



A Battle for Global Values

By Tony Blair

From *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2007

Summary: The war on terrorism is not just about security or military tactics. It is a battle of values, and one that can only be won by the triumph of tolerance and liberty. Afghanistan and Iraq have been the necessary starting points of this battle. Success there, however, must be coupled with a bolder, more consistent, and more thorough application of global values, with Washington leading the way.

Tony Blair is Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

THE ROOTS OF EXTREMISM

Our response to the September 11 attacks has proved even more momentous than it seemed at the time. That is because we could have chosen security as the battleground. But we did not. We chose values. We said that we did not want another Taliban or a different Saddam Hussein. We knew that you cannot defeat a fanatical ideology just by imprisoning or killing its leaders; you have to defeat its ideas.

In my view, the situation we face is indeed war, but of a completely unconventional kind, one that cannot be won in a conventional way. We will not win the battle against global extremism unless we win it at the level of values as much as that of force. We can win only by showing that our values are stronger, better, and more just than the alternative. That also means showing the world that we are evenhanded and fair in our application of those values. We will never get real support for the tough actions that may well be essential to safeguarding our way of life unless we also attack global poverty, environmental degradation, and injustice with equal vigor.

The roots of the current wave of global terrorism and extremism are deep. They reach down through decades of alienation, victimhood, and political oppression in the Arab and Muslim world. Yet such terrorism is not and never has been inevitable.

To me, the most remarkable thing about the Koran is how progressive it is. I write with great humility as a member of another faith. As an outsider, the Koran strikes me as a reforming book, trying to return Judaism and Christianity to their origins, much as reformers attempted to do with the Christian church centuries later. The Koran is inclusive. It extols science and knowledge and abhors superstition. It is practical and far ahead of its time in attitudes toward marriage, women, and governance.

Under its guidance, the spread of Islam and its dominance over previously Christian or pagan lands were breathtaking. Over centuries, Islam founded an empire and led the world in discovery, art, and culture. The standard-bearers of tolerance in the early Middle Ages were far more likely to be found in Muslim lands than in Christian ones.

But by the early twentieth century, after the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment had swept over the Western world, the Muslim and Arab world was uncertain, insecure, and on the defensive. Some Muslim countries, such as Turkey, made a muscular move toward secularism. Others found themselves caught up in colonization, nascent nationalism, political oppression, and religious radicalism. Muslims began to see the sorry state of Muslim countries as symptomatic of the sorry state of Islam. Political radicals became religious radicals and vice versa.

Those in power tried to accommodate this Islamic radicalism by incorporating some of its leaders and some of its ideology. The result was nearly always disastrous. Religious radicalism was made respectable and political radicalism suppressed, and so in the minds of many, the two came together to represent the need for change. They began to think that the way to restore the confidence and stability of Islam was through a combination of religious extremism and populist politics, with the enemies becoming "the West" and those Islamic leaders who cooperated with it.

This extremism may have started with religious doctrine and thought. But soon, in offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood,

supported by Wahhabi extremists and disseminated in some of the madrasahs of the Middle East and Asia, an ideology was born and exported around the world.

On 9/11, 3,000 people were murdered. But this terrorism did not begin on the streets of New York. Many more had already died, not just in acts of terrorism against Western interests but in political insurrection and turmoil around the world. Its victims are to be found in the recent history of many lands: India, Indonesia, Kenya, Libya, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and countless more. More than 100,000 died in Algeria. In Chechnya and Kashmir, political causes that could have been resolved became brutally incapable of resolution under the pressure of terrorism. Today, in 30 or 40 countries, terrorists are plotting action loosely linked with this ideology. Although the active cadres of terrorists are relatively small, they exploit a far wider sense of alienation in the Arab and Muslim world.

These acts of terrorism were not isolated incidents. They were part of a growing movement -- a movement that believed Muslims had departed from their proper faith, were being taken over by Western culture, and were being governed treacherously by Muslims complicit in this takeover (as opposed to those who could see that the way to recover not just the true faith but also Muslim confidence and self-esteem was to take on the West and all its works).

The struggle against terrorism in Madrid, or London, or Paris is the same as the struggle against the terrorist acts of Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories, or rejectionist groups in Iraq. The murder of the innocent in Beslan is part of the same ideology that takes innocent lives in Libya, Saudi Arabia, or Yemen. And when Iran gives support to such terrorism, it becomes part of the same battle, with the same ideology at its heart.

Sometimes political strategy comes deliberately, sometimes by instinct. For this movement, it probably came by instinct. It has an ideology, a worldview, deep convictions, and the determination of fanaticism. It resembles, in many ways, early revolutionary communism. It does not always need structures and command centers or even explicit communication. It knows what it thinks.

In the late 1990s, the movement's strategy became clear. If it was merely fighting within Islam, it ran the risk that fellow Muslims -- being as decent and as fair-minded as anyone else -- would choose to reject its fanaticism. A battle about Islam was just Muslim versus Muslim. The extremists realized that they had to create a completely different battle: Muslims versus the West.

That is what the September 11 attacks did. I am still amazed at how many people say, in effect, that there is terrorism today because of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. They seem to forget entirely that 9/11 predated both. The West did not attack this movement. It was attacked.

THE NATURE OF THE STRUGGLE

For this ideology, we are the enemy. But "we" are not the West. "We" are as much Muslim as Christian, Jew, or Hindu. "We" are all those who believe in religious tolerance, in openness to others, in democracy, in liberty, and in human rights administered by secular courts.

This is not a clash between civilizations; it is a clash about civilization. It is the age-old battle between progress and reaction, between those who embrace the modern world and those who reject its existence -- between optimism and hope, on the one hand, and pessimism and fear, on the other.

In any struggle, the first challenge is to accurately perceive the nature of what is being fought over, and here we have a long way to go. It is almost incredible to me that so much Western opinion appears to buy the idea that the emergence of this global terrorism is somehow our fault.

For a start, the terror is truly global. It is directed not just at the United States and its allies but also at nations who could not conceivably be said to be partners of the West.

Moreover, the struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan are plainly not about those countries' liberation from U.S. occupation. The extremists' goal is to prevent those countries from becoming democracies -- not "Western-style" democracies but any sort of democracy. It is the extremists, not us, who are slaughtering the innocent and doing it deliberately. They are the only reason for the continuing presence of our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is also rubbish to suggest that Islamist terrorism is the product of poverty. Of course, it uses the cause of poverty as a justification for its acts. But its fanatics are hardly champions of economic development.

Furthermore, the terrorists' aim is not to encourage the creation of a Palestine living side by side with Israel but rather to prevent it. They fight not for the coming into being of a Palestinian state but for the going out of being of an Israeli state.

The terrorists base their ideology on religious extremism -- and not just any religious extremism, but a specifically Muslim version. The terrorists do not want Muslim countries to modernize. They hope that the arc of extremism that now stretches across the region will sweep away the fledgling but faltering steps modern Islam wants to take into the future. They want the Muslim world to retreat into governance by a semifeudal religious oligarchy.

Yet despite all of this, which I consider fairly obvious, many in Western countries listen to the propaganda of the extremists and accept it. (And to give credit where it is due, the extremists play our own media with a shrewdness that would be the envy of many a political party.) They look at the bloodshed in Iraq and say it is a reason for leaving. Every act of carnage somehow serves to indicate our responsibility for the disorder rather than the wickedness of those who caused it. Many believe that what was done in Iraq in 2003 was so wrong that they are reluctant to accept what is plainly right now.

Some people believe that terrorist attacks are caused entirely by the West's suppression of Muslims. Some people seriously believe that if we only got out of Iraq and Afghanistan, the attacks would stop. And, in some ways most perniciously, many look at Israel and think we pay too great a price for supporting it and sympathize with those who condemn it.

If we recognized this struggle for what it truly is, we would at least be on the first steps of the path to winning it. But a vast part of Western opinion is not remotely near this point yet.

This ideology has to be taken on -- and taken on everywhere. Islamist terrorism will not be defeated until we confront not just the methods of the extremists but also their ideas. I do not mean just telling them that terrorist activity is wrong. I mean telling them that their attitude toward the United States is absurd, that their concept of governance is prefeudal, that their positions on women and other faiths are reactionary. We must reject not just their barbaric acts but also their false sense of grievance against the West, their attempt to persuade us that it is others and not they themselves who are responsible for their violence.

In the era of globalization, the outcome of this clash between extremism and progress will determine our future. We can no more opt out of this struggle than we can opt out of the climate changing around us. Inaction -- pushing the responsibility onto the United States alone or deluding ourselves that this terrorism is a series of individual isolated incidents rather than a global movement -- would be profoundly and fundamentally wrong.

TWO FRONTS

That is why it is a mistake to ignore the significance of the elections in Iraq and Afghanistan. The fact is that, given the chance, people want democracy. From the moment the Afghans came out and voted in their first-ever election, the myth that democracy is a Western concept was exploded. In Iraq as well, despite violence and intimidation, people voted, and not just a few, but in numbers large enough to shame many Western democracies.

What these votes show is that people do not want dictatorship, neither theocratic nor secular. When the supporters of Saddam or Mullah Muhammad Omar dare to stand in elections, they do not win many votes. Iraqi and Afghan Muslims have said it clearly: democracy is as much our right as it is yours. In embracing it, they are showing that they also want a society in which people of different cultures and faiths can live together in peace. This struggle is our struggle.

Who is trying to stop those who want democracy? In Iraq, a mixture of foreign jihadists, former Saddamists, and rejectionist insurgents; in Afghanistan, a combination of drug barons, the Taliban, and al Qaeda. Their case is that democracy is a Western concept that is being forced on an unwilling Islamic culture. Every conspiracy theory, from its being the West's intent to seize Iraqi oil to the West's having designs of imperial domination, is repeated. Some in the West even agree.

Why are these reactionary elements fighting so hard? Because they know the importance of victory or defeat. Right from the beginning it was obvious to them. Of course, there have been mistakes and unacceptable abuses of human rights on our side. But here in its most pure form is a struggle between democracy and violence.

For sure, it is arguable that de-Baathification went too quickly and was spread too indiscriminately, especially among the armed forces. It is easy to forget, however, that the real worry back in 2003 was a humanitarian crisis, which was avoided, and that the pressure at the time was to de-Baathify faster.

But the basic problem, from the murder of UN staff in August 2003 onward, has been simple: security. The reactionary elements have tried to derail both reconstruction and democracy by violence. Power and electricity became problems not through indolence on the part of either Iraqis or the coalition forces but through sabotage. People became frightened because of terrorism and criminal gangs, some of which had been deliberately released from prison by Saddam just before his fall.

These were not random acts. They were and are part of a strategy. When that strategy failed to push the coalition out of Iraq prematurely, when it failed to stop the voting, the extremists turned to sectarian killing and outrage -- most notably the savage and blasphemous destruction of the Shiite shrine in Samarra.

The extremists know that if they can succeed -- in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, or any other nation desiring to go the democratic route -- then the prospect of a democratic future for the Arab and Muslim world will be dealt a potentially mortal blow. Likewise, if these countries become democracies and make progress, that will be a powerful blow against both the extremists' propaganda about the West and their whole system of values.

In each case, the forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other nations are there to help indigenous security forces grow, support the democratic process, and provide a bulwark against the terrorism that threatens that process. In each case, full UN authority is in place.

The debate over the wisdom of the original decisions, especially about Iraq, will continue. Opponents will say that Iraq was never a threat, that there were no weapons of mass destruction, that the drug trade in Afghanistan continues. I will point out that Iraq was indeed a threat, as two regional wars, 14 UN resolutions, and the final report of the Iraq Survey Group showed. I will remind people that in the aftermath of the Iraq war, we secured major advances in tackling the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, not least a new relationship with Libya and the shutting down of A. Q. Khan's nuclear weapons network. I will recall that it was the Taliban who manipulated the drug trade and housed al Qaeda and its training camps.

But whatever the conclusion to this debate, if there is one, the fact is that now, whatever the rights and wrongs of how and why Saddam and the Taliban were removed, there is an obvious, clear, and overwhelming reason for supporting the people of those countries in their desire for democracy. Since June 2003, multinational forces have been in Iraq under a UN resolution and with the authority of Iraq's first-ever elected government. In Afghanistan, UN authority has been in place throughout.

The crucial point about these interventions is that they were not just about changing regimes but about changing the value systems governing the nations concerned. The banner was not actually "regime change"; it was "values change." That is why I have said that what has been done, by intervening in this way, may be even more momentous than was appreciated at the time. The painful irony is that the extremists have a clearer sense of what is at stake than many people in the West do.

THE BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

This is ultimately a battle about modernity. Some of it can be conducted and won only within Islam itself. But let us remember that extremism is not the true voice of Islam. Millions of Muslims the world over want what all people want: to be free and for others to be free. They regard tolerance as a virtue and respect for the faith of others as a part of their own faith.

This is a battle of values and for progress, and therefore it is one that must be won. If we want to secure our way of life, there is no alternative but to fight for it. That means standing up for our values, not just in our own countries but the world over. We need to construct a global alliance for these global values and act through it. Inactivity is just as much a policy, with its own results. It is simply the wrong one.

Islamist extremism's whole strategy is based on a presumed sense of grievance that divides people against one another. Our answer has to be a set of values strong enough to unite people with one another. This is not just about security or military tactics. It is about hearts and minds, about inspiring people, persuading them, showing them what our values stand for at their best. Why are we not yet succeeding? Because we are not being bold enough, consistent enough, thorough enough in fighting for the values we believe in.

Simply to state it in these terms is to underline how much has to be done. Convincing Western publics of the nature of the battle is hard enough. But we then have to empower modern, moderate, mainstream forces in the Islamic world to defeat their reactionary opponents.

We have to show that our values are not Western, still less American or Anglo-Saxon, but values in the common ownership of humanity, universal values that should be the right of the global citizen.

Ranged against us are people who truly hate us. But beyond them are many more who do not hate us but do question our motives, good faith, and evenhandedness. These are people who could support our values but who believe we ourselves support them only selectively. These are the people we must persuade. They have to know this is about justice and fairness as well as security and prosperity.

That is why on a whole range of critical issues, we face not just powerful questions about our national interests but also vital tests of our commitment to global values. If we believe in justice, how can we let 30,000 children a day die when those deaths could be prevented? If we believe in our responsibility to the generations that come after us, how can we be indifferent to the degradation of the planet? How can we have a global trading system based on unfair trade? How can we bring peace to the Middle East unless we resolve the question of Israel and Palestine?

Wherever people live in fear, with no prospect of advance, we should be on their side, in solidarity with them, whether in Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, or Zimbabwe. Wherever countries are in the process of democratic development, we should extend a helping hand.

This requires, across the board, an active foreign policy of engagement, not isolation. And it cannot be achieved without a strong alliance, with the United States and Europe at its core. The necessary alliance does not end there, but it does begin there.

Let me be quite plain here. I do not always agree with the United States. Sometimes it can be a difficult friend to have. But the strain of anti-American feeling in parts of Europe is madness when set against the long-term interests of the world we believe in. The danger with the United States today is not that it is too involved in the world. The danger is that it might pull up the drawbridge and disengage. The world needs it involved. The world wants it engaged. The reality is that none of the problems that press in on us can be resolved or even approached without it.

BEYOND SECURITY

The challenge now is to ensure that the agenda is not limited to security alone. There is a danger of a division of global politics into "hard" and "soft," with the "hard" efforts going after the terrorists, whereas the "soft" campaign focuses on poverty and injustice. That divide is dangerous because interdependence makes all these issues just that: interdependent. The answer to terrorism is the universal application of global values; the answer to poverty and injustice is the same. That is why the struggle for global values has to be applied not selectively but to the whole global agenda.

We need to reenergize the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians -- and we need to do so in a dramatic and profound manner. Its significance for the broader issue of the Middle East and for the battle within Islam goes beyond correcting the plight of the Palestinians. A settlement would be the living, visible proof that the region and the world can accommodate different faiths and cultures. It would not only silence reactionary Islam's most effective rallying call but fatally undermine its basic ideology.

We must combat the ravages of poverty, famine, disease, and conflict, particularly in Africa, increasing our aid still further and stepping up our activity. Before the United Kingdom's presidency of the G-8, the group of leading industrial powers, in 2005, the issues of Africa and climate change were not high on the political agenda in London, let alone internationally. Now they are. This is due in no small part to the efforts of millions of people energized by the Make Poverty History campaign and Live 8, which played an extraordinary part in mobilizing civil society. But just because the issues are at the top of the agenda now does not mean that they cannot easily slip down again.

We must ensure that they do not. We must continue to mobilize the resources and the will to turn the commitments of 2005 into action. I have seen that if there is real commitment by African governments to progress, then the people of Africa are quite capable of doing the rest. Which is why, no matter how desperate the situation looks or how insurmountable the obstacles appear, we have to maintain optimism that progress is indeed possible.

We need to jump-start talks on trade. At stake, obviously, is our commitment to fighting world poverty and supporting development. But also in the balance is the very idea of using multilateral action to achieve common goals. If we cannot conduct a decent trade round, when it is so plain that our long-term national interests and the wider interests of the world demand it, this will be a failure with multiple consequences, all of them adverse. Europe's agricultural protection is a policy born of another age, and it is time to end it. But change in Europe alone is not the answer. The United States must also open up. Japan, too. In improving access to nonagricultural markets, we look to leadership from Brazil and India. And we must agree on a development package for the poorest that includes 100 percent market access and aid for trade.

Finally, the whole world needs to focus on the threat of climate change. Future generations will not forgive us if we do not pay attention to the degrading and polluting of our planet. We need a clear, disciplined framework for action, with measurable outcomes that all the major players buy into and that has at its heart the goal to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations and the planet's temperature. I believe a clear goal and a strong framework would help spur the technology revolution we need. It is vital to give business the certainty it requires to invest in cleaner technology and reduce emissions.

The United States wants a low-carbon economy; it is investing heavily in clean technology; it needs China and India to grow substantially. The world is ready for a new start. Washington can help lead it.

In my nine years as prime minister, I have not become less idealistic or more cynical. I have simply become more persuaded that the distinction between a foreign policy driven by values and one driven by interests is wrong. Globalization begets interdependence, and interdependence begets the necessity of a common value system to make it work. Idealism thus becomes realpolitik.

None of this eliminates the setbacks, shortfalls, inconsistencies, and hypocrisies that come with practical decision-making in a harsh world. But it does mean that the best of the human spirit, which has pushed the progress of humanity along, is also the best hope for the world's future.

That is why I say this struggle is one about values. Our values are our guide. They represent humanity's progress throughout the ages. At each point we have had to fight for them and defend them. As a new age beckons, it is time to fight for them again.

[Home](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Current Issue](#)

Copyright 2002--2009 by the Council on Foreign Relations. All rights reserved.