Introduction:
America, Radical Islamist Groups, and the Muslim People

It has been nearly a decade since the United States was attacked by a group of radical Islamists on September 11, 2001. Since then, rooting out the network of terrorists behind the attacks and related radical Islamist groups has been a major focus of American foreign and military policy. The magnitude of the American investment in this goal is extraordinary. Extensive U.S. military and intelligence resources have been directed toward fighting the central radical Islamist network al Qaeda in numerous theaters. The war in Afghanistan was waged because of al Qaeda's base of operations there under radical Islamist Taliban government protection. The war continues primarily because of fears that the Taliban, though initially defeated, could retake the country and once again provide a safe haven for al Qaeda. While the war in Iraq was initiated for a variety of reasons, it soon became a major theater for conflict with al Qaeda forces. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops have been rotated through these theaters, returning with mental as well as physical wounds. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent and, most poignantly, thousands of American lives have been lost.

Despite these massive investments, the United States has little to show for it. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other affiliated groups hostile to America continue to thrive. Their leaders, Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar, have not been captured and continue to operate. More important, a surfeit of

young Muslim men continue to eagerly join these radical Islamist groups, ready to sacrifice their lives in the name of jihad against the United States. Attacks on U.S. targets based in the Muslim world persist. While there have been no major terrorist attacks on American soil, several terrorists have come perilously close to succeeding in what could have been highly destructive attacks.

A Systemic Problem

On the surface, it is difficult to grasp how the American military, by far the most powerful military in history, can have such trouble mastering the problem of relatively small and primitive groups such as al Qaeda. If these groups are viewed in the context of the larger system of which they are part, however, the challenge becomes clearer. While most Muslims may not support the specific terrorist acts of radical Islamist groups, the extent to which the larger Muslim society—actively or passively—supports or sympathizes with the beliefs and goals of these groups plays a key role in their survival and resiliency. As long as widespread feelings of anger and resentment provide a source of ongoing support for their cause in the form of recruits, money, and moral support, then the problem is not simply between America and radical Islamist groups, but between America and the Muslim people as a whole.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, while many voices in the Muslim world condemned the attacks, many Americans were shocked to hear that in some Muslim cities people had celebrated them. It was not clear, however, how widespread these feelings were. At the time, little was known about attitudes toward the United States in the Muslim world. Only a few sporadic polls (which are explored in the next chapter) had been conducted, and area specialists had to rely heavily on anecdotal evidence. Not surprisingly, this led to inconsistent conclusions about Muslim public attitudes toward the United States.

After 9/11 there was a substantial increase in polling of the Muslim world. Overall, it was not a pretty picture. As discussed in chapter 1, Muslim public views of the United States were quite negative. And while most Muslims did say they disapproved of terrorism, substantial numbers expressed some support for al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Later polling showed widespread support for attacks on U.S. troops and even some smaller numbers approving of attacks on U.S. civilians.

With the election of Barack Obama, polls showed substantial optimism in the Muslim world as well as in the West that this would lead to improved relations between the United States and the Muslim world. Obama's high-profile speeches addressed to the Muslim world in Ankara and Cairo were met with great anticipation. Polls taken in 2009 and 2010, however, have shown only sporadic improvement. Majorities in most majority-Muslim countries continue to have negative views of the United States, and substantial numbers express support for al Qaeda and for attacks on U.S. troops. The fundamental reality of widespread Muslim hostility toward the United States has largely persisted.

As mentioned, the context of this hostility makes it is easier to understand how al Qaeda and other groups hostile to America thrive despite the massive American military effort. When terrorist groups express feelings that are present in the larger society, it makes it easier for them to operate and to recruit new members. Thus the United States is not simply dealing with the problem of those terrorist groups, but with a larger system that encompasses the society as a whole.

A number of studies corroborate this dynamic. Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova studied the relationship between public attitudes and terrorist attacks using Gallup public opinion data from countries in the Middle East and North Africa and data on terrorist attacks from the National Counterterrorism Center. They found that negative attitudes toward another country's leadership (including the United States) corresponded with higher levels of terrorist attacks against that country by groups from the hostile public's country.[1] They argue that "our results are inconsistent with one hypothesis, that public opinion is irrelevant for terrorism because terrorists are extremists who act independently of their countrymen's attitudes toward the leadership of the countries they attack."[2]

Several studies have shown that public antipathy toward the United States can increase the likelihood that members of the public will be supportive of anti-American terrorist groups. A 2007 report from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) found that one of the strongest correlates of public support for terrorism is negative attitudes toward the United States.[3] Tessler and Robbins, based on studies of public opinion in Algeria and Jordan, concluded that societal support for terrorist groups is associated with negative views of both U.S. foreign policy and their home governments, presumably due in part to their close ties with the U.S. government.[4]

Analysts of terrorism corroborate that public support for terrorist groups is critical to their operation. As the terrorism specialist Audrey Cronin comments, "Terrorist groups generally cannot survive without either active or passive support from a surrounding population."[5] The USIP study mentioned above concluded that with public support, terror groups are better able to raise funds, recruit, operate safe houses, and avoid infiltration or capture.[6] A study by the Brookings Institution reported that because of general hostility toward the United States, "al-Qaeda and like-minded groups continue to draw numerous recruits throughout the Middle East and the Islamic world more broadly."[7]

The Limits of Military Force

Viewing the problem of terrorism by radical Islamist groups as an expression of a systemic problem is key to dealing with it effectively. If hostility toward the United States were present only in a small minority of the population, it might be possible to work with the larger population to isolate and incapacitate this subculture. If there is a degree of continuity between the attitudes of the subculture and the larger culture, however, this approach may backfire. Efforts to attack the subculture may be perceived as an attack on the larger culture and may provoke an increased readiness to provide support to the subculture.

This points to the limitations of addressing the problem of terrorism through military force. Traditionally, when dealing with an opposing state, U.S. military power can play a key role because it is facing a clear target with delimited capacities, and a military attack erodes the opposing state's capacity. When dealing with a substate, terrorist actor, however, the target is not as clear because its assets can be highly dispersed throughout the host society. The threat is also hard to contain, as its magnitude lies in the capacity of terrorist organizations to mobilize recruits, which may well be virtually limitless.

Commanders of U.S. forces have recognized the limits of U.S military power and the need to view the fundamental problem as being one of America's relationship with the society as a whole. General David Petraeus, in an interview published February 2010, said of the Afghan conflict, "You can't kill or capture your way out of these endeavors."[8] General Stanley McChrystal, then commander of U.S. forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, explained,

"The biggest thing is convincing the Afghan people. This is all a war of perceptions. This is not a physical war, in terms of how many people we kill or how much ground you capture, how many bridges you blow up."[9]

Paradoxically, America's military power has not only proven to be of limited utility in fighting the terrorist threat, but in some ways has exacerbated it. As documented in the following chapters, anger at America in the Muslim world is strongly linked to a perceived military threat by the United States against Muslim people and nations. When underlying hostility is amplified by a sense of threat, it is more likely to translate into dangerously counterthreatening behavior such as terrorism. Robert Pape's study of suicide terrorism concludes that it is mainly a reaction to the threatening presence of foreign military forces in a country.[10] Further, the gains of using military force against the terrorist threat are also uncertain. Like Hercules fighting the hydra, the gains of a military attack may be superseded by the negative effects of escalating threat perceptions on both sides, and mobilizing yet more angry recruits to the terrorist cause.

As polling confirms, terrorist groups such as al Qaeda are fairly unpopular in most Muslim countries and are perceived as something of a threat. These attitudes, however, may not accrue to the benefit of the United States if the United States is perceived as an even greater threat. It is as if Muslims are living in a neighborhood with two gangs. They may not like either gang, but if the weaker gang stands up to the stronger one, this offsets the power of the stronger one. This mitigates dislike of the weaker gang and may even lead to support of the weaker gang in its struggle against the stronger one.

Because the problem of terrorism is so integrated with the society as a whole, a U.S. strategy to deal with virulent expressions of hostility toward the United States in marginal subgroups in the Muslim world must also address the attitudes of the larger society. To begin with it is essential to understand the nature of this anger in the Muslim people.

The Study

To explore the extent and roots of Muslim hostility toward America, this book includes an analysis of public opinion surveys in majority-Muslim nations conducted by a variety of organizations, focus groups in six majority-Muslim nations, and extensive new polling in eleven majority-Muslim nations.

The focus is on attitudes in majority-Muslim nations, not on Muslims who are living as minorities in other nations. There is relatively little emphasis on majority-Muslim nations in Africa, where, according to very limited data, hostility toward the United States is currently much more muted and where the populations do not appear to be highly engaged in the dominant discourse of the larger Muslim world in relation to the United States.

Focus groups were conducted by the author with representative samples in Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, and Pakistan. These focus groups were the basis for developing the survey questions.

The most in-depth polling was conducted from 2006 to 2007 and in 2008 in Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco, and Pakistan. Surveys were developed and carried out in conjunction with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland. The nationally representative samples ranged in size from 1,000 to 1,243, giving them a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes.

Polling was conducted in additional countries between 2007 and 2009 in Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, and Turkey. An additional set of surveys was conducted in Egypt, Indonesia, and Pakistan separate from the START surveys. Sample sizes ranged from 583 to 1,243, giving them a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 to 4.1 percentage points. Samples were nationally representative with the exception of Egypt, which was urban only. All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes.

All of the polling was conducted with the fielding partners of WorldPublicOpinion.org, an international project managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), and thus are identified as being polling of WorldPublicOpinion.org, or WPO.

Other polling data analyzed include those from surveys conducted by the World Values Survey, the Arab Barometer, the Pew Research Center, Gallup, the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland (fielded by Zogby), GlobeScan/PIPA for the BBC World Service, ABC News, and Terror Free Tomorrow.

Chapter 1 reviews the data gleaned from other polls as well as our own, exploring the scope and depth of Muslim hostility toward the United States as it has evolved from the 1990s to the present. It explores the scope of support for al Qaeda and other violent anti-American

groups, support for attacks on U.S. troops, and, finally, support for attacks on U.S. civilians.

Subsequent chapters plumb the depths and roots of this hostility. Chapter 2 introduces the central elements of a widely held overt narrative that portrays the United States as oppressing the Muslim people. It also introduces a more subtle, underlying narrative that portrays the United States as having betrayed the liberal values it has promoted and that have at times formed the basis of a trusting relationship between Muslims and America. The chapter provides evidence of how these narratives are sustained by an underlying conflict between Muslims' attraction to liberal values from outside of the Muslim culture, predominantly embodied by the United States, and the urge to resist those values so as to preserve their traditional culture.

Chapters 3 through 6 explore the four key elements of this dual narrative, in particular the beliefs among Muslims that the United States coercively dominates the Muslim world, that it seeks to undermine Islam, that it undermines democracy in the Muslim world, and that it supports Israel's victimization of the Palestinian people.

Chapter 7 explores in greater depth the complexities of how Muslims feel about radical Islamist groups such as al Qaeda in the context of their feelings toward the United States. This chapter draws heavily on the findings of the focus groups.

Chapter 8 then turns to the broader question of what kind of society Muslim publics want, exploring further the underlying tension between liberal and Islamist ideas present in Muslim society. Naturally, this has implications for U.S. policymakers who have worried about what might occur in Muslim societies if they became more democratic.

The closing chapter discusses the implications of these findings for U.S. foreign policy. The goal is not to prescribe a comprehensive U.S. foreign policy, but to consider a number of steps with the potential for mitigating Muslim anger at America, reviewing their costs and benefits in various dimensions. The likely response of the American public to such options is also considered.

Last, I offer a note about how I have gone about presenting these data in digestible form. Not all readers find it comfortable to assimilate substantial amounts of polling data, so I have made an effort, at risk of some repetition, to summarize the data at the beginning of each chapter and each section, thus giving the reader the option of skimming the more numbers-dense sections.