

Executive Summary

Why do they hate us? People all over the US asked that question right after the 9/11 attacks. But instead of looking for an answer, we engaged in a global war on terrorism against an enemy, about whom we know next to nothing. Thus the war on terrorism is doomed to fail.

Terrorism is of all ages. So why do we experience this angst, this deep-seated fear of a hydraheaded monster of mythological dimensions, constantly changing and adapting, always catching its opponents off guard ? Today's obsession with terrorism and security comes and goes, in waves. It was there when the anarchist terrorists of the late nineteenth century made havoc. It was there when the fascist terrorists of the 1930s spread death and destruction. And it is here now. Each time, myth and reality become blurred. Underestimating terrorism is dangerous. But exaggerating the threat is just as dangerous – so is groupthink.

Nothing should or could justify the terrorist attacks of 11 September. But that does not absolve us from the obligation to try to explain them, in order to prevent more of the same.

Do we have today's monster's name right? Is al-Qaeda our invisible enemy? In his book **'Al-Qaeda – The Myth', Rik Coolsaet** argues that al-Qaeda has become a myth. Just like in the 19th century, when a Terrorist International only existed in the public's mind, today's al-Qaeda is like a broken thermometer whose mercury shattered into a multitude of small blobs, all highly toxic, but unrelated to one another. Al-Qaeda no longer exists as the global disciplined and centralized terrorist organization it once was. It has turned into a grassroots phenomenon. It is a unifying flag, a loosely connected body of home-grown terror groups and even freelance jihadists, each going their own way without central command, unaffiliated with any group. As happened in the past.

But why now ? And where do these fanatics recruit ? Here, history creeps in. Today's international terrorism is not born out of religion, nor out of poverty. As was so often the case in the past, **terrorism is bred by marginalization** . Terrorism is a symptom of a society gone awry. When a world changes too rapidly in too many dimensions at once, it makes – rightly or wrongly – large groups of people, nations or countries feel excluded. And it is precisely this which constitutes the breeding ground for small extremist splinter groups searching for a way to justify their acts of terror. As **self-appointed vanguards** they are thus seeking to present themselves as champions of justice.

The anarchist terrorists of the 19 th century found a breeding ground among the marginalized working classes. The fascists of the 1930s appealed to the nationalists seeking independence, but also to the scores of people who were living in a time of great personal uncertainty, due to the Great Depression. Today's jihadist extremists hope to

conquer the hearts and the minds of the numerous Muslims who are experiencing a persistent climate of humiliation and oppression in large parts of the Muslim world.

Today's Muslim is like the 19th-century worker – regarded with the same fear, mixed with the same contempt. Today's America is to the Islamist terrorist what the bourgeois state was to its 19th-century anarchist precursor, a symbol of arrogance and power. Osama bin Laden is the 21st century's Ravachol – the anarchists' hero, a lightning rod for the police, but to his followers the symbol of 'the breath of hatred and resistance' of the 19th-century working classes. The jihadists are the successors of the 19th-century anarchists: the vanguard whose attacks are supposed to kindle the spark among the masses. Today's Saudi-Arabia is the anarchists' Italy of the 19th century. 11 September was the wake-up call for the international community, comparable to the murder of the French President Sadi Carnot in 1894 and the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and Louis Barthou, the French Foreign Minister, in Marseilles in 1934. But each time, the **terrorist's way proved to be a dead-end** .

To win the war on terrorism, two goals must be pursued at the same time: a common struggle against the terrorists and a political effort that focuses on the discontent and feelings of exclusion among a vast and populous section of the world. A hundred years ago such a **remedy** was found against a similar wave of international terrorism. The organized labour movement did offer a better solution than the terrorist bombing campaigns in giving workers a sense of self-esteem and identity and with this their own full position in society. There, terrorism withered away. But where no such perspective was offered, terrorism did keep on simmering – until one terrorist assassination too many precipitated the world into the First World War.

So, before getting into a collective panic and starting to regard every Muslim quietly reading his Koran in the tube as a potential terrorist, we would be wise to consider the **Three Rules of Thumb of Terrorism** .

First rule of thumb. All through history terrorist groups have **always** been marginal splinter groups. Today is no different.

Second rule of thumb. In the past terrorists **never** achieved the results they hoped for. On the contrary. History teaches us that the effect of terrorism is generally the reverse of what the terrorists aim at.

Third rule of thumb. In the event of terrorist attacks we **always** tend to overreact . It's only human, but we do have to be aware of this. We need to confront terror with our minds as well as with our hearts.

About the author & the book

The book grew out of the conference 'Why 9/11? Root Causes of International Terrorism', organized by the Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels in November 2003. The original Dutch edition was published in March 2004 (Van Halewyck Editions, Leuven , Belgium) and was listed for several weeks in the Books Top 10 charts of Belgium 's leading chain of bookstores as well as in that of the major news magazines. A French translation was published in April 2004 (Editions Mols, Bièrges , Belgium) and was introduced by the former Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Louis Michel, and by the French scholar Olivier Roy.

The new English edition has been **thoroughly revised and updated** , so as to take into account the major terrorist events in 2004, from the Madrid, Riyadh, Jakarta and Beslan attacks until the assassination of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004, as well as the ensuing national and international developments in counterterrorism cooperation.

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