

Islamist Terrorism and the “Pizza Effect”

By Mark Sedgwick

The purpose of this short essay is to suggest a new way of looking at the old question of how Islamist terrorism differs from other and better understood forms of terrorism, using the frames of globalization and localization and of the less well known but equally important phenomenon of the “pizza effect,” the nature of which will be summarized below. Using these frames, the essay argues that research is urgently needed in one area which has so far been almost totally ignored: the impact on young Muslims living in the West, and especially in Europe, of widespread understandings of Islam as an inherently violent religion.

In the narrowest sense, globalization is often defined as the increasing interconnection of economies. In a wider sense, it may be defined as the consequences of the tendency for previously separate regional systems to become fused into a single global system, not just in economic life but also in political, intellectual and cultural terms. In this sense, globalization alters the status of centers and peripheries. In the seventeenth century, Istanbul and Cairo were important centers in the Middle Eastern regional system; Paris, London and New York were irrelevant, belonging to different and separate regional systems. As regional systems merged in the nineteenth century, first Paris and London and then New York and Washington became global centers, in relation to which Istanbul and Cairo were peripheries.

Cultural and intellectual trends in Paris and New York had significantly more influence on Istanbul and Cairo than was the case the other way round – although there was cultural and traffic in both directions, with Parisians and New Yorkers reading the Rumi and the 1,001 Nights. Similarly, political decisions in London and Washington had more impact on Istanbul and Cairo than was the reverse—though once again there was traffic in both directions, with decisions taken in Istanbul becoming the chief issue in the British general election of 1876, and decisions made by a native of Cairo, Muhammad Atta, having significant impact on the United States after 2001.

“Localization” is a less frequently used term, but is the essential corollary of globalization. If globalization is about production, localization is about consumption, which is not just passive. In business terms, a global product such as Microsoft Word has to be localized by, for example, producing a version with Arabic language support. In cultural terms, localization may be deliberate (like Microsoft’s) or spontaneous. Rumi, for example, was deliberately localized for the US market by translating his poetry from Persian into English.

More interesting and often more important is spontaneous localization. Since being translated, Rumi has been read by millions of American readers, only a tiny fraction of whom were Muslim. American readers of Rumi, then, necessarily understand his poetry in their own way. For them, Rumi does not speak of the relationship between the Sufi

mystic and Allah, but of something else—possibly the spiritual dilemmas of life in the big city. The American reading of Rumi is the spontaneous localization of Rumi.

International transfer in a globalized world is often a recursive process, as is recognized by the term “pizza effect.” The original Italian pizza was a simple dish, consisting of bread with a tomato topping. Taken to America by Italian emigrants, the pizza was developed there into its present more complex form, which after the Second World War spread to Europe—including Italy. The contemporary pizza is now taken to be purely Italian, but it is not. The pizza effect can be found everywhere, for example in the homes of cosmopolitan Turks whose reading of Rumi derives from the American reading.

Applying these frames to Islamist terrorism, both globalization and localization are clearly visible. The “pizza effect” is less obvious, but may be important. One possible instance of the “pizza effect” is identified below; however there may well be other such instances.

As is well known, terrorism became a global phenomenon in the late nineteenth century, as anarchist “outrages” spread across Europe to the United States, and also to the Middle East. The first recognizably modern terrorist action in the Middle East was carried out in 1896, when armed members of the Hunchakian - an Armenian nationalist group that included former members of the Russian People’s Will group - occupied the headquarters of the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul, issued demands they did not seriously expect to be met, and threatened to kill off their (mostly foreign) hostages. By the 1970s, terrorism had become an even more global phenomenon, with members of the Japanese Red Army assisting the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in what they understood to be a global anti-imperialist struggle. Both the logic and most of the techniques of terrorism were by then well established, but were further developed in the 1980s by the addition of “suicide bombing.”

Islamist terrorism, then, can be seen as a localized form of a global phenomenon. “Suicide bombing,” for example, has been localized by being reinterpreted as “self-martyrdom,” using and developing the established Islamic concept of the shahid—initially understood as one who dies in the cause of God, not one who blows himself up. The 1970s global struggle against imperialism, and especially against the United States as the foremost imperialist power, has become the global struggle against Crusader-Zionist aggression against Islam, and especially against the United States as the foremost power in the Crusader-Zionist front. Further examples of localization of globalized techniques and analyses could easily be given.

Additional examples of the pizza effect are less obvious, but one may perhaps be found in contemporary conceptions of jihad, of which there are two main varieties. In one conception, jihad essentially denotes an endeavor in a good or Godly cause. In this conception, warfare is only one variety of jihad, and not the most important one. Warfare is justified principally in self-defense. In an alternative conception, jihad essentially denotes the use of violence against non-Muslims. The first conception is common to most

contemporary Muslims. The second conception is common to Islamist terrorists and to hawkish commentators such as Daniel Pipes. [1] This is a remarkable division of opinion.

Daniel Pipes, who sometimes quotes sources such as *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (the standard reference work among scholars) in his support, is undoubtedly right in a historical sense. In the tenth century, for example, jihad denoted warfare against non-Muslims. Self-defense was relevant only in so far as determining who was obliged to take part in that warfare—in Western terms, it was part of *jus in bello* (rules relating to fighting war), not *jus ad bellum* (just war theory). By the nineteenth century, however, as globalization produced a single unified system of international law, Muslim states such as the Ottoman Empire had for all practical purposes abandoned the Sharia rules of jihad, though they sometimes used the concept for propaganda purposes. The old rules of jihad were used only by occasional non-state groups fighting European occupation, as in Chechnya or Algeria. Far more widespread was the reinterpretation of jihad which stressed non-military struggle, and incorporated much of nineteenth-century international *jus ad bellum*—notably the importance of self-defense as a criterion, generally considered to derive ultimately from Saint Augustine of Hippo. [2] Localization is clearly visible. This reinterpretation has since become the standard understanding among Muslims.

The “pizza effect,” then, explains dovish Western commentators finding echoes of Saint Augustine in jihad theory. Something similar may also be happening in the opposite direction—though Daniel Pipes is clearly not responsible for Osama bin Laden’s conceptions of jihad. These may draw on localized forms of globalized analyses and techniques for their implementation, but they clearly derive from an alternative stream of Islamic thought which never accepted the nineteenth-century modifications that became generally accepted elsewhere: nineteenth-century Wahhabism. There is, however, some risk of a “pizza effect” among Muslims who know Western languages, who are separated from the societies in which conceptions of jihad as self defense are common, and whose knowledge of Islam is often poor.

So far as I know, there has been no research on the impact on Muslims living in the West of the oft-repeated view of jihad as “really” about violence against non-Muslims, though I know of one application for funding to perform such research which was—unfortunately—rejected. As is well-known, many young Muslims in Europe grow up alienated both from the older generation of immigrant Muslims and from the societies in which they live, which they regard as rejecting and excluding them. For alienated and rebellious young men and women who are labeled “Muslims” whether they are religious or secular, the image of a violent Islam which is feared by the West (and rejected by their parents) might well have significant appeal. [3] The ground might thus be unwittingly prepared for later fertile reception of terrorist definitions of jihad.

Understanding of Islamist terrorism through the frames used by this essay has clear implications for policy. Globalized aspects of Islamist terrorism may be addressed by tried and tested methods developed in the past, and globalized aspects may be found beneath localized forms. Localized forms, however, also demand localized remedies. Most importantly, the use of these frames suggests that research is needed into the “pizza

effect,” and that more attention needs to be paid to the risk that certain Western portrayals of Islam may be part of the problem, not the partial solution to the problem that their proponents presumably intend.

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NOTES:

[1] See, for example, Daniel Pipes, “What is Jihad?” New York Post December 31, 2002, available <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/990>.

[2] An excellent study of past and present understandings of jihad is Rudolph Peters, *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979).

[3] In the Muslim world, “Muslim” generally denotes religiosity first, and identity second. In Europe, it is often a proxy for ethnic identity, imposed from outside.