Minimizing a religious explanation for Islamic terrorism, several analysts emphasize political and socioeconomic causes: the Arab-Israeli conflict, which Arabs view as an unendurable humiliation; the extension of Western political power and cultural influence into the Middle East, which is seen as still another humiliation; and the economic hardships that grip the Arab masses, which provide recruits for terrorist organizations. Shmuel Bar, a veteran of the Israeli intelligence community and a senior research fellow at an Israeli think-tank, recognizes the importance of these factors but maintains that they do “not do justice to the significance of the religious culture in which [Islamic terrorism] is rooted and nurtured,” a culture in which there is no distinction between religion and politics. His essay examines the religious-ideological motivation for Islamic terrorism.

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While terrorism—even in the form of suicide attacks—is not an Islamic phenomenon by definition, it cannot be ignored that the lion’s share of terrorist acts and the most devastating of them in recent years have been perpetrated in the name of Islam. This fact has sparked a fundamental debate both in the West and within the Muslim world regarding the link between these acts and the teachings of Islam. Most Western analysts are hesitant to identify such acts with the bona fide teachings of one of the world’s great religions and prefer to view them as a perversion of a religion that is essentially peace-loving and tolerant. Western leaders such as George W. Bush and Tony Blair have reiterated time and again that the war against terrorism has nothing to do with Islam. It is a war against evil.

The non-Islamic etiologies of this phenomenon include political causes (the Israeli-Arab conflict); cultural causes (rebellion against Western cultural colonialism); and social causes (alienation, poverty). While no public figure in the West would deny the imperative of fighting the war against terrorism, it is equally politically correct to add the codicil that, for the war to be won,
these (justified) grievances pertaining to the root causes of terrorism should be addressed. A skeptic may note that many societies can put claim to similar grievances but have not given birth to religious-based ideologies that justify no-holds-barred terrorism. Nevertheless an interpretation which places the blame for terrorism on religious and cultural traits runs the risk of being branded as bigoted and Islamophobic.

The political motivation of the leaders of Islamist jihadist-type movements is not in doubt. A glance at the theatres where such movements flourished shows that most fed off their political—and usually military—encounter with the West. This was the case in India and in the Sudan in the nineteenth century and in Egypt and Palestine in the twentieth. The moral justification and levers of power for these movements, however, were for the most part not couched in political terms, but based on Islamic religious sources of authority and religious principles. By using these levers and appealing to deeply ingrained religious beliefs, the radical leaders succeed in motivating the Islamist terrorist, creating for him a social environment that provides approbation and a religious environment that provides moral and legal sanction for his actions. The success of radical Islamic organizations in the recruitment, posting, and ideological maintenance of sleeper activists (the 9/11 terrorists are a prime example) without their defecting or succumbing to the lure of Western civilization proves the deep ideological nature of the phenomenon.

Therefore, to treat Islamic terrorism as the consequence of political and socioeconomic factors alone would not do justice to the significance of the religious culture in which this phenomenon is rooted and nurtured. In order to comprehend the motivation for these acts and to draw up an effective strategy for a war against terrorism, it is necessary to understand the religious-ideological factors which are deeply embedded in Islam.

THE WELTANSCHAUUNG [WORLDVIEW]
OF RADICAL ISLAM

Modern international Islamist terrorism is a natural offshoot of twentieth-century Islamic fundamentalism. The “Islamic Movement” emerged in the Arab world and British-ruled India as a response to the dismal state of Muslim society in those countries: social injustice, rejection of traditional mores, acceptance of foreign domination and culture. It perceives the malaise of modern Muslim societies as having strayed from the “straight path” and the solution to all ills in a return to the original mores of Islam. The problems addressed may be social or political: inequality, corruption, and oppression. But in traditional Islam—and certainly in the worldview of the Islamic fundamentalist—there is no separation between the political and the religious. Islam is, in essence, both religion and regime and no area of human activity is outside its remit. Be the nature of the problem as it may, “Islam is the solution.”