

The Rodeo Ride of Manipulating Middle East Politics

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Four separate events in different parts of the world - Pakistan, Israel, the United States and wherever Osama Bin Laden makes his home these days - provided a gloomy but instructive start to the new year in the matter of Al-Qaeda-linked terrorism. The events were the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, a new audio tape by Osama bin Laden, Israel telling the world that Al-Qaeda is making inroads in Palestine, and US presidential candidates riding the terrorism horse like clowns at a rodeo.

Bin Laden's new audio tape shows his resilience and durability, but also his profound political weaknesses in connecting with public opinion in the Middle East. His policy of provoking ethnic strife among Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq is widely rejected throughout the region; and his promise to strike against Israel is a desperate attempt to anchor his rejected terrorism in more legitimate popular Arab anger against Israel and its continuing brutal, colonial policies. Bin Laden and his sidekick, Ayman al-Zawahri, have tried this several times before, always falling flat on their faces. In the past seven years since the 9/11 attacks, an overwhelming majority of Middle Easterners have rejected Al-Qaeda's philosophy and tactics, especially when they see the damage they do to their own societies.

The few small groups of terrorists that have sprung up in the Arab world, Western Europe and elsewhere are just that - small, isolated groups of disaffected, socially marginalized, and politically confused individuals who have found a bizarre cult to join. Their solitary status and the deviant nature of their appeal make them freaks, not a global movement.

Israel has tried to promote a totally different and dishonest version of this truth. Its efficient disinformation and propaganda network spreads the word that Al-Qaeda is making inroads in Palestinian society, without clarifying that, first, this is part of a global dynamic, and second, that it is mostly a consequence of Israel's own debilitating policies that have turned Palestinian areas into havens for extremism. By continually speaking in the same breath about Al-Qaeda terrorism and the threats from Hizbullah, Hamas, and other such nationalistically anchored resistance movements, Israel wishes to de-legitimize the latter groups fighting against it, and to exaggerate the real reach of Al-Qaeda.

Not surprisingly, most of the American presidential candidates - especially hormone-heavy Republicans - have bought into this Israeli-inspired package of distortion and exaggeration, and regurgitated it in their own made-in-America nonsense. A few candidates whose electoral zealotry occasionally transforms them into intellectual vagabonds on this issue, like Rudolph Giuliani and Mitt Romney, stress that Islamic terror or Islamo-fascists are the defining threat of this century, or this generation, or something equally cosmic and frightening. Most candidates avoid such fear-mongering, resorting to more comfortable, vacuous generalizations about how the Bhutto assassination highlights the ever-present threat of terror, the turmoil in the Middle East, and the dangerous world we live in.

These men and women are running for the American presidency? Indeed, our world is ever more dangerous when potentially the most powerful individuals in the world address a serious

global challenge with a disappointing combination of political dishonesty, lack of intellectual rigor, and an almost absolute vacuum in their analysis.

The truly dangerous terrain we approach is that where political-intellectual charlatanism and violent state policies generate strategies that make the Al-Qaeda threat much greater than it really is, or that promote new recruits for terror groups. Such an approach substitutes ignorance-based fear-mongering for the precise, realistic and proactive policies that should be used to manage the terror threat as the political problem that it is, rather than the cultural, religious or civilizational menace that it is made to be, and that is exploited - and sometimes manufactured - by American, Israeli, Arab and other merchants of deceit.

We are all experiencing the deadly consequences of the combination of Western-Israeli officials who constantly harp about Islamo-fascists and Islamic terrorism, and Arab-Asian political elites who use authoritarian police methods to control and degrade their own people. Asia, the Arab world, and America are equally to blame for the incremental numbers of dehumanized young men and women in Arab-Asian-Islamic societies who finally give up on honest public policy-making and rational discourse, and mostly turn to nonviolent Islamist, tribal and other mass movements. A very few fall off the edge and gravitate toward Al-Qaeda-inspired terror.

Our collective failures in assessing and addressing the global terrorism threat become clearer every year, in a world increasingly run by political charlatans. We should summon the courage to address the reality of predatory extremism, militarism and terror that nourishes itself, rather than create a simplistic world of Islamic terrorist-fascists who unilaterally assault innocent Israelis, Europeans and Americans.

If you want entertainment, stay in this political rodeo. If you want a better, safer world, get out of it as fast as you can.

*Rami G. Khouri is published twice-weekly by **THE DAILY STAR**.*