



A Question of Values? Changing Strategies in the Ideological Battle against Terrorism

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IN the ideological fight against terrorism, there has been a marked shift in the strategy of many Western countries. Before the need for an ideological battle was realized, Islam and terrorism were carelessly conflated. Subsequently, there was a massive effort to rectify this misguided approach and defend what was believed to be 'true Islam'. To that end, many political leaders emphasised that the terrorists were 'misinterpreting and misrepresenting' the holy Quran. This strategy relied heavily on the monolithic nature of Islam and the ability to identify so-called 'moderate Muslims'. It was believed that by increasing airtime for Muslims who preach tolerance, the ideology of the terrorists would automatically be discredited.

The flaws of this last approach can be seen clearly in the ongoing Iraqi insurgency. The deep schisms in the country within Islam were not anticipated and the coalition forces are now struggling with the intense rivalry between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Indeed, who determines a 'moderate Muslim'? Given the divergences within Islam, the quest for 'moderate' or 'true' Muslim is futile. This is not to say that moderate Muslims do not exist; of course they do. But a blind emphasis on this categorisation begs the question – why should Muslims only be identified as moderate or otherwise?

The New Strategy: Way of Life

After the failure of this false dichotomy in the Iraqi quagmire, there has been a noticeable change in the strategy to discredit terrorism. Instead of demonising Islam or attempting to find the 'right model' of Islam, the stress is now on espousing the values of what U.S. President Bush has labelled the 'civilized world'. Increasingly, we hear sound bites from both Australian Prime Minister John Howard and U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair that they are protecting not only their country, its people but also its 'way of life'.

What does this 'way of life' entail? It cannot just be dismissed as rhetoric for Western values; for if that is the case, then Samuel Huntington's thesis of the 'clash of civilizations' is much closer than we would care to admit. To their credit, both prime ministers have taken pains to reject Huntington's argument. Tony Blair, in particular, has argued that the current battle against extremism is not a clash between but *about* civilizations.

An elaboration into the elements of the phrase 'way of life' can be gleaned from Tony Blair's recent article in *Foreign Affairs*. In the article titled 'A Battle for Global Values', Blair mentions (1) religious tolerance (2) openness to others (3) democracy (4) liberty and (5) human rights administered by secular courts as the key tenets that he seeks to protect from extremism. Of these, Blair highlights the significance of democracy, seen in the successful Iraqi and Afghan elections. He also emphasises that these values are global and not dependent on religion. Irrespective of whether one is a Muslim, Christian, Jew, or Hindu,

these values represent those on the right side of the battle. There has hence been a subtle shift from rejecting 'bad' values to embracing 'good' ones.

Pros and Cons of the Shift

So is this recasting of the ideological battle helpful? Compared to earlier strategies, the new approach certainly seems the right way forward. Its most significant strength is that it takes away religion from the equation, thus altering the ideological divide in the current struggle against terrorism. But a closer examination reveals some shortcomings.

First, it reveals a deep tension between democracy and secularism. For Blair, democracy is not just about free and fair elections; it includes rule of law as well as constitutionally protected civil and political liberties. But even if democracy is about giving all citizens a voice in their country's governance, then it should be entirely possible for religion to acquire a prominent place. Indeed, President Bush's stance on stem cell research and abortion illustrates that democracy does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with secularism. Moreover, there are political parties in Europe which espouse notions of 'Christian democracy'. In the same light, would there not be room for 'Islamic democracy'? Would an Islamic democracy in the Middle East or Asia be acceptable?

There are numerous advantages of secular democracies. But has it been conclusively proven that a secular democracy is the *only* panacea against religious extremism? And would a non-secular prescription of human rights be necessarily worse than the secular alternative?

Second and related to the friction between democracy and secularism – is democracy or secularism more desirable in countering extremism? There are a number of examples of secular countries with little semblance of democracy. For instance, regimes in Zimbabwe, North Korea and Myanmar all have secular outlooks but are ruled by authoritarian if not oppressive leaders. The high significance placed on democracy by Western countries will then require at the very least, an equal emphasis in addressing secular as well as religious dictatorial regimes.

Third, the new approach demonstrates the deep tensions within democracy. The fact that Blair had to list four other elements in addition to democracy -- tolerance, openness, liberty and human rights -- shows that democracy *alone* cannot guarantee the rest. This is a key lesson for countries which believe that a democratic Middle East, modelled after a future Iraq, would automatically lead to peace and security.

Fourth, Blair's tenets have disconcerting implications for multicultural societies. It assumes that everyone *should* subscribe to some value. The evaluation of extremism is no longer dependent on rejection of certain values but the acceptance of some others. All citizens, especially immigrants, will be judged on the extent to which they subscribe to values prescribed by Blair's precepts. What was originally an inclusive pathway to a multicultural society has become exclusive. Increasingly, there does seem to be a significant attempt in both the United Kingdom and Australia to tweak their multicultural systems in favour of France's integration model. But we would learn well from the recent riots in France where the weaknesses of the French model became apparent.

This is, of course, not to say that Blair's tenets are harmful in any way. To his credit, he has attempted to distance religion from extremism. In that respect, they are a helpful starting point -- but only to the extent that one set of divisions are not replaced with another. The efficacy of the values that embody the 'civilized world' are useful only to the extent they are flexible.

Conclusion

At the heart of the global values debate is the question of national identity in an era where talent flows are not constrained by national boundaries. Samuel Huntington, in his latest book *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, subscribes to a shallow static conception of national identity and portrays immigrants as a challenge, if not a threat to American national identity. We will do well if we can recognize national identity as a dynamic concept that needs to be continuously negotiated within society. We will do even better if we recognise that values of a particular society, be it Western or otherwise, are not the prerogative of only political elites but all residents of the country.

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