

Talking Terrorism

BY MUATAZ NOFFEL

Terrorism in the West is almost subliminally associated in the first instance with Islam, a notion no less overused and vague than terrorism itself. In the minds of the unprepared or unalert, Islam calls up images of bearded clerics and mad, suicidal bombers. Behind the Islamic images stand the Palestinian terrorists, who in the unexamined popular mythology of our day are presumed to have begun the whole shameful and frightful thing. One thing about "terrorism", as a phenomenon of the public sphere of communication and representation in the West that seems most striking, is its isolation from any explanation or mitigating circumstances. Also striking is "terrorism's" isolation from representations of most other dysfunctions, symptoms, and maladies of the contemporary world.

Terrorism's appearance of isolation has almost always been misleading. Terrorism has appeared regularly in conjunction with other stigmatized groups: Islam, Palestinians, and Iran — that is, objects, concepts, peoples, and cultures poorly and antithetically known, and therefore more liable to technical, metaphysical, and ultimately ideological constructions. To my knowledge, of no other country, religion, culture, or ethnic group except Islam has it been said that terrorism is after a fashion, endemic. By the nature of the argument, evidence is problematic but it is shuffled about with curious results. All sorts of strange objects appear. For example, the Islamic mind, ancient conflict, remarkable but unnameable affinity to malicious violence — all of them attesting to the essential traits that supposedly have been there eternally and are susceptible neither to historical change nor to any sort of amelioration.

Nowhere is the paradigmatic rhetorical combination of client appeal and blockage more clear than in the work of political scientists in Israel and the United States. Their recent foreign policy has been staked on the fight against terrorism; a political decision arrived at consciously and therefore ideologically as a method for dealing with resistance to US-Israeli power. In addition, this decision made it possible for the government-sponsored outpouring against terrorism either to screen or to legitimize the governmental violence of both countries. This is not to say that terrorism does not exist, but rather to suggest that the existence of terrorism signifies first, in relation to "us", the alien and gratuitously hostile force. It is destructive, systemic, and controlled. It is a network and a conspiracy run from Iran, Iraq, Beirut, Palestine, Libya, and Cuba. Most of all, terrorism has come to signify "our" view for everything in the world that seems inimical to our interests, army, policy, or values. As such it can be used to justify every thing "we" do and to delegitimize as well as dehumanize everything "they" do. The very indiscriminateness of terrorism, actual, and described,

its tautological and circular characteristics are anti-narrative.

No wonder then, that "facts" and the truth for a consecutive historical experience stand little chance of wide acceptance. It is easily ignored, for example, that everything that the Israelis do to the Palestinians constitutes brutality and oppression easily rivaling the previous South African regimes, or that world leaders and antinuclear movements have nothing to say about the Israeli nuclear threat. There is every chance that ignorance about Israel's current attitude toward Palestinians will keep pace with sustained encomiums on Israel's pioneering spirit, democracy and humanism.

The television screen was filled with images of Israel's siege and devastation of Beirut and South Lebanon for the second time after the summer of 1982, and its bloody injustice practiced against the Palestinian children during the past decade. Its current and continual denial of Palestinian's basic human rights — such as the practice of collective punishment, demolishing homes of innocent families, and the illegal dispossession of the lands from its owners — is no secret. Nevertheless, "terrorism" is still supposed by the journalists and audiences to be an almost Platonic essence inherent in all Palestinians and Muslims, without historical, social, or political circumstances or conditions to provoke it. Even more important, however, the discourse of

"terrorism," counterterrorism, and terrorist expertise obliterated all the historic processes that might conceivably have produced so many terrorists and so many acts of terror.

But I also want to say that in the specific case of "talking terrorism" in the Middle East, crucial distinctions have been characteristically eluded. There has been terrorism, there has been cruel, insensate, shameful violence, yes, but who today can stand before us and say that violence is all, or even mainly, on the side of the labelled "terrorists". Who can say that virtue is on the side of civilized states who in many ways do tend in fact to represent decency, democracy, and a modicum of "the good"? I must confess that I find the entire arsenal of words and phrases that derive from the concept of terrorism both inadequate and shameful. There are few ways of talking about terrorism now that are not corrupted by the propaganda war of the past decade, ways that have become, in my opinion, disqualified as instruments for conducting rational, secular inquiry into the cases of human violence. Is there some other way of apprehending what might additionally be involved when we now unthinkingly use the word terrorism? Is there a style of thought and language that pretends neither to get past the word's embroiled semantic history, nor to restore it, cleansed and sparkling new, for polemical use?

A feast fit for students?

BY SAMER MUSCATI

OTTAWA (CUP) — They may not know how to run the country, or even organize a national conference, but they can make a chocolate mousse that will knock your socks off.

The Federal government last month wined and dined over 100 national conference on youth delegates to a feast fit for kings. It was a meal that most students undoubtedly have every day along with their caviar and truffles.

The handpicked delegates were flown in from across the country to Ottawa to find solutions to the growing problems that youth face in the "new economy".

Logically, almost no student groups were invited to the youth conference. For what would students possibly know about youth issues? The government wisely decided that our future should be determined by suit wearing young-liberals, corporate lackeys and government officials that attended the three day rendezvous.

The catchphrases of the conference were "building partnerships", and "creating opportunity". Speaker after speaker warned of the new economy, where reliance on federal government handouts will be a thing of a past.

"Gone are the days you can throw a cheque towards solving social problems," extolled MP Maurizio Bevilacqua, chair of the national conference. "Today's youth need effective partnerships, self-reliance and entrepreneurship."

Irrelevant and trivial issues such as rising tuition costs, decreasing quality of education, high students debt, and chronic student

unemployment were obviously not addressed.

And of course, it would have been improper to have brought up issues such as the government's backtracking on the Liberal's Red Book promise to fund a \$100 million Youth Corps Program to employ 10,000 youths every year.

It would have been unthinkable to ruin the party by talking about the government's privatization of the Canada Student Loans Program, which could lead to banks determining who is eligible for loans.

Naturally, the wine just wouldn't taste the same if there was discussion on the \$7 billion in federal cuts to social transfer payments to the provinces, money designated in large part to educational institutions.

But just when you thought things couldn't get any better for youth, they have. The conference was so successful that Canada's second largest bank, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, has generously offered to host the second national conference on youth next march. The CIBC will not only determine the conference agenda, but will also decide who the participants are.

"I can't tell you how thrilled I am that one of our leading financial institutions in the country will continue with what we've begun here today with young people by sponsoring another conference," said an enthusiastic Douglas Young, Federal Minister of Human Resources.

I'm glad to be out of it, quite frankly.

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