

Islam and Terrorism

by Michael Curtis

It is fortuitous that the 20th anniversary of 9/11, September 11, 2011, should coincide in the same week with two other manifestations of Islamanist terrorism: the capture of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the group whose objective is to create an Islamic State; and the opening of the trial of Islamist terrorists in the entire galley of the 19th century Palais de Justice in Paris, a venue to accommodate the large numbers of people interested. The events are reminders, like others such as the 7/7, July 7, 2005 coordinated suicide attacks in London that targeted commuter traveling on the transport system, train bombing in Madrid in 2004, Christmas day 2020 in Berlin, and in Vienna November 2020, that the democratic West is involved in a global struggle to defeat Islamist extremism and terrorism.

The echoes of the events of 9/11, which led to a chain of activity that is still continuing, are still reverberating. The terror of that day and the smoke pouring from the twin towers in NYC after they were hit, is unforgettable. The 19 terrorists had smuggled box-cutters and knives through security at three east coast airports. As a result, an American Airlines plane and a United Airlines plane, each with 5 high jackers crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City; an American Airlines plane crashed into the Pentagon, killing more than 125 military personnel and civilians inside the building and 64 people aboard the plane; a United plane, possibly intended for the White House or the U.S. Capitol, in which passengers heroically resisted the hijacking crashed in a field in Shanksville in rural west Pennsylvania, killing all 44 aboard. Only six people in the WTC towers survived, and almost 10,000 were treated for injuries. The overall calculation of the attacks is that 2,977 innocent people were killed and 19 hijackers.

The hijackers were Islamist terrorists from Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations. They were financed by the Al Qaeda terrorist organization of Osama bin Laden. Some of the terrorists had lived in the U.S. for more than a year, and had taken flying lessons at American flight schools. Others had slipped into the country in the months before September 11.

The lines were clearly drawn on reaction to terrorism: on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush declared to the world, "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." The war on terrorism had begun, with the invasion of Afghanistan, the incursion in Iraq, the rise of ISIS, Islamist militias in the Middle East.

The Taliban, Islamist religious-political movement, gained control of Afghanistan in August 2021 and presented themselves as a more moderate force than they were when they ran Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. During that period, they barred

women from attending school or working outside their home and forced them to wear the burqua. They banned music, cut off the hands of thieves, and imposed a strict interpretation of Sharia, Islamic law. Though they currently claim they are committed to a peace process, it is probable that though the Taliban may have changed its strategy, it has not altered its extremist ideology to create the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Its early administration in September 2021 excludes women, and is dominated, in ethnocentric fashion, by Pashtuns while ignoring the Hazara minority which has been persecuted in the past.

In Paris on September 8, 2021 the trial began in the Palais de Justice of 20 men, including the one surviving terrorist of the attacks, accused of involvement, providing planning and logistical support, in the November 2015 attacks in Paris. It is the largest trial in French history with nearly 1,800 plaintiffs, including survivors and family members of those who died, among the 330 lawyers, and five presiding judges.

On November 13, 2015 ten extremists of ISIS had carried out a number of attacks and suicide bombings at cafes and restaurants in central Paris, on the Stade de France, national soccer stadium where the president of France was attending a game, and at the Bataclan concert hall. The result was 130 people were killed, and about 500 others were wounded. It was the bloodiest violence in France since World War II.

These attacks followed the killings of 12 and injuring 11 at the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo on January 7, 2015, and at a Paris kosher supermarket. The attackers were mostly French citizens who had been trained in Syria. In 2020, a French court convicted 14 people of these terrorist attacks in January 2015.

At the trial in Paris today, the key defendant is Salah Abdeslam, the only surviving attacker and the only defendant charged with murder, who declared his profession was to be a

fighter for the Islamic state: "I gave up my job to become an Islamic state soldier." The presiding judge Jean-Louis Peries, spoke of the extraordinary nature of the attacks and the events that had led to the trial, which he remarked are "inscribed in their historic intensity as among the international and national events of this century." The object of the trial is not only to establish the guilt or innocence of the 20 accused but also to document the planning and execution of the massacres. Included in this inquiry are analysis of senior officials of the Islamic state in Raqqa in Syria, secret infiltrators from Greece and Turkey in 2015, and the operations workshops in the Molenbeek quarter of Brussels.

In the U.S., as a result of the anniversary of 9/11 and the public attention devoted to Islam, and because of the fact that views of Americans about Islam have become increasingly polarized along political lines, it is useful to look at the reality as analyzed by the Pew Research Center in September 2021.

The Muslim population in the U.S. has been increasing. In 2007 about 2.3 million Muslim adults and children were living in the U.S., about 0.8% of the U.S. population. The number grew, partly because of immigration into the country of Muslims, and partly because of the higher birthrate of Muslims than of other faiths. The number is now calculated at 3.85 million or 1.1% of the population. Muslims are now more prominent in the public arena; four Muslims, have been elected to Congress, the first being Keith Ellison in 2007. Currently, there are three, all Democrats, two of whom are women; Iihan Omar born in Somalia, and Rashida Tlaib, born to a Muslim family of Palestinian immigrants.

With memories of 9/11 and the evidence of the trial in Paris the question can be asked. Is Islam more likely than other religions to encourage violence? In American politics there is strong partisan difference, which has become increasingly more polarized, with Republicans more convinced of the danger and

threat of Islam than are Democrats. This is likely to be illustrated in the near future in American foreign policy.