

INSITE on Terrorism

The Geopolitical Roots of Asymmetrical Conflicts



David Smiley

US PRESIDENT George W. Bush is convinced that the only reliable way to combat terrorism is to fight fire with fire. People around the world are divided about the wisdom of the military option.

David Smiley places the problem of Saddam Hussein and the threat of weapons of mass destruction allegedly harboured by Iraq in a policy context. He explains that political responses to terrorism tend to be reactive. This may account for the reason why they are generally unsuccessful. They do not address the roots of terrorism. At the national level, for example, David Whittaker² cites 15 programs, 14 of which are reactive, such as increased government and para-military powers and reduced civil rights.

But failed states do pose an immediate challenge to the global community, for they have made victims of millions of innocent people in recent years. Reactive peacekeeping initiatives have failed to adapt to the asymmetric nature of terrorism.

The short term risks and long term effectiveness of pro-active search-and-destroy alliances are yet to be determined. What, then, are the roots of terrorism? The author reviews three prominent hypotheses. The first addresses the relationship between Islam and the West, and the second claims that US "imperialism" is at the heart of today's global problems. Could they both be incorrect? Is there more substance in the theory that civil disturbances are a consequence of economic decline?

TO THE man-in-the-street the roots of terrorism lie in Islam. Development of this hypothesis can be found in Walter Laqueur³ and in Rohan Gunaratna⁴. To some western academics the roots of terrorism lie in US imperialism (Noam Chomsky⁵ and Phil Scraton).⁶ A third hypothesis places the roots of terrorism in conditions of economic decline, as a Muslim academic has suggested: "Militant religious fundamentalisms

have always followed – rather than preceded – the decline of socioeconomic conditions".⁷ Development of this hypothesis can be found in Marty and Appleby,⁸ and in Michael Klare.⁹

DAVID SMILEY is a research associate, Walsh Bequest, Department of Economics, Macquarie University, Sydney, and is the author of *Third World Intervention – A New Analysis* (2000).¹

I will make a distinction here between Islam as a way of life, the uses of political terrorism in wars of liberation, and the uses of religious terrorism by Islamic fundamentalists or Islamists. Islam as a way of life is followed by nearly

one quarter of the world's population and, although it is not territorial, it aspires to become universal. However, nearly all Muslims live in states that are not strictly fundamentalist, and nearly all are exposed to western culture through globalisation. Why then, have Americans been asking, do Muslims appear to hate us? "The results of half a dozen surveys [of Arabs and Muslims] show, broadly, that America is not hated for itself but rather widely mistrusted because of its policies in the region; that there is no clash of civilisations between Islam and the West since both share similar values and concerns; that Muslims would like to have better relations with America; and that even the most conservative Muslim societies are changing fast."¹⁰ There seems to be nothing here that links Islam *per se* with terrorism.

All wars of liberation use terrorism but few directly concern Islam. Virtually all of those in Europe, in North, Central and South America, in Sub-Saharan Africa, and in South Asia are not Islamic.¹¹ Many in the Middle East and North Africa were originally anti-colonial, not Islamic. Those now perceived as Islamic involve, for example, land in Palestine and oil in Chechnya. Whether Islamic or otherwise, all wars of liberation concern contemporary or historic disputes over land and natural resources and all use terrorism in attempting to resolve these disputes.

Fundamentalism has been described as "religion under threat" and the tiny percentage of Islam called fundamentalist or Islamist does answer to this description. Islam means submission and its authority is unquestioned, arising from the absolute certainty of divine authority.¹² Its objectives are three-fold: to purify deviations from the truth from within Islam, to prevent the spread of decadent secular modernism from without, and to achieve power and prestige.¹³ Its method is Jihad in which violence is legitimised and the value of human life subjugated to its objectives. Martyrs, who go straight to heaven, are not poor, not uneducated, and they are not self-seeking and thus, in themselves, not susceptible of the economic analysis of

deprivation. The causal sequence of Islamism is: terrorism, economic disruption, political instability, increased credibility and legitimacy of Islamism.

Imperialism: the US as rogue state

LONG A TARGET of dissent in the development literature and more recently in that of globalisation, imperialism is now a major target in the literature on terrorism. Examples can be found in Noam Chomsky.¹⁴ The thrust of the thesis of Chomsky and others is that the US itself qualifies as a major rogue state. First, it is ambivalent towards the UN. For example: "The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook [in East Timor in 1975]. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success."¹⁵ Second, the US supports terrorism in friendly states. For example Penny Green, and Herman and Julia Schwendinger¹⁶ list those countries whose military have been trained in terrorism by the US. These include Israel, Honduras, Nicaragua, Brazil, Uruguay, Cuba, Indonesia, East Timor, Zaire, Angola, South Africa, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Angola, and Mozambique. Third, the US has been known to apply what some define as terrorism to unfriendly states. For example, Arundhati Roy¹⁷ lists those countries bombed by the US since 1945 as China, Korea, Guatemala, Indonesia, Cuba, Belgian Congo, Peru, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Grenada, Libya, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq, Bosnia, Sudan, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

This hypothesis, convincing as it is, must be rejected as seriously incomplete. Chomsky concentrates his attack upon imperialism on what he calls capitalism, but equating capitalism with monopoly. Absent from his analysis is feudalism, yet imperialism has been defined as the articulation or linking of two different modes of production, capitalist and feudal. The first is not analysed into its competitive and monopolistic components, the second is

Table 1
Imperialism as collusion between two different modes of production

National income	Total to wages	Total to rent	Total to capital	Imperialism as the collusion of two different modes of production
12,000	6,000	3,000	3,000	Independent capitalist state
600	360	240		Independent feudal state
15,000	7,000	4,000	4,000	Capitalist state benefiting from imperialism
700	360	340		Feudal elite benefiting from imperialism

confused with fascism, and monopoly is not analysed at all.

Let us start with a duopolistic definition of imperialism as an international collusion in which the output of the feudal partner, increased in size by foreign direct investment (FDI) in technology, is shared between local and foreign elites. Table 1 hypothetically illustrates the distribution to the three factors of production.

Capital is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Economics* as man-made means of production, and capitalism is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Politics* as a form of social organisation in which there is private ownership and/or control of the means of production. The *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* defines markets as facilitating the unplanned outcome of acts of exchange. It would seem then, from the study of anthropology, that markets and capitalism have coexisted as a natural order for millennia before Adam Smith and David Ricardo wrote the theories of economic development and comparative advantage. But for every invisible hand of competition there is an invisible foot of monopoly that trips up progress.

This is clearly set out in monopoly theory which distinguishes between a surplus called economic rent that the monopolist extracts from the consumer, a cost of competing with others for this rent called rent seeking, and the cost that monopoly inflicts on society called dead weight loss. Though monopoly is defined as a situation in which there is one supplier, these private appropriations and social costs apply wherever ownership is concentrated monopolistically amongst a minority. Feudalism, defined later, is taken here to be

a traditional society characterised by a pattern of concentrated land ownership.

In Table 1, row 2 depicts a capitalist state that may be monopolistic, row 3 a feudal state by definition monopolistic, row 4 the capitalist state now benefiting in wages, rent and return on investment from an imperialist collusion, and row 5 the now dependent feudal state benefiting from increased rent in the form of natural resource royalties and real estate investment.

The causal sequence from imperialism to terrorism starts when the new distributions of total income shown in rows 4 and 5 are disturbed, in the dependent agent by civil unrest, or in the imperialist agent by threats to imports, for example of energy and minerals, or opportunities for arms export.

Poverty: the rule of rent

A GEOPOLITICAL explanation of poverty comes from historian William McNeill.¹⁸ He describes how a part of the harvest could be taken from the peasantry by those who own land leaving just sufficient for survival. McNeill called this a state of macro-parasitism. This state was also defined by Thomas Malthus as subsistence, and is associated with institutions such as feudalism and caste. Paul Samuelson¹⁹ has built a simple but powerful model of the *origins* of macro-parasitism similar to that shown in Table 2. Row 4 illustrates subsistence, or macro-parasitism, where 40% of product, a common figure, is taken in rent. Why does Samuelson's model follow wages down below subsistence, to zero in row 5? Because the level of subsistence can be changed. "No wonder that some landlords greeted with joy the

Table 2
A Malthusian production function and
a Ricardian distribution function

Total pop'n	Output	Wage inc.	Total to wages	Total to rent	A model of Macro-parasitism
10	80	8	80	0	Abundant land
30	200	5	150	50	Competition bids up rent
60	300	3	180	120	Subsistence level economy
80	350	0	0	350	Theoretical limits

introduction of the white potato, which enabled people to live on cheaper calories" hence lowering subsistence wages and raising rents (p.728). Using this model, how can poverty be reduced? Samuelson provides two methods. On page 727 he shows how capital investment in technology can lift wages (and rents). And on page 541 he demonstrates that "land rent is in the nature of a surplus that can be taxed heavily without distorting production incentives" and, in theory, increasing total wages by that amount.

A large proportion of the world's peoples live in macro-parasitic societies, not far above subsistence, and therefore vulnerable to political fallout from any socioeconomic decline. Let us now test the thesis that socioeconomic decline always precedes militant fundamentalism or, more generally, terrorism. In Table 3 data from World Bank *World Development* reports over four decades show trends in per capita income growth, and these are compared with qualitative assessments by region, as follows:

- The East Asia and Pacific region, characterised by exceptional income growth rates and almost complete absence of terrorism, seem to confirm the hypothesis.²⁰ The Latin America and the Caribbean region has been characterised by Marxist reaction against both feudalism and imperialism. The data seem to confirm the hypothesis.
- For Middle East and North Africa the 1990-1999 figure seems inconsistent. A more appropriate picture may be that of "High Income Oil Exporters" showing

income growths for 1960-1980 of 6.3% and for 1985-1995 of -2.0%. The region is also characterised by inequality, high population growth and youth unemployment, social unrest and an increase in involvement in resource conflict.

- Data for the South Asia region seem to support the hypothesis if early religious wars are included.

- Data for Sub-Saharan Africa seem to support the hypothesis. The region has long been characterised by resource conflict, inequality, high population growth and youth unemployment, and social unrest, followed by Islamic penetration from the north.

Samuelson's model explains the origins of macro-parasitism, arriving at a steady state system such as feudalism, caste or latifundio. But it is robust enough to be extended by monopoly theory so as to accommodate change. In one example the direct effect of a natural resources bonanza is to increase rent and therefore inequality. Thus "... in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Pakistan ... immensely wealthy families oppress millions of impoverished people".²¹ But macro-parasitism carries other penalties, described in the theory of monopoly. In a second example, as a result of the discovery of oil or minerals, although personal fortunes go up, national incomes often go down.²² In a third example, in a coercive venture, military or terrorist, the costs of rent seeking, for example for oil, and the dead weight losses, in lives and infrastructure, are likely to be large since the decision-makers are not necessarily the ones carrying these costs.

Table 3
Growth of income and militancy
1965-71, 1973-80, 1980-90, 1990-99

GDP per capita growth 1965-71 1973-80 1980-90 1990-99 by World Bank region					Forms of militancy
WB Development Report	1991	1991	2000-01	2000-01	
E. Asia & Pacific	5.3	4.9	6.4	6.1	Negligible in Tiger economies
Latin Amer. & Carib.	3.8	2.5	-0.3	1.7	Declining liberation terrorism
M. East & N. Africa	5.8	1.9	-1.1	0.8	Rising Islamist terrorism
S. Asia	1.2	1.7	3.5	3.8	Declining ethnic terrorism
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.1	0.4	-1.2	-0.2	Rising warlord terrorism

The causal sequence of macro-parasitism is: population growth – rent increase – wages decline – subsistence – stagnation. Other things being equal, wages fall with rising population and as a result of military or terrorist activity. Other things being equal, wages will rise as a result of capital investment or land reform.

A region free of terrorists

APART FROM Spain and Ireland there are few examples of indigenous terrorism in the OECD countries. Hypothesis three would suggest that this is due to the high average incomes in that region. But the Tiger economies of East Asia exhibit remarkably little indigenous terrorism yet average incomes are well below those of Latin America and Middle East and North Africa, regions normally associated with terrorism. What are the characteristics of this region that might support or reject the three hypotheses, and do these suggest a solution to terrorism?

Table 2 encapsulated some geopolitical ideas of Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, and Paul Samuelson that define poverty. Table 3 sought to establish a relationship between trends in income levels and trends in geopolitical conflict including terrorism. In Table 4 are now assembled some geopolitical reforms that might lift standards of living and hence reduce motivations for terrorism.

East Asia and Pacific. From this region I will select the Tiger economies of China,

South Korea and Taiwan as a benchmark for comparisons with other regions. The Tiger region is unique in several respects. There is a very low incidence of military or terrorist activity, and of the sorts of imperialist intrusions of which Chomsky complains. FDI in China and other Asian Tigers tends to be competitive since it does not interface with the land monopolies that dominate most third world countries. Therefore there is no basis for monopolistic collusion characteristic of imperialism. Land redistribution has pushed its economic growth at a much higher rate than that of any other region. Thus "in all three of Asia's biggest successes – Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – the groundwork for both fast growth and the income equality that eased the social strains of development was laid by a radical land reform".²³ The long-term per capita growth of eight percent of GDP is therefore taken here as a benchmark. This benchmark is regarded as realistic since it has been achieved, almost immediately following agrarian land redistribution, by very poor countries poorly endowed with natural resources. It appears applicable to other countries in this region, notably Indonesia, the Philippines, and North Korea, as well as to countries in the following regions.

Latin America and Caribbean. Here the roots of terrorism are economic not religious, Marxist not Islamic. The gap between the benchmark and the most recent average growth rate from Table 3,

1%, is 6.3%, an opportunity lost by an economy based on feudalism and guided by imperialism. Multiplying this by the regional GDP of \$1.9 trillion suggests a dead weight loss of \$120 billion per annum. Since the region is characterised by IMF debt, land reforms could transform economic efficiency and social equity if these reforms were made a condition of debt forgiveness.

Middle East and North Africa. Here the roots of terrorism are both economic and fundamentalist. The average growth rate from Table 3 is only 0.8%, yielding a lost opportunity of 7.2% and hence a deadweight loss of \$43 billion per annum.

South Asia region. The roots of terrorism lie in the economics of poverty and the politics of territorial dispute, both disguised as wars of religion. Here, the average growth rate from Table 3 is 3.8 percent, yielding a huge lost opportunity of 4.2 percent and hence a dead weight loss of \$25 billion per annum.

Sub-Saharan Africa. The roots of terrorism lie in conflicts over natural resources waged by warlords with imperialist guidance. The average growth rate from Table 3 is actually negative, yielding a lost opportunity of 8.2% and hence a deadweight loss of \$25 billion per annum.

It could be argued from this that the Tiger reforms have created the rising standards of living that, according to hypothesis three, discourage terrorism. Regional shortfalls from this ideal are calculated in Table 4 and associated levels of risk and benefit from reform are suggested. Reforms like those of

the Tiger economies would transform regions such as Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and remove much of the economic basis for terrorism. But would this be true where there was a fundamentalist basis for terrorism? Let us conclude by looking at a region that is challenging Francis Fukuyama's thesis that Western liberal democracy is the end-point of history. We will assemble a set of responses to this challenge.

Are we at the end of history?

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA²⁴ attempted to describe a post-historical world in which the systems of monarchy, fascism and communism had been replaced by a final system, a system beyond which evolution was unnecessary. Western liberal democracy does have some impressive credentials. Economically it disproved Malthus, rebuilt a Europe devastated by World War Two, and delivered standards of living that would have blown the minds of our ancestors. Politically it combined the traditions of Europe's Enlightenment with the new dynamism of Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Paine into a system of freedom that absorbed Europe's refugees from feudalism and then defeated fascism and communism. Socially it created a degree of freedom and tolerance of diversity not found in other societies.

Why then is there such resentment against western liberal democracy, a resentment strong enough to inflict terrorism, and now put Fukuyama's final system on a collision course with Islamism? The potential outcomes of this collision appear to be unlimited. For example, if

Table 4
Potential gains from reform and long term impacts on terrorism

Region	GNP \$Trillion	Growth per cap	DWL p.a.%	DWL p.a. \$billion	Terrorist risk level	Long term effect of reform on terrorism
L.A	1.9	1.7	6.3	120	Moderate	Moderate
M.East N.A.	0.6	0.8	7.2	43	V. high	Substantial
S. Asia	0.6	3.8	4.2	25	High	Moderate
Sub-S Africa	0.3	-0.2	8.2	25	High	Substantial
Tigers	1.5	8.0	N/A	N/A	Low	N/A

Islamic terrorism precipitates a major international crisis, starting perhaps with the disruption of energy supplies and leading to Klare's resource wars, western economies, if left alone, will eventually substitute technologically and adapt socially. They can afford to. But large parts of the rest of the world, starting with those completely dependent on energy extraction, may be forced down to and below Malthus's subsistence level. And if Gunaratna's assessment of trends is correct then Islamism, already decoupled from the control of any sovereign state, may see no need to stop there. "Seeking revenge by destroying the West's existing order was already a priority; after 9/11 it became an imperative, no matter how long it would take."²⁵

But "Al Qaeda's move towards being apocalyptic rather than utopian after 9/11 is due principally to the atomisation of an already fragmented and loosely-organised multinational enterprise".²⁶ In this lie both the strength of autonomous continuity and the weakness of internal conflict that has, in the past, bestowed a short shelf life upon fundamentalisms. If some of the reforms advocated by J.S. Mill and Henry George had been commenced a hundred years ago we might not have had to face fascism, communism, modern imperialism and now Islamism. What can be done about the two collusive partners of Western imperialism, about Islam, and about their roots in disputes over land and natural resources? Here are some suggestions.

The reform of imperialism. Chomsky's account of modern imperialism raises the question of how the high ideals of western liberal democracy could have been so badly betrayed. But Chomsky provides no coherent analysis of the monopolistic under-pinning of imperialism. Let us revisit monopoly. While economists see markets as the engine of growth, they see market failures such as monopolies as an urgent responsibility of governments to fix. But anti-trust legislation faces corporations as powerful as government itself. Maybe there is a way around this. Modern imperialism

relies on the existence of foreign monopolies in land and natural resources to support foreign policies that in turn support the interests of trans-national corporations and the energy and armaments industries. Reform of first world and third world agriculture would therefore reduce the power of these monopolies. The costs of both modern imperialism and its feudal partnerships are unknown but probably very large. An important mutation of feudalism is that of Western agricultural protection, and for this we do have some measure of costs. This impost provides 35% of US, and 45% of European farm incomes. But since labour is reproducible and wages largely competitive this surplus is in the nature of economic rent, appropriated by Western landowners, and inflicting a cost of \$700 billion per annum upon the third world.²⁷

Islamic reform. A significant indicator of the potential for Islamic reform appeared recently in a regional study by Arab scholars.²⁸ The study contrasts the historical achievements of the Arab world with its contemporary problems. These include stagnant growth, a reliance on depletable and ultimately substitutable natural resources, illiteracy particularly in women, an education system mismatched with science and technology and to the labour market, fast-rising population, and a high youth unemployment " ... helping to produce a great army of young Arabs, jobless, unskilled and embittered, cut off from changing their own societies by democratic means, Islam at least offers them a little self-respect". The report concludes that "With so many paths closed to them, some are now turning their dangerous anger on the western world".

Land reform. Though Douglas MacArthur and Deng Xiaoping managed it all those years ago, third world land redistribution today implies an unacceptable coercion of property rights. It is also limited to agrarian land and provides no environmental incentives. Land taxation is not subject to these limitations and has no geographical or political limitations.²⁹

Resource wars. The costs of rent seeking where armed force is involved are only too well known in the large number of ongoing, apparently insoluble conflicts over oil, gas, coal, minerals and water. "Almost every African nation blessed with copious minerals is also cursed with some form of civil unrest."³⁰ Klare (*op.cit.*) maintains that "Human history has been marked by a long succession of resource wars – stretching all the way back to the earliest agrarian civilisations" and that all wars of the future will be resource wars. Global regulation of natural resource usage implies an unacceptable coercion of sovereign rights. However, domestic taxation of our uses of natural resources provides governments with revenue, reduces pressures on the environment, encourages the development of technological improvements in and substitution for scarce energy and mineral resources, and encourages consumer behaviour modification where these are not possible.

Social science education reform. A recent critique of economic understanding applied by social scientists to world problems³¹ is well illustrated in many of the works cited in this article, for example "So first we need an economic solution to poverty (till such time as we abolish capitalism and therefore poverty altogether) ..."³²

Conclusion

"As the world has moved away from slavery, colonialism, Fascism, Nazism, sexism and racism, so humankind can move away from terrorism as a mode of expressing political protest, provided institutions can be created in which people with genuine grievances and legitimate aspirations can express them and find redress without resorting to violence."³³

But the world appears to have blundered, with no geopolitical foresight and very inadequate hindsight, through the institutional disasters of slavery, colonialism, Fascism, Nazism, and racism, and is now blundering unprepared into Islamism, all of which share the characteristic of dispute over territorial and

natural resources, resources that J.S. Mill long ago suggested "should be globally shared."³

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- 10 *The Economist*, October 19, 2002, p.43.
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- 12 Paradoxically, "Endorsement for nearly anything can be found in the holy writs of the major religions, and the Koran is no exception". Walter Laqueur, *op.cit.*
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