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Osama bin Laden as Transnational Revolutionary Leader

MARK N. KATZ

Labeling Osama bin Laden as a terrorist is entirely appropriate; he is, after all, the man behind the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as previous attacks on the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the USS *Cole*, and other American targets. Bin Laden, however, is not just a terrorist: he is also a revolutionary. More specifically, he is a transnational revolutionary leader.

A transnational revolutionary leader seeks to foment his or her brand of revolution not just in one country, but in many countries. Bin Laden is certainly not the first transnational revolutionary leader to make an appearance on the world stage. Lenin, for example, did not want to spark Marxist revolution only in Russia, but throughout the world. Mao in China and Che and Castro in Latin America sought to spread Marxist revolution in their regions and beyond. Nasser was not content to lead an Arab nationalist revolution in Egypt, but hoped to effect revolutionary change throughout the Arab world. Qaddafi and Saddam Hussein, among others, attempted to take up where Nasser left off. The Ayatollah Khomeini did not want Islamic revolution just for Iran, but for the entire Muslim world. Bin Laden also seeks to spread Islamic revolution throughout the Muslim world.

None of these previous transnational revolutionary leaders achieved his ultimate goal. However, some of them—or their successors—did witness the spread of their brand of revolution to other countries. From Russia, Marxist revolution radiated to coun-

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tries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Arab nationalist revolution succeeded in half a dozen other Arab countries after it first occurred in Egypt. Islamic fundamentalist revolution, however, has occurred in only two other countries—Sudan and Afghanistan—since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Despite the recent rollback of the Taliban, Islamist movements remain active in many other countries.

Of course, significant differences exist between bin Laden and previous transnational revolutionary leaders. Indeed, no two have sought to spread revolution in exactly the same manner. Each has fashioned a strategy he thought suited for the times and countries in which he was attempting to accomplish this task. Despite these differences, bin Laden's bid to spread transnational revolution shares important similarities with those of his predecessors. Bin Laden has benefited from a set of circumstances that facilitated the efforts of previous transnational revolutionary leaders to spread their brand of revolution. At the same time, these previous transnational revolutionary leaders failed to propagate their ideologies to the degree they hoped because of a set of obstacles that bin Laden himself either faces now or is likely to confront soon, if he remains at large.

“ROOT CAUSES”

Whether it was the Marxism of Lenin, Mao, Che, or Castro; the Arab nationalism of Nasser, Qaddafi, or Saddam Hussein; or the Islamic fundamentalism of Khomeini or bin Laden, each of these ideologies has won followers in many countries because of widespread resentment of authoritarian rule, an overbearing foreign presence or influence, and unequal income distribution. In virtually all cases where revolution has occurred, these three problems have appeared to local populations to be inextricably inter-

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related: foreign interests supported the continuation of authoritarian (or outright colonial) rule to enrich themselves at the expense of the country's people.

Examples abound. The authoritarian czarist regime in Russia appeared to act as the protector of foreign investors by the early twentieth century. The Kuomintang regime in China failed to protect the country against Japanese invasion and exploitation. The Egyptian monarchy seemed to be no more than a fig leaf for British control. The Batista regime in Cuba and the shah's regime in Iran both were seen as puppets of American economic interests.

Many in the Muslim world believe that the oil-rich countries of the Arabian Peninsula rule in an authoritarian manner for the benefit of Western interests and at the expense of Muslims. Indeed, this perception is growing inside bin Laden's homeland, Saudi Arabia. Although the West still generally views Saudi Arabia as enormously wealthy, the decline in the real price of oil combined with a high population growth rate have resulted in Saudi per capita income dropping by 50 percent or more since the mid-1980s. As the scholar Mai Yamani has shown, many young Saudis blame the United States for this situation. While some believe the United States has taken advantage of their government, others see the Saudi government as actively collaborating with America in the pursuit of anti-Islamic aims. Either way, they view the Saudi government as unnecessarily—and inexcusably—subservient to America and the West. Many Saudis and Muslims elsewhere share bin Laden's dissatisfaction over the presence of non-Muslim troops inside the country that contains Islam's two holiest cities (American forces are stationed in Saudi Arabia to protect the kingdom from an Iraqi invasion).¹

In addition to the general perception that authoritarian rule/foreign domination/economic exploitation are at the root of their countries' problems, these revolutionary leaders were able to draw on a transnational revolutionary ideology that was already in the air in many countries. The rise of Marxism as a popular transnational revolutionary ideology preceded Lenin by several decades. Arab nationalism was a popular revolutionary ideology in many Arab countries long before Nasser came to power in Egypt, as was Islamic fundamentalism in many Muslim countries before Khomeini came to power in Iran.

Lenin, Nasser, and Khomeini were, however, the first to lead their brand of transnational revolution to power. After initial success in their own countries, many Marxists in other countries flocked to Lenin's banner, Arab nationalists to Nasser's, and Islamic fundamentalists to Khomeini's.

The failure of Lenin, Nasser, and Khomeini to accomplish the ambitious task of successfully spreading their brand of revolution to many (or even to any, in Lenin's and Khomeini's cases) other countries did not discredit the transnational revolutionary ideologies they espoused. On the contrary, their failure benefited subsequent transnational revolutionary leaders.

For Mao, Che, and Castro, Lenin's success in Russia popularized Marxism-Leninism as a revolutionary ideology, but his failure to bring it to their regions allowed them the opportunity to try to do so. Nasser's success in bringing Arab nationalist revolution to Egypt helped popularize that ideology throughout the Arab world, but his failure to unite it under his leadership afforded Qaddafi in Libya and later Saddam Hussein in Iraq the opportunity to try (and fail) to do so. Similarly, Khomeini's success in bringing Islamic fundamentalist revolution to Iran gained a following for this ideology not just among his fellow Shiites but also among Sunnis, but his failure to export it elsewhere has provided bin Laden with the opportunity to attempt to do so in the Sunni Muslim world.

OBSTRUCTIONS I: THE MAJOR POWERS

Although bin Laden's attempt to foment transnational revolution has been facilitated by many factors that aided previous such efforts, it also faces many of the same obstacles they did—or appears likely to.

First, previous transnational revolutionary leaders galvanized the opposition of the contemporary great powers and their allies. Some external powers actually sought to reverse the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 by intervening militarily in Russia shortly afterward. Although this military intervention failed, the major powers undertook steps in the following years to contain Soviet Russia as well as suppress Communist parties in their own countries and colonies. Except for the dubious case of Mongolia (which became Marxist in the early 1920s as a result of Russian intervention, not indigenous revolution), the great powers succeeded in preventing any further Marxist revolutions until the disruption of the international system that occurred as a result of World War II.

Similarly, the success of Marxist revolution in China in 1949 led the United States and its allies to

¹See Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000).

try to prevent its spread elsewhere in Asia. France and later the United States obviously failed to do so in Indochina. But Western intervention was instrumental in preventing the forcible export of Marxist revolution from North Korea to South Korea and at suppressing Marxist revolutionary movements in Malaya (now part of Malaysia), the Philippines, and other parts of Asia. The United States responded to the success of the 1959 Marxist revolution in Cuba by vigorously assisting in the suppression of Marxist revolution elsewhere in Latin America. The 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua was a notable failure, but American efforts at suppression succeeded in many other Latin American countries (including Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru) from the 1960s onward.

It was not so much Nasser's seizure of power in 1952 that galvanized the West against him as his 1955 arms deal with Czechoslovakia, nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, and union with Syria in 1958. The West did not succeed in halting the spread of Arab nationalist revolu-

tion to several countries, but American and British intervention or support helped maintain pro-Western regimes in Lebanon, Jordan, and the oil monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. French intervention halted Qaddafi's forcible attempt to export his brand of revolution to Chad in the 1980s, and the United States-led UN intervention in the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf war halted Saddam Hussein's forcible attempt to export his brand of revolution to Kuwait (and possibly beyond). (Only a few years earlier, the leading Western powers as well as the Soviet Union provided arms and other support to Saddam Hussein during much of the Iran–Iraq war—which Hussein initiated—when they feared Khomeini's forces would overrun Iraq and then move on to the less populous Arabian Peninsula countries, setting up Islamic republics dependent on Iran.)

Similarly, the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. have galvanized the United States to militarily intervene against bin Laden and his Taliban protectors in Afghanistan. While the United States and the Northern Alliance have succeeded in rolling back the Taliban, it remains to be seen whether Washington will be able to prevent bin Laden's brand of Islamic fundamentalist revolution from spreading to other Muslim countries.

OBSTRUCTIONS II: NATIONALIST DIFFERENCES

Although the ideologies transnational revolutionary leaders espouse are intended to allow adherents to overcome narrow national differences and replace them with loyalty to a larger transnational—or pan-national—group, these leaders have largely failed at this task. The ringing phrase from *The Communist Manifesto*—“Workers of all countries, unite!”—was the goal of Lenin and other Marxists. They fully expected nations that experienced Marxist revolution to automatically become and remain the closest of allies. Instead, bitter rivalries developed between many Marxist revolutionary regimes, such as those between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, between Yugoslavia and Albania, between the Soviet Union and China, between the Soviet Union and Albania, between China and Vietnam, and between China and Albania. None of these rifts ended until they were overcome by the collapse of communism in

1989–1991. Some still continue.

Nasser and other Arab nationalist leaders sought to end what they saw as the artificial divi-

sion of the Arab world imposed by colonialism and to unite all Arabs into one enormous state. Yet, here again, hostile relations developed between many Arab nationalist regimes, such as those between Egypt and Syria after the latter pulled out of their union in 1961, between Egypt and Iraq, between Syria and Iraq, and between Egypt and Libya. While some are active and others dormant, all these rivalries continue.

The Islamic revolutionary regimes have not fared much better at unity. Iran and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan almost went to war in 1998. Tehran provided military assistance to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance long before Washington did after September 11. And for all its anti-American rhetoric, Iranian assistance to the Northern Alliance has continued even after the American military intervention in Afghanistan began in early October.

Whether the pan-Islam preached by bin Laden can be implemented—and sustained—remains an open question. We do know that the Sunni fundamentalist regime in Sudan supported bin Laden (and he them) for several years until his departure in 1996, when the Sudanese government wanted to distance itself from him. Moreover, the Khartoum regime moved closer to the United States immediately after September 11. Sudan's fundamentalist

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government appears to be more interested in survival than in spreading revolution.

OBSTRUCTIONS III: DOMESTIC DIVISIONS

Not only have transnational revolutionary leaders been unable to overcome nationalist differences between countries adhering to their ideology, they and their successors have often failed to overcome ethnic and other differences within their own countries. Lenin hoped that his transnational ideology would overcome all distinctions between Russians and the many non-Russian groups conquered under the czars. But instead of uniting these different groups into a common Soviet identity, communist rule exacerbated ethnic differences in the Soviet Union to the point where, when Mikhail Gorbachev began to initiate democratization in the late 1980s, the principal demand of many non-Russians was independence. Marxist rule widened ethnic differences in many other countries, as well.

In Egypt, Nasser's Arab nationalist revolution increased tensions between the north and the south.² Nasser's successors would later be challenged by a revolutionary group, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, that sought not only Islamic revolution in Egypt, but also an end to the north's domination over the south.

Ethnic division is a problem that has especially plagued the Islamic fundamentalist revolutionary regimes in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Tehran continues to fear the possibility of secession by Iran's non-Persian minorities—especially the Azeris. Since its inception in 1989, Sudan's Islamic revolutionary regime has fought a bitter war to prevent the secession of the non-Muslim south. And while almost all Afghans are Muslims, the Taliban (who were bin Laden's host) overwhelmingly came from just one of that country's ethnic groups: the Pashtun. The Taliban had almost no support among Afghanistan's Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara populations.

OBSTRUCTIONS IV: AUTHORITARIANISM AND ECONOMIC DYSFUNCTION

Transnational revolutionaries have faced two other major problems. One is their inability to foster sustained economic development. Marxism-Leninism promised a bright shining future in which individual economic well-being would be far superior to what capitalism could produce. But over

time it became increasingly apparent—especially to those living under Marxist rule—that their state-run economies produced significantly inferior living standards compared to those in the capitalist West. One communist country where living standards have recently improved—China—accomplished this largely by abandoning the Marxist economic model and embracing capitalism.

Nasser's Arab nationalist economic model called for a state-run economy to be funded by the windfall that would result from the inclusion of the oil-rich Persian Gulf monarchies into his projected pan-Arab state. The latter never occurred, and Egypt remained poor. But living standards are low even in those Arab nationalist states with great petroleum wealth—Algeria, Libya, and Iraq—due to a combination of low oil prices and the use of this revenue not for economic development, but for military and other unproductive purposes.

Not surprisingly, Sudan and Afghanistan, which were poor before their Islamic fundamentalist revolutions, have remained poor since. Iran is rich in oil, but its citizens' standard of living has remained low because of several factors, especially large-scale government subsidies to unprofitable "Islamic" enterprises as well as defense outlays. Iran's experience shows that Islamic fundamentalist revolutions in other oil-producing Muslim countries may not result in improved economic conditions for their citizens either.

The second problem faced by transnational revolutionary leaders has also been the result of a conscious decision to rule in an authoritarian manner. Believing that they know the "will of the people" or the "will of God" better than anyone else, their intolerance of any disagreement has appeared fully justified to them. The slow, deliberative process of democracy with all the compromises it entails is seen as unnecessary when they already know the "right" answers to all questions.

Of course, these transnational revolutionary leaders, along with their successors and emulators, have not always known the right answers. Indeed, they have come up with some spectacularly wrong answers—such as the mass killings carried out by Stalin and Mao, the invasions of Iran and Kuwait launched by Hussein, and the suppression of women under the Taliban. Even where they manage to avoid such behavior, the persistence or exacerbation of the previously mentioned obstructions (conflict with the status quo powers and other revolutionary regimes, internal ethnic or religious conflict, and economic failure) has steadily eroded

²See Mamoun Fandy, "Egypt's Islamic Group: Regional Revenge?" *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1994).

whatever popular support revolutionary regimes enjoy when they first come to power.

Marxist-Leninist, Arab nationalist, and Islamic fundamentalist revolutionary regimes have all encountered this set of problems. It is doubtful that any other Islamic revolutionary regimes bin Laden or his successors help bring to power would be able to avoid them.

WILL HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF?

Although the same “root causes” that helped previous transnational revolutionary leaders have also aided Osama bin Laden, he also faces the same obstructing factors they did, and thus his grandiose revolutionary ambitions are failing too.

How these previous transnational revolutionary leaders failed, however, offers some sobering lessons. None succeeded in spreading his brand of revolution to the degree he had hoped, but failure to do so did not discourage others from trying later. As the cases of Lenin, Nasser, and Khomeini show, defeating—or containing—their attempts to foster transnational revolution did not stop others from seeking to emulate them. The same may well prove true for bin Laden. Even if he and his Taliban allies are completely defeated, someone else—inspired by their example—may try to begin where they left off. The defeat of bin Laden, then, will achieve little if it merely serves to inspire future bin Ladens.

Can this be prevented? Previous experience with the Marxist-Leninist and the Arab nationalist revolutionary waves indicates that this occurs only when transnational revolutionary ideas become discredited within the countries where regimes espousing them came to power. Thus, the disappearance of bin Laden and the Taliban does not necessarily mean that the appeal of Islamic fundamentalist revolution will also disappear. For many Muslims unhappy about American support for Israel and the authoritarian monarchical or secular regimes they live under, bin Laden’s vision of one giant Islamic state stretching from Morocco to Indonesia appears to be the answer to their immediate concerns. They are not focusing on the severe problems faced by people living under Islamic fundamentalist rule in Iran and Sudan and Afghanistan under the Taliban. Any negative reports they hear about these regimes are usually dismissed as Western propaganda. Even if these reports are credited, American hostility is seen as primarily to blame.

Bin Laden may be defeated by the West. But it may not be until many more Muslims experience life under Islamic fundamentalist rule for a prolonged period of time that they will learn what people in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan already know or are in the process of learning: this ideology does not provide a solution to their problems. Only then will Islamic fundamentalism, along with bin Laden and its other proponents, finally be discredited. ■