

THE TERRORIST AS HUMANITARIAN

Faisal Devji

Abstract: A global society has come into being, but as yet it possesses no political institutions proper to its name. I will make the case that new forms of militancy, like that of al-Qaeda, achieve meaning in this institutional vacuum while representing, in their own way, the search for a global politics. From environmentalism to pacifism, such a worldwide politics can only be one that takes humanity itself as its object. This article aims to show that militant practices are informed by the same search that animates humanitarianism, which has become the global aim and signature of all politics today.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, human rights, humanitarianism, humiliation, terrorism, violence

On the fifth anniversary of 9/11, a jihadist Web site posted a long interview with Osama bin Laden's lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in which he described Muslim militancy as offering an opportunity for all the world's oppressed, whether or not they converted to Islam:

Interviewer: Speaking of the plunder of resources, grievances, and the oppressed ones in the world, in recent statements by Al-Qa'ida of Jihad calls for supporting the oppressed in the world have been repeated. Is this a new Al-Qa'ida approach?

Al-Zawahiri: No, this is a confirmed jurisprudence-based law. God, the exalted, said in [a] Hadith Qudsi: "O my servants, I have forbidden oppression for myself, and forbidden it for you, so do not oppress each other" ... I invite all of America's victims to Islam, the religion which rejects injustice and treachery. If they don't convert to Islam, then they should at least take advantage of Muslims' defensive campaign to repel America's aggression against them and overcome them, each under his own banner, and with whatever is at his disposal.¹

This is a novel interpretation of Islam's universality, one that has transformed the language of religious conversion itself. The American convert Adam Gadahn,



for example, whose name within al-Qaeda circles is Azzam al-Amriki or Azzam the American, invites his compatriots to accept Islam in a videotape released in 2006 by the terror network's media arm. Prefaced by a testimonial from Zawahiri, Gadahn's performance is dedicated to giving proselytism a radically new meaning:

We invite all Americans and other unbelievers to Islam, wherever they are and whatever their role and status in Bush and Blair's world order. And we send a special invitation to all of you fighting Bush's Crusader pipe dream in Afghanistan, Iraq, and wherever else 'Dubya' has sent you to ... Finally, some will ask how we expect to attract converts to Islam after having spilled so much non-Muslim blood, albeit in defense of our religion, liberty and lives. We might ask the same question to those who kill Muslims by the millions for the crime of being Muslim, and then foolishly hope to win their hearts and minds. But we will suffice by pointing to the sharp spike [in] conversions to Islam after September eleventh, which, as we've mentioned, is giving the enemy many a sleepless night.²

Echoing bin Laden's comments in the aftermath of 9/11, Gadahn points out that these attacks on US soil had led to a sudden rise in global interest about Islam, as well as a spike in conversions to the religion. Personal forms of missionary activity intended to attract converts to a particular religious tradition, in other words, were being replaced by an impersonal and in fact inadvertent proselytism involving spectacular events whose purposes might have been altogether different. Moreover, the Islam to which such converts were being led is completely open as far as sect, school, or tradition is concerned, these particulars being left to the discretion of the converts themselves.³

Gadahn's invitation to Islam discounts doctrine and practice for something so generic as to be human in nature. The examples he gives of American soldiers who become Muslim rely not upon the soldiers' discovery of Islamic scripture so much as their identification with the suffering, endurance, and sacrifice of America's Muslim victims. Thus, Gadahn reproaches critics of the 'war on terror', such as the British Member of Parliament George Galloway and the journalist Robert Fisk, for not taking the final step to accept Islam. For Gadahn, conversion has become a sign chiefly of identification with victims in general, who, whether or not they happen to be Muslim, are represented at this historical juncture by Islam. This is why al-Qaeda's spokesmen can deploy the language of identification in secular as well as religious ways.

Non-Muslims who identify with Muslim victims become human and Muslim at the same time, even if their conversion remains in the realm of potentiality, since the criteria for both humanity and Islam are the same. The breadth of Islam's humanity is such that even its greatest enemies, according to Gadahn, could be forgiven and treated as brothers if only they would repent of their actions. Unlike the rhetoric used in the war on terror, which is determined to punish Islamic militants for crimes they have committed, that used in al-Qaeda's jihad would forgive US President Bush and Britain's Prime Minister Blair

for crimes just as great—if they were to repent. However preposterous, it is clear that al-Qaeda’s rhetoric is more Christian than that of its Western enemies.

Islam and Humanitarianism

Given that militants today routinely invoke the plight of suffering Muslims in exactly the same way that humanitarians do of victims in general, the identification of Islam with humanitarianism is hardly surprising. Indeed, humanitarian actions even serve as the model for militant interventions in the contemporary rhetoric of jihad, so that Ayman al-Zawahiri recommended attacks upon infidels in the same breath as he counseled assistance to those hurt and displaced by the devastating earthquake that hit Pakistan in 2005. Zawahiri not only identified the earthquake’s victims as martyrs, as if, like al-Qaeda’s militants, they had died for their faith. He also accused the United States of making war against Islamic charitable work, thus very deliberately conflating militant with humanitarian action.

We have sadly received the news of the disaster that befell the Pakistani Muslim people following the earthquake that struck the region ... We ask Allah to grant those killed in the earthquake the positions of martyrs and pious people. My brothers and myself wish to be among you, our dear brothers, on this day. However, agents of America are standing in our way to help our Muslim brothers in their distress. Today, I call on Muslims in general, and on Islamic relief organizations in particular, to go to Pakistan and help their Pakistani brothers and withstand the troubles and harm they face for this purpose. We all know the raging American war against Islamic charitable work.⁴

Such identifications are even less surprising when we realize that one of the great themes of contemporary Islam, which is meant to characterize liberals as well as fundamentalists, pacifists as well as militants, has to do with its supposed naturalness. Islam is justified as the ‘natural’ religion of humanity, one that a Robinson Crusoe might well discover on a desert island by purely rational means. Its history therefore serves as an outer cover for Islam’s essentially human nature, rather than providing believers with doctrinal truths as in Christianity. Believers today have reworked traditional notions, like that of Islam as humankind’s original faith, one that Muhammad simply cleansed of time’s corruption, by predicating them on humanity’s modern manifestation in biological as well as juridical terms. Thus, a tradition describing Islam as the religion of all children, who are only subsequently turned by their parents into Jews or Christians, has led to the development of novel terms such as ‘reverts’ for English-speaking converts. This modernization of the Muslim experience has its roots in the nineteenth century, when medieval notions that depicted nature as being inherent in good as much as in evil were transformed to make Islam ‘natural’ in the positive and even romantic sense of being authentic and universal.

How does Islam come to represent humanity and why? The answer lies in globalization, which has redefined the place that Islam occupies in the world.

If humanity in its biological and legal forms came to be embodied by individuals at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with globalization it became a collective reality well before that century was concluded. For humanity is the globe's only subject, being the true agent as well as the victim of crises such as global warming and nuclear warfare. The worldwide Muslim community or *ummah* has become a global cause on the same pattern as a humanity threatened by global warming or nuclear war. In fact, the Islamic community literally takes the place of humanity in modern times. It does so by claiming the status of global victim, the purity of whose suffering serves as an equivalent of its pure humanity. While it has earlier precedents in colonialism, this idea of a victimized Islam can be dated to World War I, during which the Ottoman Empire was dismembered and its emperor, who claimed also to be the caliph or successor to the Prophet's worldly authority, was deposed. Osama bin Laden refers frequently to this event as precisely the origin of Islam's victimization as a global phenomenon. In times past, the Muslim *ummah* was viewed not as a body of people existing in the historical present, but as a transhistorical community made up of the dead, the living, and the yet unborn—which meant that it could not be conceived of as a body of victims in any modern sense. By the time Osama bin Laden made the following statement to a conference of Pakistani divines in 2001, however, this community had come to represent nothing but human life itself under attack: "Honorable scholars, I write these lines to you at a time when every single inch of our *umma's* body is being stabbed by a spear, struck by a sword, or pierced by an arrow" (Lawrence 2005: 96).

It is only when the Islamic community becomes a contemporary reality that it can become a political one—either as an agent or as a victim. Yet today, all global figures, the environment and humanity included, exist in rhetoric and reality as victims—which is to say that they exist as the potential subjects of politics. The task of militancy is to fulfill this potential and make them into actors. But for the moment, there is no such thing as a global politics properly speaking, although it is possible that the militants and their enemies will bring it into being by their combined efforts. Until that happens, global movements of an environmentalist, pacifist, and religious bent will continue to pose certain limits for traditionally conceived politics. But such limits arise from humanity itself as a reality bereft of reality. It was this humanity that Hannah Arendt (1993: 131), writing in the aftermath of World War II, described as a reality made possible by the very shame of its absence: "For many years now we have met Germans who declare that they are ashamed of being German. I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human. This elemental shame, which many people of the most various nationalities share with one another today, is what finally is left of our sense of international solidarity; and it has not yet found an adequate political expression."

Is it too much to say that the negative humanity Arendt defined by the word 'shame' provides the starting point for Muslim militants today? Insofar as these militants claim to participate in a universal struggle and not a specifically Muslim one, such a conception of humanity does inform their actions, for in their view Islam has come to represent this humanity in its status as global victim.

Yet the Nazi attempt to eliminate European Jewry, which epitomizes humanity's victimization in the political and juridical culture of the West, merits practically no mention among Muslim militants. Unlike those who express anti-Semitism either to deny the Jewish Holocaust or to claim an equivalent victimhood for themselves, al-Qaeda's votaries mostly remain silent about it. While this silence is no doubt anti-Semitic as well, it ends up rejecting the final identification of humanity with victimhood and discounting the apocalyptic language of genocide for Muslims themselves. In this sense, militancy is faithful to the idea of Islam's victorious and immortal future, being concerned not with the victimization of humanity so much as with its transformation into a global agent.

What then are the implications of identifying Muslims with humanity as far as militant acts are concerned? Arendt (1993: 131) suggests that "the terror of the idea of humanity" resides in the universal responsibility it implies: "For the idea of humanity, when purged of all sentimentality, has the very serious consequence that in one form or another men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men and that all nations share the onus of evil committed by all others. Shame at being a human being is the purely individual and still non-political expression of this insight" (ibid.).

In what remains of this article, I want to explore the implications of identifying Islam with humanity by focusing precisely on the universal responsibility that its militants so loudly proclaim in suicidal attacks on civilian populations the world over. My thesis is that the search for humanity—or rather, the attempt to realize it—lies at the heart of militant action. While al-Qaeda's terrorists, therefore, may begin by identifying Muslims with the passive victims who embody humanity in the discourse of human rights and crimes against humanity, their aim is in fact to transform this humanity from the inside, not least because their sacrificial practices end up denying the possibility of any position external to humanity. These militants are not interested in saving Muslim victims through humanitarian missions. Rather, they seek to remake humanity itself by abandoning the technical language of humanitarianism and human rights, which is invoked in their rhetoric only to be condemned as hypocritical.

From Humiliation's Heart

Arendt's term 'shame' has been transformed by Islamic militants into 'humiliation', which is broadcasted about by one militant after another. And while this language of humiliation has not gone unnoticed by those studying movements like al-Qaeda, its importance is generally stated more than it is examined. At most, shame and humiliation are seen as providing the psychological determinants of militancy. The point I want to make, however, is that humiliation exists here as a moral category pertaining to communities rather than a psychological one confined to individuals. Indeed, as a rhetorical category humiliation is by definition social in nature, more concept than feeling, as its central place in the argumentation of militancy makes clear. Zawahiri describes the humiliation of a humanity unachieved in the following passage from a video posted on

the Internet on 23 December 2006, in which he goes so far as to compare the Muslim victims of Western domination to animals:

O my Muslim Ummah, you must choose between two choices: the first is to live on the margins of the New World Order and international law and under the control of the enemies of Islam, dishonoured, humiliated, plundered and occupied, with them meddling in your beliefs and true religion, sticking their noses in all your domestic and foreign affairs, and you living the life of a vassal, lowly, disgraced and defiled.

And the second choice is that you rely on your Lord, renew your Tawheed [worship of the one God], rise up with your true faith, follow the revealed religion of Allah, and stand with it in the face of the arrogant criminals, as your truthful and trustworthy Prophet (peace be upon him), his righteous companions, and his purified family (Allah was pleased with them all) stood in the face of the world, inviting, giving the good news, warning and performing Jihad in order that Allah's Word be made the highest and the word of the infidels the lowest. And there is no third choice.

The Crusaders and Jews will only be pleased with the Muslim Ummah if it is satisfied with vassalage, humiliation and repression. If, however, the Ummah sets about repelling the aggression which has been committed against it for centuries, it gets nothing but bombing, destruction, torture, occupation, abuse and infringement, because in that case it is not eligible for human rights, due to it being a species of animal which has attacked its Western masters.⁵

Not one militant has attributed his radicalization to any personal humiliation, whether arising out of foreign domination, racism, or discrimination of some other kind, although to do so would not compromise his motives in the least. On the contrary, these men explicitly reject such motives, which remain nevertheless the stock in trade of 'expert' analyses regarding their militancy. It is not their own humiliation but rather that of others that shames these men, whose acts are therefore committed out of pity for the plight of others. This is the same abstract and vicarious emotion that characterizes the actions of pacifists and human rights campaigners, and, as we have seen, Zawahiri himself attributes the humiliation of Muslims to being deprived of human rights. Taken together, these expressions of pity belong to the language of humanitarianism and therefore to humanity itself.

That such a language need not be non-violent is demonstrated by its common use in al-Qaeda suicide bombings as much as in the air strikes of humanitarian intervention. Arendt was perhaps the first to identify pity as an emotion born from the womb of humanity and characteristic of a violent humanitarianism in modern phenomena like revolutions. She argues that unlike charity in its Christian form, or compassion more generally, pity presupposes a vast gulf separating those who give and receive it, not least because it moves beyond the limited circle of people whom we know and applies itself to an abstract and unknowable humanity. Rather than choosing to share in the suffering of others, pity seeks to destroy this suffering, together with the unbearable shame it produces among its possessors, through revolutionary acts and other forms of violence (see Arendt 1990: 59-114).

Osama bin Laden is probably the most eloquent orator of Muslim humiliation today, his rhetoric setting the standard for militant expositions of shame more broadly. But for bin Laden, shame and humiliation are by no means the expression of Islam's defeat or oppression by the West, as has generally been assumed. Such an inference would indeed be an odd one to make about someone who glories in the wholesale martyrdom of Muslims. Whether death leads to the victory of the martyr's cause is neither here nor there, as far as his elevated status is concerned. In the case of the Prophet's grandson Husayn, who provides the archetype of Muslim martyrdom, victory was most emphatically not the outcome of his death. Or as bin Laden, referring to al-Qaeda's martyrs, puts it in a video broadcast by Al-Jazeera on 26 December 2001 (Lawrence 2005: 154): "No Muslim would ever possibly ask: what did they benefit? The fact is that they were killed—but this is total ignorance. They were victorious, with the blessings of God Almighty, and with the immortal heavens that God promised them. Victory is not material gain; it is about sticking to your principles."

If martyrdom represents a victory in its own right, one that transcends defeat on the political plane, then humiliation, too, becomes a category transcending politics. Osama bin Laden's sermons of shame have little if anything to do with the political, economic, or religious subordination of the Muslim world to the West. Instead, they address the duties of courage and sacrifice that Muslims neglect and whose absence can be seen in defeat and oppression. However, far from being negative phenomena, defeat and oppression are viewed positively, as heaven-sent opportunities to make humanity manifest. They serve as counterparts to the biblical trials imposed by God upon an Abraham or a Job.

Martyrdom, therefore, is noble not because it will result in the political, economic, or religious triumph of Islam so much as because it allows Muslims to exhibit the fundamentally human virtues of courage and sacrifice, thus doing their duty to represent humanity itself as a global agent rather than a victim. And while there might not seem to be much religious character in such a notion of martyrdom, its elevation in the rhetoric of militancy is so pronounced that the martyr becomes the very embodiment of religious truth, his physical body being mysteriously perfumed and incorruptible even as he assumes a spiritual presence in the dreams of his surviving companions. This coming together of the traditional virtues of martyrdom with modern conceptions of humanity is manifest in bin Laden's rhetoric, for example, in the following extract from his 2001 message to a gathering of Pakistani divines (Lawrence 2005: 96):

I write these lines to you at a time when even the blood of children and innocents has been deemed fair game, when the holy places of Islam have been violated in more than one place, under the supervision of the new world order and under the auspices of the United Nations, which has clearly become a tool with which the plans of global unbelief against Muslims are implemented. This is an organization that is overseeing with all its capabilities the annihilation and blockade of millions of Muslims under the sanctions, and yet still is not ashamed to talk about human rights!

In this passage, the link forged between Islam and modern conceptions of humanity is far from arbitrary. For one thing, Islam's victimization is seen as a properly global phenomenon and is put in the context of human rights violations. For another, the virtues of courage and sacrifice, as well as the aims of peace and security that militant acts such as suicide bombings supposedly uphold, are human in their generality and cannot be limited to Muslims. Indeed, specifically Islamic virtues like honoring the Prophet or attesting to the unity of God are remarkable by their absence from the rhetoric of martyrdom, although Muslim authorities are certainly invoked to support the sanctities of a wider humanity. But theological justifications apart, Islam has come to represent humanity by the sheer extent of its apparent victimization. Not only bin Laden and his acolytes but also the liberal or fundamentalist Muslims who oppose al-Qaeda need only count up the victims of global conflicts to obtain an overwhelmingly Muslim majority in countries including Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Somalia, and more. This reaffirms the importance of such lists to the narrative of militancy.

Whether it is accurate or not, such counting is in fact used to make the connection between Islam and the victimized humanity it has come to represent. It is as if the very size and dispersal of the Muslim *ummah* are enough to guarantee the stability of this connection, regardless of who is responsible for the victimization that brings Islam and humanity together. Strictly speaking, such causes are secondary to the identification of Muslims as human beings, although their seeming diversity poses a problem for militants, who must subsume them all under increasingly abstract labels such as the 'Crusader-Zionist axis'. The enemy of Islam and humanity, in other words, is a constantly morphing presence that can be joined or abandoned at will. For the moment, Israel and the United States account for two of this hydra's heads, but not so long ago the Soviet Union and Serbia were far more important. The main point is that this enemy's abstraction permits militants to move past politics and establish themselves in a moral arena proper to humanity. This is why Osama bin Laden, in his videotaped statement of 4 January 2004, regards jihad as something providential and not simply an unfortunate necessity (Lawrence 2005: 217): "This confrontation and conflict will go on because the conflict between right and falsehood will continue until Judgment Day. Such a confrontation is good for both the countries and peoples. God says: 'If God did not drive some back by means of others, the earth would be completely corrupt.'"

Similarly in a video posted on the Internet on 22 January 2007, Zawahiri welcomed President Bush's move to send some 20,000 additional troops to Iraq, even asking him to send the entire US army, so that it might vie with the militants in virtue as much as vice. Seen as part of a providential design, the battle between faith and infidelity makes these enemies into partners, both striving to exhibit the truth of their own cause and destroy its evil. But this means that there is nothing apocalyptic in their competition, since the task of either partner is only to demonstrate his virtue in the span of time given him by God. Neither the militant nor his enemy, in other words, can lengthen or shorten this apportioned time by his deeds; indeed, bin Laden, Zawahiri and

those they inspire appear to have no interest at all in millenarianism. The first words blazoned on Zawahiri's videotape, in English, are the following: "So send your entire army to be annihilated at the hands of the Mujahideen, to free the world from your evil and theirs."⁶

Militant acts serve to make humanity manifest by transmuting the shame of its negative existence into the pride of an identity obtained as if in some alchemical precipitation. Such an achievement is properly human because it has little to do with defeat or victory in a political sense, constituting rather the display of universal virtues by individuals and groups of all descriptions. The only victory on this battlefield is that of courage and the only defeat that of cowardice. To this end, an enemy is necessary while being at the same time quite incidental. In vogue with the dispersed networks of Sunni militancy, as well as among the hierarchies of Shiite radicalism, this conception of struggle differs markedly from the collective ideals that serve as traditional military goals. Whether fighting for his freedom, his country, or even his material interests, the conventional soldier anticipates a result whose attainment lies beyond his powers in an undefined future. Any self-realization that he achieves in battle never becomes part of the struggle and is relegated to his letters and anecdotes, his memories and his dreams.

The militant, however, fights for self-realization of the most immediate kind, one whose individuality is at the same time a realization of humanity itself. Such acts of militancy, moreover, reach out to humanize their enemy in the moment of violence, for only in this way can the humanity claimed by Islam fulfill its universal destiny. It is no longer the universality of conversion that militant Islam seeks, but an identification that puts everyone—Muslim and non-Muslim, friend and foe—in the quintessentially human position of global victim. This might seem a far-fetched argument to make, but it is borne out by the character of militant activity. For example, it is clear from Osama bin Laden's statements that he considers acts of terror necessary so that the West might experience the equivalent of Muslim suffering. But far from being a form of revenge, such equivalence is meant to permit both sets of victims to identify with and indeed speak to each other, as expressed in the following statement of bin Laden's, which was broadcast on Al-Jazeera on 12 November 2002 (Lawrence 2005: 175): "If it pains you to see your victims and your allies' victims in Tunisia, Karachi, Failaka, and Oman, then remember that our children are murdered daily in Palestine and Iraq. Remember our victims in the mosques of Khost, and the deliberate murder of our people at weddings in Afghanistan. If it pains you to see your victims in Moscow, then remember ours in Chechnya."

In statement after statement, al-Qaeda's soldiers describe their attacks as a 'language', in fact, as the only language that America or the West understands. In other words, these men define violence as a mode of conversation and persuasion, the common language they share with their enemies. Murder has therefore become a medium of exchange for Islam's global militants, representing in this way the intimate relationship between themselves and the infidel. However, its true purpose is pedagogical—to school these unbelievers in the forgotten language of ethics and principles, which is to say in the language of

humanity itself. This is how Ayman al-Zawahiri puts it in an interview released on the Internet on 11 September 2006: “The materialistic Crusader western civilization knows not the language of ethics and principles but understands the language of punishment and retribution. So, if they taste some of what they are inflicting on our women and children, then they will start giving up their arrogance, stubbornness, and greed and will seek to solve the problem between them and the Muslims.”⁷ The language of violence, then, belongs to the infidel as much as it does to the faithful, allowing one’s vice to compete with the other’s virtue in such a way as to bring the ethics and principles of humanity back to political life in the most spectacular of ways.

Blood Brothers

Osama bin Laden’s rhetoric has consistently voiced a desire for global equality, in this case, between Muslims and Christians, or between the Islamic world and the West. Having accused the United States of hypocrisy as far as its advancement of this equality is concerned, bin Laden has turned his attention to the only form in which he thinks such freedom is possible: the equality of death. This is why he has repeatedly emphasized the need for an equivalence of terror between the Muslim world and America, as if this is the only form in which the two might come together and even communicate with each other. For al-Qaeda, terror is the only form in which global freedom and equality are now available. It is therefore seen to function as the dark side of America’s own democracy, as inseparable from it as an evil twin. Equality demands that security should be enjoyed by all or by none. In the aftermath of the 2005 Madrid bombings, bin Laden issued a statement in which he defined terrorism as an effort to universalize security as a human right, if only by refusing to accept its monopolization by the West (Lawrence 2005: 234): “It is well known that security is a vital necessity for every human being. We will not let you monopolize it for yourselves.”

In all this, bin Laden has done nothing more than recognize the unity of a globe in which no man can be separated from any other: each must be held responsible for his fellows, with whose suffering he must identify. Such is the humanitarian logic that also characterizes global movements like environmentalism and pacifism. But for bin Laden, this unity is made manifest by violence, which builds a bridge between enemies by demonstrating that all men are equal if in death alone. It is as if this macabre equivalence has replaced the ideal of equality that is supposed to exist between people and unite them as part of a single humanity. The militants’ violence, then, ironically links the world together in a web of mutual obligation and responsibility. It is this web of universal complicity, after all, that allows American or British civilians to be killed in recompense for the killing of Muslims in Iraq.

The worldwide web of war spun by al-Qaeda exists as a kind of specter of our global inter-relatedness, one that has as yet no specific political form of its own. The militants’ obsessive demands for equal treatment within this world, even if it is only in the form of a reciprocity of violence, represent the

dark side of humanity's global brotherhood, whose reality is the product of our increasingly interconnected universe. But this means that the same web of responsibilities and obligations that links the holy war to its enemies also links them together as a community—even as a community of brothers. For are not al-Qaeda's victims said to be merely the counterparts of innocent Muslims killed elsewhere? The militants' victims are therefore in some perverse way brothers at one remove, made even more like brothers by dying alongside suicide bombers, their blood mingling.

In the global perspective adopted by militant Islam, the peoples of the world are bound together in a web of mutual relations and complicities. For the moment, this intimacy expresses itself in the most murderous way, although even here it represents what I have referred to as the dark side of another, more benign kind of relationship, like that of universal brotherhood. Indeed, al-Qaeda's actions and rhetoric continuously invoke the specter of a global community that has as yet no formal existence of its own, and this is what allows its war to draw upon the forms and even the vocabulary of other global movements such as environmental and pacifist ones, all of which are concerned with the fate of humanity as a whole. In his more ironical moments, Osama bin Laden takes this language of global community so far as to put al-Qaeda and its American enemy on the same side of their mutual war, saying in a 2004 video that the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq for power and profits contributed to the terror network's own aims (Lawrence 2005: 242): "To some analysts and diplomats, it seems as if we and the White House are on the same team shooting at the United States' own goal, despite our different intentions ... It truly shows that al-Qaeda has made gains, but on the other hand it also shows that the Bush administration has likewise profited."

I have been arguing that Islamic militants exhibit a perverse humanity by addressing their victims in the language of intimacy, reciprocity, and equivalence. That this is not a merely rhetorical gesture becomes evident when we consider that this militancy, unlike all previous forms of terrorist or insurgent action, refuses to set up an alternative utopia for itself, something that even anarchists are not immune to. Unlike the members of religious cults or fringe political groups, few of al-Qaeda's killers display signs of entering a closed ideological world by cutting themselves off from their families or everyday life. This suggests that the Islam they seek to defend is not conceived as an ideology at all, because it does not provide a complete or alternative vision of the world into which the would-be bomber can retreat as into a fortress. Thus, bin Laden defines his own militancy merely as the obverse of the violence he attributes to the West. His refusal to claim autonomy for jihad makes for a curious identity between Muslims and their enemies (Lawrence 2005: 234): "Since we have reacted in kind, your description of us as terrorists and of our actions as terrorism necessarily means that you and your actions must be defined likewise."

Apart from strictly operational agreements, there is little unity of doctrine among the militants, even between Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The religion they follow possesses no established tradition, being made up of fragments snatched from differing Islamic authorities.

There are at most very general patterns of thought that are neither codified nor propagated in any systematic way, so that instead of being recruited to a well-defined movement, the jihad's disparate soldiers franchise al-Qaeda's expertise and brand name for a variety of equally disparate causes that exist comfortably within the structures of everyday life. Rather than offering an alternative to the world as it exists, these militants would transform it by a kind of internal convulsion, bringing forth its latent humanity by their acts of sacrifice.

Earlier movements of resistance or terror had formulated critiques of existing politico-social conditions, such as capitalism or imperialism, and offered alternatives to them. This was the case with communists and anarchists as well as nationalists and fundamentalists. Like the more pacific global movements that are its peers, al-Qaeda offers no real criticism of existing conditions and promotes no alternative to take their place. Deprived of the political and ideological unity available to regional or national movements, these latter-day militants live scattered among their enemies, whom they accuse only of heedlessness and hypocrisy. Americans are accused not so much of believing in the wrong religion or ideology, but of being heedless and hypocritical about the beliefs they do hold. Global movements like al-Qaeda do not seek an alternative to America but rather the fulfillment of America's promise of freedom for all. Indeed, by dying alongside their victims, Islam's militants demonstrate that they exist in the same world as the latter and are members of the same humanity.

Murder Most Equivocal

Militant rhetoric is marked most forcefully by the logic of equivalence: you kill our civilians, so we kill yours; because we suffer, so must you. This logic is so rigorous that it turns equivalence into the touchstone of humanity itself. Yet the logic of equivalence comes apart at its rhetorical heart—the suicide bombing, otherwise known as a martyrdom operation. The propagandistic power of a suicide bombing, its heroism as much as its horror, derives from the fact that the killer is willing to die alongside his victims. I have already pointed out the relations of intimacy and reciprocity that this willingness creates between militants and their enemies, although it is increasingly obvious that the suicidal portion of the bombing is not equivalent to its murderous part. The militant's sacrifice, in other words, carries so much of the bombing's power that his victim's death is reduced to relative insignificance. It is this breakdown in the logic of terrorist equivalence that I want to explore, because I think it represents a shift from a statistical to an existential conception of humanity.

Gandhi's name is not one to be uttered alongside that of Osama bin Laden, although he, too, spoke of the necessity of bloody sacrifice in the cause of justice. In doing so, the Mahatma was, in the early days of his career, responding to the Indian terrorists whose arguments, as he recounted them, bear a remarkable similarity to those that 'experts' of all kinds attribute to the jihad movements of our own time: "At first, we will assassinate a few Englishmen and strike terror; then, a few men who will have been armed will fight openly. We

may have to lose a quarter of a million men, more or less, but we will regain our land. We will undertake guerrilla warfare, and defeat the English” (Gandhi 1997: 77). To this political argument Gandhi offers the following religious response, which to my mind is far closer to the response that suicide bombing offers us today: “That is to say, you want to make the holy land of India unholy. Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassination? What we need to do is to kill ourselves” (ibid.).

If the Mahatma so frequently advocated killing oneself for a just cause, this was not because he thought it an effective and ethical way of achieving some end, but rather because sacrificing one’s life could not in fact be an instrumental act and was thus thrown back upon itself to become not so much a means as an end unto itself. Choosing death therefore transformed political acts into religious ones by demonstrating their unworldly and disinterested nature. Gandhi was quite clear that the terrorists of his day partook of sacrifice in its religious form, although they did so in a perverted way. Referring to one such suicidal assassin, Gandhi (1997: 78) wrote: “Dhingra was a patriot, but his love was blind. He gave his body in a wrong way; its ultimate result can only be mischievous.”

By the time that Gandhi’s non-violence movement had achieved maturity, the mutual violence between Indians had far outstripped their combined violence against the British. But this made the Mahatma only more determined on the matter of sacrifice. Although he did not advocate the killing even of noisome insects, he was willing to countenance the voluntary sacrifice of a million human lives for righteous ends. Indeed, toward the end of his own life, Gandhi longed for as many such Hindu and Muslim deaths as possible, so that these rival communities might cement their unity in blood. As it turns out, Gandhi, who was assassinated by a Hindu militant, ended up shedding his own blood to mix the cement of this unity.

Gandhi’s ideas of sacrifice, therefore, were meant to retrieve another sense of the human from the idea of humanity that informed terrorist as much as humanitarian acts. After all, it was no accident that the Mahatma’s assassin, Nathuram Godse (1998), described his own act of violence as a ‘humanitarian’ one, since he had already identified Hinduism with a statistical conception of humanity well before Islam came to occupy its place: “For, is it not true that to secure the freedom and to safeguard the just interests of some thirty crores [three hundred million] of Hindus constituted the freedom and the well-being of one-fifth of [the] human race?” (ibid.: 26).

Faced with the increasingly murderous enmity between Hindus and Muslims in India in the 1940s, the Mahatma determined to transform this violence, not by futile pleas for harmony, but by turning it inward in acts of sacrifice that would invite, if not compel, a different kind of response from those spoiling for a fight. The purpose of this sacrifice, which Gandhi had also used against the British rulers of India, was to lay claim to the noblest of human virtues, such as courage and fearlessness, and so provoke the collapse or conversion of those who were bent on violence. All this was to be achieved not by prating about non-existent ideals, but instead by separating the already existing

practice of sacrifice from that of murder, emphasizing it to such a degree that the courage and fearlessness of sacrifice would become ends in their own right. If the Mahatma's extraordinary career demonstrated the truth of his methods, however temporary or partial it might have been, the amplification of a language of martyrdom and sacrifice in militant Islam suggests that such a truth is yet possible.

It is not difficult to imagine a suicide bombing—for instance, against infrastructure such as buildings or transport networks—that does not kill anyone other than the militant himself. Indeed, a great many attacks aim precisely at this kind of infrastructure and the people associated with it, so that it is unclear which of the two is considered the primary target. While such a Gandhian act of sacrifice might seem inconceivable among the members of movements like al-Qaeda, it is certainly true that the victim is becoming more and more a symbolic presence in the practice of militancy. After all, suicide bombers generally do not choose to detonate themselves in places where they are likely to kill the most people—places that are in fact easier to infiltrate and operate within than many of their usual targets. Why choose difficult targets like aircraft, with their limited number of passengers, instead of easily accessible markets, as terrorists dedicated to old-fashioned political causes like nationalism have been doing for decades now?

As if mimicking the symbolic character of such terrorism, the new measures of security adopted by counter-terrorism are equally symbolic in nature, although no doubt for very different reasons. As an example, we can look at the ruinously costly, disruptive, and, it must be added from the anecdotal evidence I have gathered, ineffectual security measures that were put into place at British airports following the discovery of an alleged plot to blow up transatlantic airliners in July 2006. These checks and restrictions were not matched by anything even remotely similar on trains or buses, despite the fact that the only successful Islamic attacks in Britain had in fact occurred on ground transportation. That such blanket security was obviously impossible meant that the measures taken at airports were all the more symbolic, and even these were so unsustainable that they soon had to be relaxed. Perhaps, inevitably, the would-be intentions of both terrorist and counter-terrorist acts have become incidental to the complex economy of global speculation and risk management in which states, companies, and individuals are all involved, and in which image is often more important than substance.

The highly symbolic character of terrorist attacks is coupled with the fact that suicide bombings in places like Afghanistan seem to be targeting ever-smaller numbers of people when they might kill many more. This is true even of attacks like those of 2005 in London, when one of the bombers blew up a bus sitting on its upper deck and in the back, as if to minimize casualties. While this is most unlikely to have been his intention, this militant, like his colleagues elsewhere, appears to have discounted the logic of equivalence that would make the number of victims into the most important consideration of his attack. It is as if these victims were important only to showcase the enormity of the militant's sacrifice, his narcissism thus being concealed in the quest

for a common humanity. Of course, the attention militants pay to symbolic targets is not itself symbolic; rather, it is calculated to produce very precise effects, although I argue that the taking of lives is becoming incidental among these.

Earlier forms of terrorism, such as hijacking, hostage taking, and assassination, were concerned with threats to life in particular, while its more recent forms, like suicide bombing, are fixated on the infrastructure that makes life in general possible. For humanity becomes manifest in a form such as a crowd or a people, a mass or a nation, in the public spaces and conveyances made possible by infrastructure. The people attacked in such places, after all, are victimized as anonymous human beings rather than as the adherents of a particular religion, the residents of a particular neighborhood, or even the citizens of a particular state. Commuters are attacked because they provide a statistically random sample of humanity, and trains are targeted because they do not belong to any locality but are quite literally the vehicles of this humanity.

Violence against infrastructure thus targets life in the abstract, its victims having lost the capacity to become personalities both in their own right and as the individual representatives of particular nations or religious groups, quite unlike the hostages of old. Indeed, militants and their victims seem even to have changed places, with the latter drifting into generic anonymity while the former achieve a posthumous celebrity as victims of their own devising. Of course, the two forms of terror I have been describing do not always occur in isolation from one other, but if anything, their mixture tells us that there has been a sea change not only in the organization, methods, and motives of terrorism, but in its existential dimension as well.

The Infrastructure of Humanity

What does it mean to attack infrastructure? Apart from the rationality of such attacks, which we are told are meant to cause the maximum amount of death, injury, panic, cost, and disruption, they possess an existential dimension that is independent of terrorist intentions. These intentions are the least obvious factors of such attacks, since terrorists are not constituted to profit from the disruption and injury they cause in any military, economic, or even political sense. In addition, attacks on the al-Qaeda model offer support only to the most global of political demands and none at all to political parties with which governments can negotiate. This older model of terrorist politics, which had characterized groups like the PLO and the IRA, has been replaced by one in which it is no longer necessary even to claim responsibility for attacks. At most, such attacks participate in political life by creating panic, thus forcing some very general and often unpredictable reaction from citizens and their governments, of which the terrorists can take little or no advantage.

But to create panic, militants need not attack infrastructure as if it were a military or economic target; they might succeed far more by attacking private quarters instead. After all, what could be more panic-inducing than the random and practically uncontrollable targeting of domestic spaces? Is this not in fact

what traditionally organized armies and militias do all the time? It is even possible to say that the exercise of force by legitimate armies, as well as by their illegitimate copies, is increasingly being extended to private life, while terrorism quite irrationally confines itself to the public spaces created by infrastructure. In this regard, terrorism appears to sanctify private spaces and reinforce domestic life as zones of security and comfort.

Maybe terrorists are attacking the idea of the public, of a people, even of the humanity they represent. Certainly, the economic and other costs incurred by attacks on infrastructure are of little or no profit to these militants, being as abstract in this respect as the idea of humanity, although far less significant. Whatever their motives, the men who target infrastructure must, out of necessity, perceive and approach their victims in a particular way. The anthropologist Vyjayanthi Rao (2007: 567–592) has explored the particularity of such terror in a fine essay on the militant practice of multiple bombings in the city of Mumbai. Distinguishing the novelty of such attacks from the old-fashioned religious riot, which emerged out of local conditions and disputes to spread across the city, Rao points out that the serial bombing of Mumbai's infrastructure targets the city in its entirety to redress grievances that are themselves global and abstract. There exists therefore no locality of grievance or epicenter of violence in Mumbai's serial blasts, of which there have been three instances since 1993.

In order to attack infrastructure like railway stations, commuter trains, road transport systems, stock markets, airline offices, and hotels, a targeted city must be seen as urban planners and military tacticians see it, which is to say from above and in the abstract form of a map. In such a view, and from such a height, the people who are meant to use this infrastructure, or be attacked within it, can be seen only as a set of statistics, certainly not as individual victims. Setting off multiple and simultaneous blasts across the city, moreover, replaces the time by which individuals live, as well as the time it takes for them to move from place to place, with the abstract and synchronous time by which urban or military planning operates. In other words, attacks on transportation networks, like those of Mumbai in 2006, London in 2005, or Madrid in 2004, are conducted according to the very procedures that permit such infrastructure to function in the first place. Whether or not they were carried out by suicide bombers, then, such attacks can be seen as 'suicidal' because infrastructure is being destroyed by its own hand.

The fact that terrorists who attack infrastructure must adopt the very procedures by which it operates provides yet another example of the intimacy that is entailed in such violence. Like the suicide bomber who dies alongside his victims and, by sharing blood with them, brings to light a common humanity, if only in death, the bomber who attacks infrastructure discovers a kind of humanity in its destruction, too. Indeed, his violence seems to break through the generic and statistical definition of humanity that infrastructure makes possible, in the form of passengers or pedestrians, to reach the human being inside. By destroying infrastructure, the militant brings to a halt its task of constituting humanity as mass or volume, as the infinite flow of numbers eternally

in motion, as a people, nation, or public displaying itself in the streets, trains, and cinema halls of a city.

Of course, the destruction of infrastructure does not cease to produce life in the abstract—in this case, the statistics of those who have been killed and injured—but it obviates the kind of humanity made possible by road, rail, or recreation. The dead and injured are no longer manifestations of a people or a nation because they are no longer a crowd of passengers, pedestrians, or onlookers. In fact, terrorism's temporary suspension of humanity, at least in its public and collective forms, leaves private persons as its only survivors. And while we cannot attribute to terrorists the aim of retrieving a more authentic humanity from the masses and volumes that infrastructure makes of people, their inadvertent achievement of this end is not without its irony. Gandhi, for example, had attacked modern infrastructure, and the railways in particular, precisely because it brought into being a new kind of humanity that he considered false and malign.

Railways have provided the infrastructure of an abstract humanity for much of India's modern history. From the well-known story of Gandhi being subjected to racial attack and thrown off a moving train in South Africa to the many accounts of trains arriving in Pakistan or India with all their passengers massacred during the Subcontinent's partition in 1947, railways have made possible the abstraction of people into Indians and Pakistanis or Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. In 2002, for example, the setting alight of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims led to large-scale massacres of Muslims in the state of Gujarat, and in 2007 a Pakistan-bound train, this time filled with Muslims, was set alight in a very similar way, killing some 66 passengers. The train massacre has therefore become a stereotyped way of mobilizing masses and volumes of people. Although he wrote before the train massacres of 1947, the Mahatma nevertheless began his excoriation against railways by pointing out the inhuman implications of infrastructure (Gandhi 1997: 47):

It must be manifest to you that, but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have. The railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague. Without them, the masses could not move from place to place. They are the carriers of plague germs. Formerly we had natural segregation. Railways have also increased the frequency of famines, because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain, and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless, and so the pressure of famine increases. They accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy. Formerly, people went to these places with very great difficulty. Generally, therefore, only the real devotees visited such places. Nowadays, rogues visit them in order to practise their roguery.

To the argument that infrastructure can promote good as much as it does evil, Gandhi (1997: 47–48) responded in the following way:

Good travels at a snail's pace—it can, therefore, have little to do with the railways. Those who want to do good are not selfish, they are not in a hurry, they

know that to impregnate people with good requires a long time. But evil has wings. To build a house takes time. Its destruction takes none. So the railways can become a distributing agency for the evil one only. It may be a debatable matter whether railways spread famines, but it is beyond dispute that they propagate evil.

As for the statistical forms of humanity and of humanitarianism that infrastructure makes possible, they met only with criticism from the apostle of non-violence (*ibid.*: 51):

I am so constructed that I can only serve my immediate neighbours, but, in my conceit, I pretend to have discovered that I must with my body serve every individual in the Universe. In thus attempting the impossible, man comes in contact with different natures, different religions, and is utterly confounded. According to this reasoning, it must be apparent to you that railways are a most dangerous institution.

Gandhi took a dim view even of the sense of national, and we might today also say global, unity that is the product of modern infrastructure, claiming that it sought to smooth out differences that were of its own creation (*ibid.*: 49):

Only you and I and others who consider ourselves civilised and superior persons imagine that we are many nations. It was after the advent of railways that we began to believe in distinctions, and you are at liberty now to say that it is through the railways that we are beginning to abolish those distinctions. An opium-eater may argue the advantage of opium-eating from the fact that he began to understand the evil of the opium habit after having eaten it.

One need neither be a Luddite, nor favor retreating into a commune, to recognize a certain justice in Gandhi's arguments. If I have dwelt on them at length, it is to show that the use made of infrastructure has unintended consequences for the idea as well as the experience of humanity. The Mahatma's homespun philosophy, moreover, tells us how such consequences can be made available for popular thought as much as action. Without betraying any consciousness of this philosophy, militant attacks on infrastructure nevertheless bring about a Gandhian resolution to the problem posed by an abstract humanity. It goes without saying that such a resolution is far from non-violent and would not have met with the Mahatma's approval, but it is also evident that these attacks participate in his enterprise of reducing an abstract humanity to a multiplicity of concrete individuals.

In a suicide bombing, an abstracted humanity is destroyed at the same time as the infrastructure that makes it possible. It is the very form of this humanity that commits suicide in the blast, which joins terrorists and victims in a death from which only individuals can escape. The militant desire to fulfill the promises of a statistical humanity by making the whole world responsible for Muslim suffering, as well as by turning the equality of life into the equivalence of death, ends in the production of its opposite. After all, the martyr produced

by the suicide bombing is human precisely in his non-equivalence. This is so because his humanity no longer resides in biology or jurisprudence, but rather in the virtues of courage and sacrifice that he manifests, existential virtues whose production completely overpowers the statistical logic of equivalence that the militant had initially espoused.

These are the very virtues that Gandhi himself lauded, especially in the traditional figure of the soldier, who, unlike the doctors and lawyers whom the Mahatma famously castigated, was unable to turn his vocation into an instrumental quest for money and power because he was obliged to risk his life in its prosecution. Doctors and lawyers, who stood behind the biological and juridical definitions of humanity, in fact deprived their clients of humanity as an existential fact by assuming control over it in a purely technical way. So while he did not of course approve of war, Gandhi saw soldiering as one of the few professions in which virtues like courage, honor, and sacrifice had managed to survive for their own sake, and this because it put the individual's life at risk. These very virtues also make the militant human, if only posthumously, which is to say only when he has dispensed with the physical and juridical body that had once tied him to the statistical form of humanity characteristic of humanitarianism and human rights.

Faisal Devji holds the position of Reader in Modern South Asian History at Oxford University. He has held faculty positions at the New School, Yale, and the University of Chicago, where he received his PhD in Intellectual History. His specific interests include the political thought of modern Islam as well as the transformation of liberal categories and democratic practices in South Asia. His broader concerns are with ethics and violence in a globalized world. He is the author of *Landscapes of the Jihad* (2005) and *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* (2008).

Notes

1. "Al-Zawahiri Calls on Muslims to Wage 'War of Jihad', Reject UN Resolutions," United States Central Command, <http://www.centcom.mil/> (site accessed in 2008).
2. "Al-Qaeda Operative Adam Gadahn, aka 'Azzam the American': 'The Truth of Islam is Sweeping Across America and Constitutes a Fearsome Challenge to the Security, Identity, and Survival of the Crusader State [America]'; Time is Running Out to Convert to Islam," Middle East Media Research Institute special dispatch series, no. 1281, 6 September 2006, <http://memri.org/bin/opener.cgi?Page=archives&ID=SP128106> (accessed in 2008).
3. For the religious pluralism of these militants, see Devji (2005).
4. "Al-Zawahiri Urges Pakistan Quake Aid," *Al-Jazeera.net*, 23 October 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/archive/2005/10/200841014315693538.html> (accessed in 2008).
5. "Website Posts Latest Video of Al-Zawahiri, English Text," United States Central Command, <http://www.centcom.mil/> (site accessed in 2008).

6. "Al-Zawahiri Video on Bush's Iraq Security Plan," United States Central Command, <http://www.centcom.mil/> (site accessed in 2008).
7. "Al-Zawahiri Calls on Muslims to Wage 'War of Jihad', Reject UN Resolutions," United States Central Command, <http://www.centcom.mil/> (site accessed in 2008).

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