

## Comments for Teach-In II, Panel I, Origins of Militant Islam.

We have all heard a lot of talk over the past two weeks from government officials, the media, and our friends, neighbors, and colleagues, about the need to be tough on militancy. My overall theme of my talk tonight is that while we must be tough on militancy, we must also be tough on the causes of militancy. And so we must investigate those causes. Many people are asking, “Why do they hate US?” Us, of course, refers to the US. But we need to understand that until quite recently, Islamic militants have dedicated most of their hatred and most of their violence to overthrowing governments within the Middle East. Their hatred for America is real and it is frightening; but focusing only on that hatred for America will mislead us about the true causes of violence sanctioned by religion and hence will not aid us to combat it.

So today I will confine my remarks to causes of Islamic militancy that are indigenous to the societies from which it has emerged. I want to talk about three themes: Political Despotism and Repression; Corruption and Economic Immiseration; and finally, I want to discuss how knowledge of these causes affords us with new opportunities and, indeed, new obligations.

In his speech of last week, President Bush claimed that militant Islam is an attack on freedom and democracy. To that claim, I would counter that militant Islam is first and foremost an attack on the tyranny and repression that is unfortunately characteristic of so much of the Middle East. Tragically, by taking the form of militant Islam, the response to despotism and violence has itself been despotic and violent.

Many commentators have claimed that these militant groups are products of envy and resentment of the products and values of Western consumer capitalism—Movies, McDonalds, and Madonna. I would counter that militant Islamic groups resent their **own** economic systems in the Middle East that supply those luxury goods to only a small minority while keeping the majority of the population mired in poverty. Even worse, membership in the privileged minority is not by virtue of merit but by way of corruption.

The first theme, that of a response to despotism, has helped spawn extremist groups; the second theme, that of a response to global capitalism that induces corruption while ignoring poverty, has given extremist groups a mass base.

These propositions put us, I think, in an awkward position: we hate and fear these militant groups, yet we must, I think, also hate and fear the forces that have given rise to them. Therefore, to repeat, we must condemn and combat the militants, but we must also condemn and attack their causes of their militancy.

Consider first tyranny and repression. When Islamic militants assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981, they were heard to claim that they had murdered pharaoh, the despotic ruler of ancient Egypt. And one of the slogans of the Iranian Revolution, a slogan picked up by other Islamic groups, is “For Every Pharaoh, there is Moses.” Equating militant Islamic groups with Moses might offend our sensibilities, but it is certainly worth noting that these groups perceive themselves as opponents of despotism. Indeed, it was not long ago that President Ronald Reagan referred to the Afghani mujahideen fighting the Soviet Union as “freedom fighters.”

Needless to say, despotism has not been in short supply in the Middle East. Three features of that despotism have helped to spark an Islamist backlash:

--Despotic regimes have tried to control all aspects of political life. Open participation in politics has generally not been an option, and so opposition has been driven underground. More moderate Islamic movements have often been repressed, leading to the radicalization of Islam.

--Despotic regimes have tried to control religious life. As a result, many of the key figures and institutions of orthodox and mainstream Islam have become illegitimate, seen as puppets of the state. In response, opponents of these regimes have turned to more heterodox religious thinkers. And, as Dr. Sachedina has informed us, a key innovation of these heterodox religious thinkers is their claim that the broader society is no longer Muslim so that Muslims cannot lead a proper religious life w/out wholesale destruction of existing political and social institutions and their replacement by new Islamic institutions.

--Despotic regimes have even tried to co-opt Islamic movements, in part by adopting their rhetoric. Throughout the Middle East, governments hoping to cloak their corruption and repression with the mantle of religion have sponsored religious figures who condemn America in language used by Osama Bin Laden. As a result, the general population receives only a distorted interpretation of reality. Even worse, various governments have tried to use radical Islamic movements as allies against other opponents,

further legitimating the Islamists and providing them with social support and political resources.

Let us turn from despotism to the particular form that capitalism has taken in many of these countries. In America, we have two success stories: Horatio Alger, in which a poor boy becomes rich through hard work; and Abraham Lincoln, in which a boy from a modest background becomes president through his virtue. Both of these accounts stress merit, not inherited wealth and not inherited privilege. And these accounts typically treat business and politics as separate routes to success. Only infrequently, and so far with only limited success, have wealthy business people entered politics—Ross Perot, Steve Forbes, etc. This is generally seen as legitimate I think, and only occasionally viewed with more darkly when there are suspicions that the candidate has tried to purchase office. We see as distinctly illegitimate, however, the use of political office as a means to gain wealth: hence, the importance of Whitewater, or Richard Nixon's famous speech that he had received no gifts but his dog, Checkers.

It is precisely this illegitimate connection between political power and wealth that characterizes so much of the Middle East. Political officials, often of modest backgrounds, have used their office to enrich themselves on a grand scale. They are increasingly passing on their privileged political and economic positions to their sons and daughters. And the route to success in business is to have political connections, not a better idea. Corruption is endemic.

At the same time, governments have often reversed their policies of providing basic requirements of subsidized food, health care, housing, education, and access to jobs to the population at large. In part because of the demands of international financial institutions, in part because of their need to reduce their levels of debt, government spending has been slashed while economic growth has stalled or been reversed for a period stretching over two decades. At the same time, there has been a demographic explosion. As a result, for millions of young men, there are almost no prospects of stable employment; and therefore no prospects of marriage and a stable family life.

These same young men watch the rich and the powerful consume Western goods. And they know that the rich and the powerful are not virtuous and deserving of luxury, but are deeply stained with corruption. Impoverishment

amidst illegitimately earned wealth and conspicuous consumption breeds resentment. This is also, I believe, why we find so many members of the free professions among the ranks of Islamists—doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers—all people who have specialized training, who deserve a particular station in life, watching as corruption eats away at their social status and their standard of living. And they revolt against this, as most of us would.

Now it might sound like I'm painting too sympathetic a picture of these groups; that is not my intention at all. These conditions do not determine the responses to them. The vast majority of Muslims have responded to despotism, poverty, and corruption in peaceful ways, not through militancy. One response has been a turn to personal piety: many Muslims have reacted to political, economic, and cultural corruption through intensified religious observance and spiritual sobriety. A second response has been communitarianism, which combines personal devotion with collective action to recast social, political, and economic institutions as properly Islamic institutions. Their weapons are not guns and bombs, but cultural reform and the provision of social services. These communitarian Muslims discovered long before George Bush that private religious organizations could play a major role as charitable organizations. It is through their good works, works which are tremendously important in countries where poverty meets state indifference, that they hope to persuade others to reform society; moral suasion, not coercion, informs their conduct.

Finally, there are the militants, who believe in the violent and manichean assault on perceived sites of morally bankrupt social control. Political violence, paranoid conspiracy theories, and emotionally-laden recruitment campaigns draw state reprisals, instigating an abysmal cycle of violence that induces more recruits to fight heightened state repression. At some point in their lives, leaders and recruits of these groups chose violence; the existence of personal piety and communitarian social action tells us that alternative to violence exist. The choice to engage in violence does not occur in a vacuum, and in that sense and only in that sense, it understandable. But it is morally contemptible.

And it is terrifying. Violence has become a way of life for these men. Their actions are often hopelessly divorced from any concrete and feasible program for building a new, more just society. In that sense, despite their appeals to a religious ideology, they are nihilists. And in that sense, they will not go away, even if the forces that originally gave rise to them disappear.

I strongly believe that this analysis of the conditions giving rise to militant Islam provides us with some sense of where we need to go next. To be sure, criminal investigations, diplomatic overtures, and perhaps even responsible military actions are needed. But we have the opportunity, if not the obligation, to also address some of the causes of militancy.

Let me be clear about this. Islamic militants, like many of the peaceful movements within Islamic fundamentalism, make many ignorant and contemptible claims about America. They oppose our permissiveness; they oppose our liberalism, they view us solely as sinners. This is all utter garbage, when uttered by Muslim fundamentalists, Jewish fundamentalists, or Christian fundamentalists. No response to prejudice is appropriate other than to condemn it while trying to educate the ignorant.

But despotism is not a value Americans hold dear; corruption is not a legitimate avenue of advancement for us; and poverty is a condition we all wish to alleviate. Spending time over the long term trying to reverse these conditions does hold out promise for ending the threat of Islamic militancy. Consider just democracy: The return to a viable parliamentary system in Lebanon induced the local Islamic movement Hizbullah to adopt electoral strategies and to drop the goal of converting Lebanon into an Islamic state. Turkey, which has the longest experience of parliamentary rule in the Islamic Middle East, has suffered the least from militant Islamic groups.

These experiences may not be the norm and may not be easily replicated. But I think that at minimum, we can, over the longer term, staunch the flow of recruits into these organizations; we can, by the same token, help win more converts to moderate and peaceful Islam. In doing so, we can delegitimize and isolate the militants, cut them off from needed sources of social support, and reduce their ability to commit acts of terror.

We can do all of these things, I believe, while remaining true to our values.

We should do these things because ethical conduct that supports our pragmatic goals is to be favored and savored.