To Defeat Islamism, Focus on the Mind

by Lev Tsitrin

President Biden's drive to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal raises a question: can ideology be neutralized by pragmatism? It is ideology, after all, that underpins Iran's action — its suppression of internal dissent, its continued nuclear program, its support for Syria's Assad, for Lebanese Hezbollah, for Palestinian Hamas, for Yemeni Houthis, for Iraqi Shiite militias. Those policies aim at eschatological victory over the Little, and the Great Satans — Israel and the US, and the ultimate triumph of Shiism when Mahdi, the imam who's been hidden for twelve centuries, comes forth to lead the world into the glorious future of universal rule of Shia Islam. Would ayatollahs swap those policies for the prospect of a high standard of living for Iran's citizens, which Biden's diplomats will temptingly dangle as a price for Iran's abandoning its nuclear ambitions, and for the change in its

regional behavior?

I suspect the answer is a "no," though ayatollahs will undoubtedly pocket every concession Biden throws at them, without giving anything of value in return, just as they did with Obama's nuclear "deal" which granted legitimacy to Iranian nuclear project in exchange for a mere fifteen-year pause in production of the actual weapon. Politicians behave as if wealth is the ultimate all in all for all; hence, all they do is try to coopt ideologues with promises of economic prosperity. Western press, by and large, sings a similar tune, though very infrequently a more realistic note is heard. One such rare moment was the *New York Times'* article on the terrorist attacks in France in which a teacher was beheaded for showing Mohammed cartoons to illustrate the notion of free speech, followed by the killing of three church-goers in Nice. [It reached an unusual conclusion](#): the murders were caused "exclusively [by] religious fanaticism" without any "political demand" attached. The article cited an expert who suggested "acknowledging the exclusively religious fanaticism behind the attacks."

So how do you counter "exclusively religious fanaticism" that motivates not only the non-state actors willing to kill and die for a cause, but also states like Iran? The rather obvious point that one cannot ignore the role of religion when dealing with religious violence is lost on policymakers — they try everything except for debunking ideas which motivate the faithful to engage in violence. Embargoes, economic sanctions, military pressure, appeasement (like the Iran "deal" or international aid) are deployed — but confronting the ideas that underpin religious militancy — heaven forbid! This is wading into political incorrectness, this is troubling the trouble, this is stepping into a hornets' nest! Just witness what happened after France's Macron insisted that to have any meaning, free speech had to include the Mohammed cartoons. All the hell broke loose. Turkey's Erdogan suggested that Macron

needed mental treatment, and called for boycott of French goods; many other Moslem countries joined in condemning France.

Rooted in ideology, terrorism is resilient to purely military and economic efforts to confront or coopt it — witness attacks in Spain, France, UK, Belgium, Austria, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the constant strengthening of the Iran's Revolutionary Guards, of Hezbollah, of Hamas as well as the rise of ISIS and similar groups since the 9/11 attack which put Islamic terrorism on politicians' radar. Western counter-terrorism half-measures treat the symptoms, but not the virus that causes terrorism — because (as the *New York Times'* article so belatedly confirmed) this virus is of ideological kind, it is lodged in the mind, it is spread via sermons and religious texts, which we are afraid to criticize either for fear of hurting the feelings of the faithful, or because we can't come up with a convincing critique.

Is it even possible to decisively defeat the ideas that cause Islamist violence, without attacking Islam itself?

It was exactly what I did some fifteen years ago, in a book titled "*The Pitfall of Truth: Holy War, its Rationale and Folly.*" It looks at all kinds of ideologies; when it comes to prophetic religions like Islam, it observes that they have a fatal limitation it called "the problem of the third party" which makes it impossible to know whether the putative "prophet" is indeed a messenger of God. Crucially, the problem is unrelated to the contents of the message, but has to do with the way of relaying it. Any two-step communication that involves three parties in which the first party relays information to the second, and the second, to the third (in Islam, God is the first party, Mohammed, the second, and the rest of us, the third), is inherently unreliable, because verification of the veracity of what the second party communicates to the third one is impossible. One's ability to know whether Mohammed was, or wasn't a prophet, whether Koran

was, or wasn't God's word, simply does not exist.

What does this do to a "true believer's" assurance that he knows God's will? It turns him into idol-worshipper, the very thing he hates the most. The idol he worships is his own self — his implied, non-existing, made-up ability to know that Mohammed indeed relayed God's word in the Koran. All that can legitimately be said about the Koran by "third parties," is that it may have been the word of God — or (which is the same), that it may not have been. That isn't much to build on. Would one entrust his life — in this world and the world to come — to what is at best uncertain? Would one engage in murder and self-murder for the cause that might be false, the reward (or retribution) being hell, not heaven? Unlikely. Sure, like any other text, the Koran may be liked for whatever wisdom it conveys; but treating it as the expression God's will that should be forced on others is rank idolatry — even if in the "objective," yet inaccessible to us and therefore unknowable reality it was indeed revealed by God. The only thing we, third parties, can know for certain is that when it comes to religion, nothing is certain. The third parties who are certain, merely worship idols.

Thus, intellectual underpinnings of the jihadi behavior can be demolished without saying anything negative, let alone insulting, about Mohammed and the Koran. The argument concerns neither the second party, Mohammed, nor the first one, God. What's relevant is third parties, people who evaluate Mohammed's claims while having no ability to do so. Those "third parties" include jihadis of all stripes — ayatollahs, members of al-Qaeda, of ISIS, as well as the unaffiliated, "lone wolf" Moslems like the ones who committed the recent attacks in France. In their unquestioning self-assurance that Mohammed was a prophet, they fall into idol-worship. Calling them "idolaters" is not an insult, but merely a statement of fact. Just as it is no insult to say that ayatollahs have no horns and no tail, it is no insult to say that they have no

ability to know whether Koran was God's word, whether Mohammed was God's messenger: they were born with no horns, no tail, and no ability to know this. Like everyone who inherited their religious traditions, Moslems have every right in the world to like the Koran and admire Mohammed — but this admiration does not turn Koran into God's word, or Mohammed into a prophet. To refuse to admit this is to engage in idol-worship; to commit violence for the sake of idolatry is a deadly sin, per Islam itself.

The Christian West was plagued for centuries by violent disputes over "True Faith;" they abated just a couple of centuries ago, with a realization that such disputes cannot be resolved — an admission that culminated in US Constitution's First amendment's non-establishment, and free speech clauses. Islamic world is now where Europe was some five centuries ago — at each other's, and their neighbors' throats over whose religion is the correct one — a debate that by the nature of things is not solvable and is therefore fruitless, leading only to violence. Time has long come for Moslems to realize this, and like in the West, to let faith be a matter of personal choice, not subject to a communal or governmental control, its violent manifestations treated as crimes that they are. We westerners must help Moslems to get there, by pointing out to impossibility of knowing whether Koran is God's word.

Skirting around the role of religion in religious violence and pretending that it is caused by socio-economic factors like poverty and poor education — which is what our politicians and diplomates do, may be "politically correct," but it ignores the actual problem, causing it to fester, and making the pile of corpses go higher. Since 9/11, terrorist attacks became almost routine; threats from state sponsors of terror like Iran keep growing as they acquire more modern, more precise, more deadly weapons. Isn't it time we face the reality and focus on what matters, on what actually causes Islamic

terrorism — the idolatrous mindset of its perpetrators and sponsors? It seems that even the *New York Times* admits that Islamic violence needs to be confronted by the honest intellectual argument, not just by police action alone.

Writing some two hundred years ago, the great English poet William Blake thusly expressed the tenor of his age, the "Age of Enlightenment,":

I will not cease from mental fight,

Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,

Till we have built Jerusalem

In England's green and pleasant land

Unlike William Blake's, ours is the "Age of Darkening," the age of political correctness that frowns upon the "mental fight." But isn't it better (and more cost-effective in terms of human lives and treasure) to ask Khamenei, Nasrallah and their ilk, both Shia and Sunni, "how do you know what you are talking about?" and defang Islamists through "mental fight," than having to unleash on them "the sword" — F-35s, drones and missiles, suffering the consequences of retaliation — to achieve far less? Why not give reason a chance?

Lev Tsitrin is author of the pseudonymously-published "[The Pitfall of Truth: Holy War, its Rationale and Folly](#)"