf War, they went in, in the name of helping Saudi Arabia defeat Saddam Hussein. Osama Bin Laden remained quiet. Saddam was defeated, but the US troops stayed on in the land of the kaba (the sacred site of Islam in Mecca), foreign troops. He wrote letter after letter: “Why are you here? Get out! You came to help but you have stayed on.” Finally he started a jihad against the other occupiers. His mission is to get US troops out of Saudi Arabia. His earlier mission was to get Russian troops out of Afghanistan. A second point to be made about him is these are tribal people. Being a millionaire doesn't matter — the tribal code of ethics consists of two words: loyalty and revenge. You are my friend, you keep your word — I am loyal to you. You break your word — I go on my path of revenge. For him, the US has broken its word. The one to whom you swore blood loyalty has betrayed you. They're going to go for you, and a lot more. These are the chickens of the Afghanistan war coming home to roost. This is why I said to stop covert operations. There is a price attached to those that the American people cannot calculate and Kissinger-type people do not know — don't have the history to know. ■