

## SO WHY DID THEY HATE US?

Immediately after 9/11, people asked in anguish, “Why do they hate us?” Two years later we know a lot more, though by no means everything, about each component of the question; that is, who ‘they’ were, who was ‘us’, the nature of the hatred, and why it was there.

We now know that the ‘they’ was Al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaeda encouraged local franchises in different countries, and we now know that one of them caused the Bali massacre. Al-Qaeda tried to fan and lead a new Islamist empire on the model of the Taliban, an extreme fundamentalist tyranny. Today the remnants of Al-Qaeda may be best conceptualised as an international cult with apocalyptic ideology.

The ‘us’ has been clearly defined by bin Laden’s World Islamic Front Fatwa on 23 February 1998 as Jews and Crusaders, especially Americans. In the jihad against them, they were to be killed (whether military or civilians), anywhere in the world. The Bali bombers used such justifications for their actions.

The nature of the hatred is total, and can only be appeased by killing. It is not directed against an act, but against whole groups of people – that is, Westerners, Christians, Jews. Any individual symbolises the group, and as the group is to be annihilated, it does not matter which of the group are killed. It does not matter, therefore, if they are men, women or children. There is no remorse for hurt caused, only triumph and glee. There is no limit or qualification of the hatred, therefore it evokes fears of mass destruction in the victims.

The reason for the hatred is the most intriguing question. The initial answers coming from western sources were polarised and almost reflex. On the one hand, Bush labelled the acts and the perpetrators simply evil. On the other hand, others blamed the US, explaining that they were now being punished for sins of greed and neo-colonialism. Both answers emanated from within, and failed to look the hatred in the face.

To look hatred in the face is frightening. Instinctively, one may try to appease it by giving in, or return hatred with hatred. Either way, primitive fight and flight responses threaten to rip away hard won fruits of civilization, such as truthfulness from leaders and the maintenance of human rights. Terrorists have their way each way, by dominating, or polarising more and more people, and eroding their opponents’ way of life. It is therefore necessary to hold one’s fear and look beyond the hateful face to its owner’s motivations.

This is still work in progress, but some things have become clearer. First, the initial western explanations were wrong. Terrorists’ motivations were not to do evil. In their distorted way, they thought they were doing utmost good, and would be rewarded by Allah. Nor were they economically downtrodden by colonialists. The bulk of the 9/11 terrorists came from one of the richest countries in the world, Saudi Arabia, and bin Laden from one of its wealthiest families, with major entrepreneurial skills of his own.

Second, the terrorists’ explanations were wrong too. There had not been a Zionist-American-Western conspiracy to take over and humiliate the Arab nations, or Muslim

nations such as Indonesia. One of bin Laden's greatest complaints was the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, the holiest Muslim country. But his rhetoric has not diminished with the coming American withdrawal from there.

Also, Al-Qaeda was only belatedly interested in the Palestinian cause, and then it was told by Yasser Arafat to not meddle in it (15/12/2002 ABC). The infidels were not launching a crusade, and most Muslim moderates denied bin Laden's religious interpretations of his jihad, and his authority to issue fatwas. Terrorists' apologists were even more wrong. The Jews and the Americans did not cause 9/11 (or Bali) in order to have an excuse to attack Muslims.

Why then launch these hateful attacks? Behind the Arab face of hatred are Arab problems. Yes, there is oppression, yes, there is inequality. But they do not emanate from the West. They emanate from within. Most Arab countries are ruled by autocrats or tyrants, and they, their families and tribes control the countries' wealth and power, leaving the majority poor, and with no prospects. This is the breeding ground for fundamentalism, frustrated ambitions, and terrorism, a witches' brew of hatred.

Why fundamentalism and terrorism, rather than revolution? Because that is all that is possible in Arab police states, and diversion of hatred to outside is encouraged by their leaders. In alliance with religious fundamentalism, violence and terrorism are channelled away from themselves and their failures on to successful nations, especially their neighbour Israel, and beyond it America and the West. Their colonialism is painted as the cause of Arab ills.

Until Osama bin Laden, an uneasy balance existed in which the Arab leaders stayed in power and made money, the West got its oil, and Israel survived under terrorist attacks.

Then Osama became a rival for power in Saudi Arabia. He played on the 'I am holier than thou' and 'I am a greater warrior than thou' game against the establishment. His was more like a threatening palace revolution, and he too was bought off, and diverted to fight his wars elsewhere. But eventually he upset the apple cart by doing this in a big way. He upped the fundamentalism and terrorism stakes by declaring war on America, Zionism and Christianity. His ambition extended far beyond Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. He was going to be at the vanguard of a new Caliphate, a world Islam empire.

Why did they hate us? Because they could not hate their real oppressors. Because these oppressors survived by spewing hateful propaganda. Because ambitious terrorist leaders convinced the desperate that America, Jews and Christians were evil infidels, and that by killing them they would achieve paradise on earth and heaven.

America and the west were not innocent players. America's oil profligacy kept it tied to Arab tyrants. They encouraged Osama when he fought the Russians. But overkill of Western self-blame recapitulates the ethnocentrism that many liberals pronounced made us hateful. We were nowhere near as bad to the Arabs as their own oppressors.

In the two years since 9/11, we have come to understand a lot about "Why do they hate us so?" It is important to use that understanding wisely, in order not to be

excessively intimidated, nor counter-hate with hate and fall into the terrorist trap of dividing the world. We must understand the true sources of discontent and scapegoating.

Our understanding can be a weapon against terrorists. It can expose their distorted motivations and lack of concern for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Perhaps in the future we will be able to focus responses according to sophisticated understandings of particular manifestations of hatred. Then the energy that is diffused in widespread paranoia will be able to be applied to creative solutions.