

December 17, 2001

Exposing the Roots of Hatred

To the common question, “Why do they hate us so much?” many responded by suggesting that the United States and other Western countries could have prevented the terrorist attack on September 11 by addressing the “root cause” behind Islamic extremism. Those root causes range from the hegemonic designs of American imperialism and American support for Israel, to the spread of decadent American popular culture (e.g., Bay Watch, Coca Cola, McDonalds, and Rambo) which has produced a backlash against globalization and modernization.

The problem with these explanations is that they are not really root causes. In two instructive *Newsweek* articles (12/17), eminent political scientists Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukayama, while disagreeing over whether we are on the verge of a “clash of civilizations,” nevertheless agreed that the root cause of Islamic terrorism lies more fundamentally within Muslim and Arab governments themselves.

Islamic extremism, says Huntington, is “mainly a reaction of Muslim peoples to their own corrupt, ineffective and repressive governments and the Western governments they see supporting those regimes.” Fukayama tends to agree. Few Muslim governments, he notes, have taken advantage of the many opportunities for political and economic reforms. Unlike many Western countries from Spain to Latin America and other parts of the world (Taiwan), “No Arab governments have decided on their own to voluntarily step down in favor of democratic rule.” Moreover, “There is not a single instance of an oil-rich state in the Persian Gulf that has used its wealth to create a self-sustaining industrial society, instead of creating a society of corrupt *rentiers* who over time have become more and more fanatically Islamist.”

While these may well be accurate assessments, we should ask, what is the root cause of *this* failure? Fukayama, noting that the Islamic world differs from other world cultures in one important respect, hints at what that failure might be. The Islamic world alone, he says, has produced radical movements that not only reject Western *policies*, but also hate the fact that “the state in Western societies should be dedicated to religious tolerance and pluralism....” Not only Osama bin Laden and various Islamic terrorist organizations, but a sizable portion of the Muslim world (10-15 percent) believes that religious toleration is *sufficient* evidence of Western decadence. From this vantage point, the only way for the West to address the “root cause” of “Islamic extremism” would be to commit political and cultural suicide.

But is the problem only with radical Islam or Islamic terrorists? The corrupt so-called “moderate” Muslim regimes of the Middle East may not necessarily share the terrorists’ violent response to Western cultural decadence, but even the most “moderate” Islamic states aren’t anxious to embrace the West’s ideas of religious liberty and pluralism in public law. This forces upon us two questions so many are hesitant to ask—perhaps because they may not like the answers: Is there an inherent feature of Islam itself that hinders or prohibits the development of a robust religious liberty and equal treatment of diverse faiths in the public law of predominantly Muslim societies? And could there be a relationship between the complete lack of religious freedom in Muslim countries governed by Islamic Sharia law and the corrupt economic and political regimes in the Arab and Islamic world, which Huntington and Fukayama recognize as the root cause of the terrorist problem?

Find answers to these questions and you’ll get to the root of the root cause of the problem. Since liberty is indivisible, my hunch is that Islamic societies will not become open and free politically and economically until Islamic governments halt widespread religious persecution and embrace religious freedom.

—Keith Pavlischek
Fellow

Equip Citizens * Develop Leaders * Shape Policy
The Center for Public Justice, P.O. Box 48368, Washington, DC 20002-0368
(410) 571-6300 * Fax: (410) 571-6365 * <http://www.cpjustice.org>
Feedback to the author on this Capital Commentary: CapComm@cpjustice.org
Capital Commentary Subscription info: CapComm@cpjustice.org
General Inquiries Email: inquiries@cpjustice.org.

May be photocopied or retransmitted in its entirety but not otherwise reprinted or transmitted without permission.