Bias Against Understanding Terrorism

The Failure to Learn from Afghanistan

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First of all, I want to thank the Centre for asking me to give this talk, and to thank you for coming. I am delighted to be here. As you know, I have had a career in journalism. I went into journalism at an early age; in my late teens, but by early twenties, I was well established and found myself working for the federal government in Washington. So while I have had a long eventful, very interesting working life, the sense of fulfillment was tinged with some regret. Occasionally, I have reflected – success in finding a job perhaps came too early. I missed being close to scholarship long enough. So occasions such as this have a special meaning for me. I am glad to be here; glad to be talking about a subject that has been close to me for many years.

Journalists and academics have an interesting relationship. Journalism is instant, scholarship reflective. Journalists are sometimes called frivolous, inconvenient, mischievous; academics deep, serious, thinking people. Disparagingly, we are called "hacks". On the other hand, I recall occasions when a colleague in my own profession would summarily dismiss me by saying: "Deepak is not punchy enough; he is an academic." We both have our detractors. But on a serious level there exists a common purpose: challenging the status quo; questioning conventional wisdom. Science cannot progress, the boundaries of knowledge cannot be pushed unless we question what *is* now.

Now to the topic of my talk: "Bias Against Understanding Terrorism." If there were any suggestion of frivolousness or mischievousness about it, I would deny that. I have chosen this topic to challenge the conventional wisdom which has been accumulating rapidly in the last decade, mainly in the West, but also in other parts of the world. "Terrorism" was always a highly contested term, but the ease with which "terrorism" and "freedom" – these two central terms – have entered common usage is remarkable. Remarkable because whereas they were both contested terms before, they are even more poorly defined now in the wake of September 11, 2001. Many of us have bought into the idea that we are all engaged in fighting for "freedom" and against "terrorism" when both terms remain largely undefined.

What is freedom? The mere fact of participation in an electoral exercise and putting our vote in the ballot box, or something more? Does taking part in periodical elections, only to see state control over citizens' lives further tightened mean freedom? Volatility of public opinion and the "tyranny of the majority" that Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about so eloquently constantly haunt minorities and their freedoms that democracy is supposed to protect. In Europe, we are witnesses to the French government's expulsion of Romani people and planned legislation to revoke the citizenship of certain immigrants who have acquired French nationality in recent years. Some opinion polls suggest these actions are popular in France.

I want to briefly talk about freedom in a different context which does not receive sufficient attention in the West. As many as three million nomads, people of Kuchi tribes, inhabit Afghanistan and the north in Central Asia, constantly on the move. Waves of Kuchi communities are used to migrating from north to south in Afghanistan and across the frontier inside Pakistan in harsh winter to relatively milder climate, only to move north again when

spring arrives. Freedom means something different to them and they would not barter their freedom for the right to vote once every few years. Their movements have been disrupted, they are more endangered by war. Ask them what is freedom.

I was in India a few months ago, where we hear Maoist terrorists are active. The Indian press is full of stories about them. To describe them as "Maoist terrorists" is patently wrong. These are tribal people who know little, if anything, about Maoism or who Mao Dze Dung was. I heard accounts of what is happening in the remote areas of central India. Suddenly one day, workers hired by the state, or by a private firm, arrive in a remote tribal community. An area is cleared of trees, flattened. To appease the local tribal community, a small building, a school, is erected. The tribal population of the village is told: "Look, we have built a school for you." Often, within days, the entire little village has disappeared from that spot; moved deep inside the forest. The tribes do not want such rapid change in their life. Ask them what freedom is to them. The point I am trying to make is this: the "war on terror" is a war fought in the name of two concepts; both undefined despite ceaseless use of the terms "freedom" and "terrorism". But, in fact, these terms have become tools to protect the majority against minorities, and the mighty against the weak and vulnerable. The right of self-defense of the powerful has superseded the right of the underdog to resist.

There has never been a universally accepted definition of terrorism and the United Nations has consistently failed to agree on how to define this phenomenon. Less than three decades ago, Ronald Reagan proclaimed that "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter." Soviet communism has since collapsed, but geopolitical factors still play a critical part in the states' determination of policy, more so in this post-Cold War era. Two decades after Francis Fukuyama, one of the leading lights of neoconservatism, declared "The End of History" and "universalization of Western democracy" in his 1989 essay, history has delivered a sharp rebuke to those who forget or ignore it. We are witnesses to two, I would say, three major wars: Afghanistan, Iraq and the wider "war on terror". "Terrorism" and "terrorist" have become much overused terms of abuse for non-state groups and a handful of states while friendly states, and client regimes, can employ extreme repressive measures, and overwhelming force, and justify them in the name of self-defense.

So what is terrorism and what are its causes? The next part of my paper deals with these questions in trying to understand the phenomenon of terrorism, casting aside the subjectivity that clouds the debate today. I will attempt to look at terrorism" and political violence" (both terms are subsumed here) as part of a "culture of violence". I will focus on Afghanistan, though parallels can be seen in Iraq, Palestine and other conflicts.

The conflict in Afghanistan can be seen in four separate but overlapping, sometimes simultaneous, stages. These stages are: internal conflict; great power involvement; state disintegration; and lastly foreign indifference and the rise of extremism. These are the four

main building blocks of a culture of violence. The question I want to raise here is: How did this dialectic play out in Afghanistan?

The last two decades of the twentieth century were a period of intense struggle between competing ideologies – a struggle which was played out in the Afghan conflict. Afghanistan was caught up in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union as early as the 1950s. The clash of capitalism and communism, both essentially Western ideologies, magnified the internal divisions in what is a tribal system in that country. Such a society has two essential characteristics – an inner weakness born out of social fragmentation, and a defensive instinct to react violently against foreign interference. These very characteristics were reinforced as intervention by massive military-economic aid and secret intelligence operations grew in Afghanistan and the country fell under Soviet domination. Afghan Communists became bolder and they seized power in a bloody coup in 1978. The rise of communism radicalized Islamic groups in Afghanistan.

The Nature of Dialectic

Imposition of a Soviet-style system on a deeply religious people was the beginning of a chain of events which shook the Communist regime in Afghanistan. Rebellions in rural areas, mutinies and desertions in the armed forces and escalating internal warfare in the ruling People's Democratic Party created a crisis in the country. The deeper the crisis became, the more repressive measures were used by the first Communist regime in 1978-1979.

The nature of such a chain reaction, or dialectic, is self-perpetuating. A dialectical process acquires a life of its own by virtue of what is described as the power of "negativity". Negativity is what comes into being in opposition to the "subject". The first "subject" is a thesis in the shape of an event or force which is gradually stripped of its immediate certainty after coming into existence as it embarks on a "pathway of doubt".

Simply put, a thesis is what rises in its environment as a distinct entity, its character imposing itself before reaching a point at which that entity begins to come under challenge by the negative force which the original thesis created. In the ensuing struggle between the thesis and its negative, or antithesis, the certainty of the original entity progressively weakens as doubts over its viability are raised. This explanation of the nature of dialectic is based on an acknowledgment that things are multi-faceted and always in the process of becoming something else.

The conflict between a thesis and its negative is a process which slowly strips the former of properties that determined its certainty and lends the latter contradictory properties. What is obtained in such a process is a reconciliation between the two – a synthesis. While the original and its negative were contrary to each other, their synthesis preserves both, and stresses unity once again. It is at this point that the synthesis transforms itself into another thesis, leading to

further contradictions and conflict before reaching another stage of resolution. So the dialectical progression goes on. It has no beginning, and no end.

We can now begin to understand in dialectical terms the advent of various external and internal forces that eventually conspired to create a culture of violence in Afghanistan. When a small group of Communist sympathisers in the armed forces, representing an ideology that was foreign and contrary to the basic character of Afghan society, seized power in 1978, it was an event that was bound to lead to profound consequences. Under the Communist regime, there was a short-lived experiment to restructure Afghan society on the Soviet model – an experiment carried out by coercion, including purges, imprisonment, torture and assassination of opponents. The Marxist experiment provoked violent opposition that became progressively more stubborn as measures of the Communist regime acquired greater ruthlessness. There was resistance not only in wider society, but also within the regime. It took many forms – the Parcham (or Banner) faction against the Khalq (the Masses) faction, internal dissidents within Khalq, ethnic Pashtun against non-Pashtun, communist against anti-communist and so on. As the conflict escalated, fear and chaos began to take hold and the outcome was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

The scale of violence was altogether different during the years of Soviet occupation. The overwhelming war machine of the Communist superpower was at work and, in the final major confrontation of the Cold War, the United States threw its vast resources in support of the anti-Communist Mujahideen groups to fight that war machine. Weapons of terror were used by all sides and the conflict produced millions of victims. The violence committed by the Soviet occupation army was answered by the Mujahideen opposition on the ground.

The war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan is often portrayed as one in which the Afghan resistance took on a superpower and won. This is an over-simplification, because such a view ignores the dialectical nature of the conflict which triggered intervention by other external powers in opposition to the USSR. The Mujahideen victory could not have been possible without the military and financial support from America and its allies, notably Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and China. American and Pakistani intelligence services were deeply involved in the planning and execution of the war against the Soviet occupation forces. The role of Pakistan in the recruitment and training of anti-communist guerrillas was critical.

State intervention from outside also brought foreign militants to Afghanistan. The military government of Pakistan allowed thousands of Islamic radicals to train and fight in the conflict, which made them battle-hardened and reinforced their fundamentalist ideology. After the defeat of communism, they were left without a cause and many returned to their own countries to engage in struggle against regimes they regarded as un-Islamic and corrupt.

Islam and the External Dimension

Islam has been a powerful force in modern Afghanistan. It was the main source of resistance to change from above, whether imperial powers like Britain and Russia tried to impose that change, or internal regimes such as those of Mohammad Daud and subsequently under Communism in the 1970s and 1980s. Religion, interwoven with a tribal system, provided the core of this resistance. It was endorsed by local mullahs who found their position in society threatened. The war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan went beyond this. Islam was used as a political ideology to bind together the disparate factions and their members at the insistence of President Zia of Pakistan and with the active support of the CIA-ISI alliance.

The idea of Islam as a political ideology, not merely a religion, to be used to reshape and control society is sometimes described as "Islamism". Afghanistan is a deeply religious country, but Islamism had not taken root in the wider Afghan society before the Communists seized power in 1978. In the early 1970s, religious militancy was primarily concentrated in Kabul, where a relatively small number of educated Afghan fundamentalists fought for influence with left-wing groups in student politics and the armed forces. However, the Islamists became isolated in later years. Almost all prominent activists had fled to Pakistan by 1975, when an attempt to overthrow President Daud failed.

At this stage, the Islamist movement of Afghans underwent internal turmoil as it prepared to oppose the Daud regime. The movement split into two significant groups: the Hizb-i-Islami, dominated by ethnic Pashtuns and led by Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, and the mainly-Tajik Jamiat-i-Islami under the leadership of Burhanuddin Rabbani. The Pashtun-Tajik divide was to prove permanent, but both groups had a lot in common with their Middle Eastern counterparts. They both recruited members from the intelligentsia. Many of the activists of these Islamist groups had been students in scientific and technical institutions. They were joined by more educated Afghans and foreign militants who eventually fought against the Soviet occupation forces. They were Sunni Muslims with a strong anti-Shi'a stance, reflecting the wider trend in the Arab world against Iran. Sunni Arab regimes, threatened by the growing Shi'a militancy following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, wanted to keep Iranian influence in check. Their answer was to support anti-Shi'a forces, whether it meant the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, in his war with Iran or Sunni militants in Afghanistan.

It has been suggested that the ideology of the Afghan Islamists was 'borrowed entirely' from two foreign movements: the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt, and the Jamaat-i-Islami of Pakistan. Just like these two movements, the Afghan Islamists opposed secular tendencies and rejected Western influence. Within Islam, they opposed Sufi influence, with its emphasis on love and universality of all religious teachings. Rabbani was among those prominent Afghans who had spent years at al-Azhar University in Cairo and had been active in the Muslim Brotherhood. Hikmatyar, on the other hand, was close to Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami, which was itself influenced by the Brotherhood and its ideologue, Sayed Qutb. The writings of Qutb were

a source of inspiration to a large number of Arabs who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The main appeal of Qutb comes from his assertion that the world is "steeped in jahiliyyah", the Arabic term for ignorance. He argues that this ignorance originates from the rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth. Qutb attacks communism for denying humans their dignity and capitalism for exploiting individuals and nations. He claims that the denial of human dignity and exploitation are nothing but consequences of the challenge to God's authority. The solution advanced by Qutb is that Islam acquires a "concrete form" and attain "world leadership", but this is possible only by initiating a movement for its revival.

Qutb does not openly preach violence, but other ingredients of a revolutionary brand of Islam are present in his writings. He recognises that there is a significant body of educated people who are disillusioned with the existing order. These people represent a constituency for change in a number of Middle Eastern countries, where economic and social problems, corruption and a lack of involvement in political processes have created a wide gulf between governments and the people. Qutb rejects the Communist and capitalist systems alike and asserts that Islam is the only alternative. His vision is idealistic and its attraction very strong for the alienated looking for political adventure.

The Muslim Brotherhood was hostile to successive Egyptian governments and firmly aligned itself with the Palestinian cause after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. When Anwar Sadat became president of Egypt in 1970 following the death of Nasir, he promised to implement Islamic law and released all Brotherhood members from jail in an attempt to pacify the movement. But Sadat's decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 resulted in a new confrontation, which led to his assassination in September 1981. The Muslim Brotherhood went underground and, in subsequent years, developed a complex network of more than seventy branches worldwide.

The disintegration of the Afghan state system between 1992 and 1994 and the subsequent rise of the Taliban turned Afghanistan into a haven to which foreign fighters could return without fear of retribution. Many more new Islamic radicals came from the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and the Far East to study, train and fight in Afghanistan during the Taliban period. They developed personal contacts with each other, learned about the Islamist movements of other countries and planned cross-border activities.

Conflict within and the Birth of al Qaeda

No other veteran of the Afghan conflict has achieved worldwide notoriety like Osama bin Laden. He had his initiation to radical Islam as a student at King Abdul Aziz University in the Saudi city of Jiddah, from where he got a degree in economics and management. It was there that bin Laden developed a deep interest in the study of Islam and used to hear recorded

sermons of the fiery Palestinian academic, Abdullah Azzam. In the 1970s, Jiddah was a centre of disaffected Muslim students from all over the world and Azzam was a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood. His influence encouraged bin Laden to join the movement.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, bin Laden moved with several hundred construction workers and heavy equipment to the Afghan-Pakistan border and set out to "liberate the land from the infidel invader", as bin Laden saw it. He saw a desperately poor country taken over by tens of thousands of Soviet troops and millions of Muslims bearing the brunt of the military machine of a superpower. Afghans neither had the infrastructure or manpower to mount effective resistance to the occupation of their country.

Osama bin Laden created an organisation to recruit people to fight the Soviets and began to advertise all over the Arab world to attract young Muslims to Afghanistan. In just over a year, thousands of volunteers, including experts in sabotage and guerrilla warfare, had arrived in his camps. Their presence clearly suited CIA operations in Afghanistan. Bin Laden's private army became part of the Mujahideen forces based in Pakistan and supported by the United States. Military experts with a close understanding of US policy estimated that a "significant quantity" of high-technology American weapons, including Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, reached bin Laden and were still with him in the late 1990s.

Bin Laden helped build an elaborate network of underground tunnels in the mountains in eastern Afghanistan in the mid-1980s. The complex was funded by the CIA and included a weapons depot, training facilities and a health centre for the Mujahideen. He set up his own training camp for Arab fighters and his following increased among foreign recruits. But he became increasingly disillusioned by two things: one, the continuing infighting in the Afghan resistance after the Soviets left; the other, America's disengagement from Afghanistan that many saw as abandonment. Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia to work for his family business.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and it looked as though the security of Saudi Arabia was under threat, he urged the royal family to raise a force from the Afghan war veterans to fight the Iraqis. Instead, the Saudi rulers invited the Americans – a decision that greatly angered bin Laden. As half a million US troops began to arrive in the region, bin Laden openly criticized the Saudi royal family and lobbied Islamic leaders to speak out against the deployment of non-Muslims to defend the country. It led to a direct confrontation between him and the Saudi royal family.

He left for Sudan, which was going through an Islamic revolution. He was warmly welcomed, not least because of his wealth, in a country devastated by years of civil war between the Muslim north and the Christian south. His relationship with Sudan's de facto leader, Hasan al-Turabi, was close and he was treated as a state guest in the capital, Khartoum. Returning veterans of the Afghan conflict were given jobs and the authorities allowed bin Laden to set up

training camps in Sudan. Meanwhile, his criticisms of the Saudi royal family continued. The Saudi authorities finally lost patience and revoked his citizenship in 1994. Osama bin Laden was not to return to his homeland again.

These events had a lasting impact on bin Laden. He had fallen out with the United States and the Saudi ruling establishment and his freedom of movement was severely restricted. In Khartoum, he began to concentrate on building a global network of Islamist groups. His business, Laden International, had a civil engineering company, a foreign exchange dealership and a firm that owned peanut farms and corn fields. Other business ventures failed, but he had enough money to support Islamic movements abroad. Funds were sent to militants in Jordan and Eritrea and a network was set up in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan to smuggle Islamic fighters into Chechnya. He set up more military training camps, where Algerians, Palestinians, Egyptians and Saudis were given instructions in making bombs and carrying out sabotage.

The ideological nucleus of what became al Qaeda also attracted Ayman al-Zawahiri, regarded as Osama bin Laden's deputy. Al-Zawahiri was born into a leading Egyptian family and fell under the influence of revolutionary Islam at an early age. His grandfather, Rabia'a al-Zawahiri, was once head of al-Azhar Institute, the highest authority of the Sunni branch of Islam. His great-uncle, Abdul Rahman Azzam, was the first Secretary-General of the Arab League. When he was a boy of 15, Ayman al-Zawahiri was arrested for being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. He trained as a surgeon, but his radical activities led to a rapid advancement in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. By the late 1970s, when he was still in his twenties, he had taken over the leadership of the group.

In October 1981, al-Zawahiri was arrested with hundreds of activists following the assassination of President Sadat by members of his group at a military parade. The authorities could not convict him of direct involvement in the murder, but he was sentenced to three years in prison for possessing weapons. He left Egypt after his release – first going to Saudi Arabia and then to Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, from where large numbers of foreign fighters entered Afghanistan during Soviet occupation.

There is evidence that the association of Ayman al-Zawahiri with the Afghan resistance started just before his arrest in Egypt in 1981. He was a temporary doctor in a clinic run by the Muslim Brotherhood in a poor suburb of Cairo, where he was asked about going to Afghanistan to do some relief work. He thought it was a 'golden opportunity' to get to know a country which had the potential to become a base for struggle in the Arab world and where the real battle for Islam was to be fought. On his way to Afghanistan several years later, al-Zawahiri briefly worked as a surgeon in a Kuwaiti Red Crescent Hospital in the Pakistani frontier city of Peshawar. He made frequent visits inside Afghanistan to operate on wounded fighters, often with primitive tools and rudimentary medicines. Ayman secured his place in the Afghan resistance as someone who treated the sick and the wounded – just as bin Laden had secured his by virtue of

being a wealthy Arab who spent his money and time helping people in an impoverished country which had been devastated by Soviet forces.

In subsequent years, al-Zawahiri emerged as an intellectual and the main ideological force behind Osama bin Laden. He enunciated clear distinctions between his and other Islamist groups. Al-Zawahiri saw democracy as a "new religion" which must be destroyed by war. He accused the Muslim Brotherhood of sacrificing God's ultimate authority by accepting the idea that people are the source of authority. Other Islamist groups were also condemned for accepting constitutional systems in the Arab world. In his view, such organisations exploit the enthusiasm of young Muslims, who are recruited only to be directed towards "conferences and elections" (instead of armed struggle).

The further al-Zawahiri went in his consideration of modern social systems, the more radicalised he became in reaction. He implied that the moral and ideological pollution was made worse by material corruption. He complained that the Muslim Brotherhood had amassed enormous wealth. This material prosperity, he said, was achieved because its leaders had turned to international banking and big business to escape the repressive and secular regime of Nasir in Egypt. Joining the Muslim Brotherhood created opportunities for its members to make a living. Their activities were driven by materialistic, rather than spiritual, aims. These views amounted to a complete rejection by al-Zawahiri and his organisation, the Islamic Jihad, of other Islamist groups and brought the Jihad closer to Osama bin Laden and his network.

The influence of the Palestinian-Jordanian academic, Abdullah Azzam, was central in all this. Azzam was a child when Israel was founded in 1948 and had been active in the Palestinian resistance movement from an early age. He had links with Yasir Arafat, but their association ended when he disagreed with the secular philosophy of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, eventually coming to the view that it was far removed from "the real Islam". Azzam's logic was that national boundaries had been drawn by infidels as part of a conspiracy to prevent the realisation of a trans-national Islamic state. And he came to the view that his goal was to bring together Muslims from all over the world.

Abdullah Azzam saw in the Afghan conflict an opportunity to realise this ambition. Recruitment of volunteers from all over the Muslim world to fight the Soviet occupation forces was to be an important step towards his goal to set up an Islamic internationale. To achieve this, these volunteers would train, acquire battle experience and establish links with other radical Islamic groups. The Mujahideen resistance in Afghanistan had already established a legendary reputation which would inspire potential followers all over the world. The resistance could eventually become a highly-motivated and trained force, ready to destroy the decadent West and export the Islamic revolution to other parts of the world.

In November 1989, Azzam and his two sons were assassinated in a bomb attack as they drove to a mosque in Peshawar to pray. The identity of their murderers remained a mystery, but

rumours persisted about a link with bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. It was reported that while they both supported the idea of extending the struggle to overthrow Arab regimes, Azzam wanted the job completed first in Afghanistan by replacing the Communist regime of Najibullah with a Mujahideen government. Other players, including the Soviet and Afghan secret services, also had an interest in removing Azzam. Whoever was responsible for his assassination, its most significant consequence was that bin Laden and al-Zawahiri gained almost total control of the network of foreign fighters linked to the Afghan conflict.

The split between Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam in the late 1980s was the beginning of al Qaeda. Whereas Azzam insisted on maintaining the focus on Afghanistan, bin Laden was determined to take the war to other countries. To this end, bin Laden formed al Qaeda. His main goal was to overthrow corrupt and heretical regimes in Muslim states and replace them with the rule of Shari'a, or Islamic law. The ideology of al Qaeda was intensely anti-Western and bin Laden saw America as the greatest enemy that had to be destroyed.

To sum up, we need to consider the dialectic I have been explaining that led to the creation of al Qaeda's ideology to understand the organization itself. The two main ideologies to emerge after the Second World War were communism and free-market liberalism. Competition between them during the Cold War obscured the challenge they faced from a third force, radical Islam in the Middle East. The first significant manifestation of this force was the Islamic revolution in Iran in the late 1970s. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s created an environment in which the challenge from radical Islam was directed against communism. America strengthened it by pouring money and weapons into the Afghan conflict, but failed to recognise that the demise of the Soviet empire would leave the United States itself exposed to assaults from groups like al Qaeda. In time, this failure proved to be a historic blunder. And it created a "culture of violence" – a condition, fuelled by war, in which violence permeates all levels of society, and becomes part of human nature, thinking and way of life.

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