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## *Review of From the Terrorists' Point of View*

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# Review of *From the Terrorists' Point of View*\*

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## Abstract

Counterterrorism (e.g., military forces) and antiterrorism (e.g., theological dialogues) programs are the most common strategies in the prevention and potential elimination of terrorism. Professor Fathali M. Moghaddam's *From the Terrorists' Point of View* represents a shift in current thinking because it competes with the today's counterterrorism-antiterrorism paradigm. The core message the author sends to the national and international intelligence community is this: If you all want to end terrorism, you all should first "see the world from the terrorists' point of view." In the terrorists' world, their terrorist acts are morally justified and rational; and although they engage in terrorism, they also deeply care for the welfare of Islamic communities. From the Terrorists' Point of View also suggests an alternative explanation for the origin of terrorism across all cultures that is based on the author's "staircase to terrorism" metaphor. Using this metaphor, an individual moves from the ground floor to subsequent floors until he/she realizes at the top floor (fifth) of the staircase the only option is terrorism to end the injustices of the social system that individual has experienced for many years. This review suggests that, although political and Islamic fundamentalist terrorists might share the same feeling of injustices on the ground floor and on subsequent floors, this metaphor appears to be more applicable to the development of political terrorism, relative to the origin of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. It also suggests that the cultural identity crisis in Islamic communities (also discussed by the author) appears to be a more convincing approach to explain the development of this form of terrorism. The controversial nature of the author's thesis is what will make *From the Terrorists' Point of View* an interesting book.

**KEYWORDS:** staircase to terrorism, terrorists' point of view, Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, political terrorism, counterterrorism-antiterrorism paradigm

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**From the Terrorists' Point of View: What They Experience and Why They Come to Destroy**

By Fathali M. Moghaddam

Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2006

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Counterterrorism and antiterrorism programs are the most common strategies in the prevention and potential elimination of terrorism. Counterterrorism emphasizes military forces, technological intelligence, human intelligence, and profiling (including both racial/ethnic and behavioral profiling). Examples of successful counterterrorism programs can be found in the annual *Country Reports on Terrorism* (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Further evidence of the positive effects of counterterrorism programs include: the fact that since September 11, 2001 no significant terrorist attacks have been recorded in the United States; the killing of Abu Musad al-Zarqawi, the leader of *al-Qaeda* in Iraq, on June 8, 2006; and the recent discovery of a potential terrorist attack involving the use of liquid bombs to blow up airliners traveling from Britain to the United States (Thomas, 2006).

By contrast, antiterrorism programs emphasize either political dialogues (in the case of political terrorism) or theological dialogues (in the case of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism). An example of political dialogues is the 1997 agreement of the original Irish Republican Army (IRA) to establish a dialogue with the dominant political system to end terrorism in Northern Ireland (Paniagua, 2005; White, 2003). The aim of theological dialogues is to convince Islamic fundamentalist terrorists that their interpretation of the Glorious Qur'an is erroneous, particularly in the justification for killing innocent civilians with *jihadist* actions. An example of such theological dialogues is the Islamic Dialogue Committee, headed by Judge Hamound al-Hitar, in Sanna, Yemen (Brandon, 2005; Paniagua, 2005).

Professor Fathali M. Moghaddam's *From the Terrorists' Point of View* represents a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970) because it competes with the current counterterrorism-antiterrorism model. Although the author generally recognizes the utility of counterterrorism and antiterrorism programs, his main conclusion is that, "although all of these [programs] can be part of a solution to terrorism, they *will never* win the war on terror" (p. 127, emphasis added). The author proposes that, in order to end terrorism, one must first understand how terrorists see the

world. Once this is accomplished, one would then have a better understanding of the roots of terrorism and how to end it. In synthesis, the author's core message to the national and international intelligence community is this: if you all want to end terrorism, you all should first "see the world from the terrorists' point of view" (p. 2); and if you continue with traditional measures to end terrorism (e.g., counterterrorism), "then billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of people dedicated to the 'war on terror' will be wasted" (p. 2).

From the perspective of the vast number of civilians hurt and/or killed by terrorist acts, terrorists are insane, irrational, suicidal, immoral, not interested in peaceful solutions to social and/or political problems, not interested in the welfare and education of the community where they operate, and single-minded - in other words "just concerned to carry out 'acts of terror'" (p. 3). According to the author, the terrorists perceive themselves as the complete opposite of these attributes.

Terrorists want peace, but it must be built on a social system that does not promote injustice, unfair treatment, and deprivation. From that point of view, the author suggests terrorists' attacks are morally justified. The author states, "Terrorists have a very strong sense of right and wrong, ...and they are highly committed to a morality that serves as the core of their identity" (p. 83). He further asserts that the main problem is that terrorists' sense of morality "is not our morality" (p. 83). In addition, the author argues that it is not true that terrorists only want to engage in "acts of terror" (p.3). They are also very interested in the welfare of their community, as exemplified by " Hamas and other such 'terrorist' organizations [that] are filling and doing the work that corrupt local or regional governments are unable or unwilling to do" (p.3). Hezbollah is another organization "depicted in the Western media as only having a 'terrorist' function" (p. 3). However, Hezbollah is perceived in Lebanon as an organization deeply involved in social services, including building schools and clinics. The reason why we cannot perceive these positive attributes among terrorists is because we have not been able "to see the world from the terrorists' point of view" (p. 2).

In Chapter 2, the author presents a summary of examples of behavioral and sociological theories in the explanation of the origin of terrorism. With the exception of the *Crisis Identity Theory* (i.e., that Islamic terrorists engage in act of terror because of the "pervasive crisis identity being experiencing by Islamic communities" p. 26) and the *Relative Deprivation Theory* (i.e., terrorism results from unmet expectations and frustration with the dominant social system), other theories are unworkable in explaining the origin of terrorism (e.g., Freudian Irrational and Terror Management Theories). The author then introduces his own theoretical explanation of terrorism in terms of the metaphor *staircase to terrorism* that "involves transformations in identity, as a person move from floor to floor" (p. 32). The author originally published this explanatory metaphor last year (Moghaddam, 2005). *From the Terrorists' Point of View* represents an

expanded version of that metaphor, specifically in Chapters 4 (ground floor), 5 (first floor), 6 (second floor), 7 (third floor), 8 (fourth floor), and 9 (fifth floor).

The ground floor (Chapter 4) is occupied by all people in a given society, where its citizens experience “*perceptions* of deprivation...*feelings* of being treated unfairly... [and] a *subjective* sense of injustice” (p. 46). The core characteristic of the ground floor is not how its occupants perceive “objective conditions, including poverty and low education” (p. 46), but “how people feel about, and how they subjectively interpret their personal and collective identities and situations” (p. 46). Most people on the ground floor become adjusted to a social system that is perceived as unfair, unjust, and threatening to personal and collective identities. But an extremely small number of individuals on the same floor and part of the same social system might elect to climb the staircase leading to terrorist acts because “they see fewer and fewer choices, until the only possible outcome is the destruction of others, or oneself, or both” (p. 44). If those perceptions of injustice, deprivation, and unfairness are not changed on the ground floor, the individual might move to higher floors. And on each subsequent floor the idea of terrorism is considered as the only choice that individual would have to defeat the unfairness and unjust practices of the particular social system. In this metaphor, the most dangerous floors are the fourth and fifth, because these are the floors where the perception of terrorism as a moral activity, a strong identification with the terrorist organization, and the nullification of inhibitory mechanisms (Lorenz, 1966) that could prevent the killing of innocent people with terrorist acts are greatly reinforced.

The author’s key conclusion is that counterterrorism and antiterrorism programs will never be successful in winning the war on terror because “only by reforming conditions on the ground floor can we prevent individuals from climbing to the top of the staircase and carrying out terrorist acts” (p. 128). The author then devotes the final chapter to recommend a “contextualized democracy” as a solution to terrorism. This specific form of democracy emphasizes “local cultural symbols and meaning systems as a way to strengthening democratic trends and bringing into place a democratic state” (p. 129). This “contextualized democracy” would assure that everyone has the same duties and basic rights, with the sense that their voices matter and are included in decision-making actions. The author, however, recognizes that this particular solution to terrorism might be very difficult to apply in the case of Near and Middle East societies because it would require dramatic changes in Islamic laws, particularly laws that negatively affect women in Islamic communities.

People who perceive injustices and unfairness in a given political system may indeed try to destroy that system with terrorism (see Paniagua, 2005, p. 1038). But this is political terrorism, for example the IRA in Northern Ireland, the *Tupamaros* in Uruguay, and the Chechen separatists in Russia (White 2003), not

the form of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism or messianic terrorism directed by al-Qaida. The main agenda of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organizations is not to change the conditions on the “ground floor,” but “to eliminate any political system that does not embrace Islam as the only true religion” (Paniagua, 2005, p. 1039). As noted by Laqueur (2000), Islamic fundamentalist terrorists perceive “all other religions and civilizations [as] barbarian, evil, and animal-like” (p. 33; see also Marsella, 2004, pp. 44-45). Therefore, the heuristic nature of the author’s “staircase to terrorism” metaphor seems to apply to the origin of political terrorism and not to the development of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

*From the Terrorists’ Point of View*, however, emphasizes a crucial factor in the author’s “staircase to terrorism” metaphor originally published in 2005 that I also consider “at the heart of Islamic terrorism” (p. 14). This factor is the cultural identity crisis Islamic terrorists have been experiencing for many years in their struggle to preserve the traditions of Islam against the influence of globalization stimulated by Western nations. With the exception of some passing commentaries with emphasis on the historical and current crisis of identity in the Islamic communities (e.g., the Preface and Chapter 2), the author has not provided a convincing argument to justify the role of that “crisis of identity in Islamic communities” (p. 14) in explaining Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. The staircase to terrorism metaphor does not emphasize that “crisis of identity,” but people’s perception of injustices, unfairness, and deprivation on the ground floor and how an extremely small number of individuals on that floor believe that they have to continue climbing the “winding and darkening staircase” (p. 44) until their only choice is to engage in terrorist acts against the dominant social system. Therefore, the “contextualized democracy” solution to terrorism proposed by the author is aimed at improving the conditions on the ground floor to prevent people who are dissatisfied with their social system from climbing the “staircase to terrorism.” In this proposed “contextualized democracy,” strategies to change Islamic terrorists’ perception of being in a state of identity crisis were not considered.

In future editions of *From the Terrorists’ Point of View* it would help to differentiate conditions (e.g., perceived injustices) in the “staircase to terrorism” metaphor that might lead to political terrorism from those leading to Islamic fundamentalist terrorism (e.g., cultural identity crisis). Islamic fundamentalist terrorists and political terrorists might very well share the same perceived injustice, unfairness, and deprivation. But the fear and anger resulting from the thought that the cultural identity of Islam could vanish (in a distant future, of course) with the impact of globalization and the political and social influence of Western nations is, as pointed out by Professor Moghaddam, “at the heart of Islamic terrorism” (p. 14).

The author is very clear on one point upon which we all agree: terrorism, regardless of its motive, cannot be justified. But he is also very clear with the core

of his thesis - that a better understanding of terrorism and how to end it can only be achieved when one is able to see the world from the terrorists' point of view. This is, of course, a controversial thesis that many readers will surely reject; but this controversial position is precisely what makes *From the Point of Terrorists' Point of View* an interesting book.

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