BEYOND
TERROR AND MARTYRDOM
THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

In launching a "war on terror" after the attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush and his advisers sought to reshape the political world by delivering it from evil. Their strategy was breathtaking in its simplicity. Destroying Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and eliminating the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq would induce the birth of democracy throughout the Middle East. Simply by appearing on the scene, democracy would cause the collapse of the anti-American theocracy in Iran and would undermine authoritarian Middle East regimes, where Islamist militants preaching jihad—holy war—had distracted the masses from the corruption of their leaders and had produced the nineteen 9/11 hijackers. Under the benevolent hegemony of a victorious United States, Arabs and Muslims would see their best interest in a regional recognition of Israel's right to exist, and the land considered holy by three ancient religions would find its place in a harmonious scheme of globalization. With cheap oil flowing from the Persian Gulf to irrigate the world's economy, the entire planet would bloom with the promise of a "new American century"—prophetic words invented by neoconservatives in a Washington think tank long be-

fore the terrorist attacks of 2001 gave the Bush administration grounds for military action.

President Bush won reelection in the fall of 2004 to pursue this ambitious program. But his second term in office was marked by a stunning set of reversals, as the realities on the ground proved resistant to his simple prescription. Iraq—the testing ground for the war on terror—sank into chaos. Political strife between Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites led to sectarian massacres, ethnic cleansing, kidnappings, torture, and suicide attacks. Having failed in their bid to capture or kill Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, U.S. military forces found themselves reacting to spiraling violence in Iraq, where jihadists linked to Al Qaeda had joined the battle with—and against—local insurgents.

As Iraq teetered on the brink of anarchy, Iran—contrary to the White House's optimistic projections—elected Mahmud Ahmadinejad as its president in 2005. Like Bush, he was also determined to reshape the world, in his case by practicing nuclear blackmail. Ahmadinejad's call for Israel to be wiped off the map frightened his wealthy, fragile neighbors on the Arabian peninsula and placed the global petroleum market at the mercy of Gulf security, which now found itself under potential nuclear threat. The United States' deepening disorientation in Iraq increased Iran's opportunity to influence Shiites in that country as well as in Lebanon, making a resolution of the crises in both of these states impossible without Iran's consent.

In March 2008 Ahmadinejad made an official visit to Baghdad, where he toured the Green Zone under the protection of the 160,000 U.S. troops present, in a stunning display of Iran's new

clout. Then in May, after Iran's protégé in Lebanon, Hezbollah, swept the streets of Sunni Beirut and the Druze mountain in fighting that left scores dead, a conference in Qatar made arrangements for the opposition, led by Hezbollah, to have the right to veto decisions of the Lebanese government. This precondition was set by Tehran's local allies in order to elect the long-awaited new Lebanese president. Throughout the Middle East, President Bush's war on terror had strikingly and inadvertently reinforced the power of Washington's old nemesis, the Islamic Republic.

As for Israel, that embattled nation was not made more secure by the war on terror—far from it. Israel's pointless Thirty-Three-Day War against Hezbollah during the summer of 2006 served only to cast the militant Lebanese Party of God and its Iranian mentor as champions of resistance to Zionism, American imperialism, and the decadence of the West. Grievances and frustrations grew sharper every day, aggravating a theme with inexhaustible media value: the problem of Palestine. Israel had scored an irrefutable military victory with its response to the second intifada, launched in late September 2000. That Palestinian uprising was broken after the Israeli government mercilessly repressed the militants and proceeded to erect a barrier wall on the West Bank. But Ariel Sharon and his successor, Ehud Olmert, were no more able than George W. Bush to convert military victory into political success. When Israeli troops pulled out of Gaza in 2005, the Islamist nationalist party Hamas portrayed the withdrawal as a victory for the armed jihad it had waged since the second intifada. And on the strength of that claim, Hamas won a majority in the Palestinian legislative council six months later.

Bush's war against the "axis of evil"—which he identified as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea in his State of the Union address of January 2002—deliberately echoed the struggle against the Soviet "evil empire," a phrase that President Ronald Reagan had coined in 1983. The defeat of terrorism and jihadism would be an extension of the victory over communism, guaranteeing the triumph of Western democracy in the Muslim world just as the fall of the Berlin wall had done for the countries of the Warsaw Pact. On April 9, 2003, after the conquest of Baghdad, a cable attached to a U.S. tank toppled the colossal statue of Saddam Hussein that had stood in the capital. For television audiences worldwide, the scene was intended to evoke the moment when statues of Stalin and Lenin were pulled down in the former Soviet Union, symbolizing the collapse of the communist system and the flourishing, on its rubble, of democratic nation-states. Just such an efflorescence of democracy was what Washington foresaw for Iraq once it was freed from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

But in formulating this analogy between the war on terror and the cold war, the Bush administration ignored several fundamental differences between the former Eastern bloc and the Middle East. By the time the Soviet empire collapsed in 1991, almost no one believed in communist ideology anymore. It had become merely the mask of a bureaucratic regime, a discourse cut off from any social base. In the Muslim world, on the other hand, references to Islam, then and now, permeate the culture, fertilizing a deep-rooted concept of civilization and dictating the routines of daily life. Islam is subject to many diverse, often contradictory, appropriations, which clash in a bid for control over meaning and values. Yet over a billion believers spread throughout the world

adhere to Islam with equal conviction, even as their interpretations of their common faith differ.

By initially identifying terror as the enemy to be targeted by war, President Bush and his advisers sought to avoid any possible amalgamation of hundreds or thousands of "bad" Muslims with the many millions of "good" ones. The very notion of "terrorist" was supposed to identify those comparative few who were to be eliminated. But the borders of the group tagged as terrorists quickly became politically subjective. From Washington's perspective, "terrorism" was represented first and foremost by Al Qaeda and its Taliban host in Afghanistan, but the definition quickly expanded to include not just Saddam Hussein and his Iranian enemy to the east but also Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine—two organizations with a significant popular base, vast support and sympathy beyond the borders of their countries, and victories in democratic elections—the kind of elections in whose name the war on terror was being fought.

In opposition to Bush's war on terror, Bin Laden and his followers sought to perpetuate the strategy of "martyrdom operations" that had shocked the world on 9/11. Their plan was to duplicate suicide missions indefinitely, until the final apotheosis of Islam and the destruction of the West were achieved. Here too, the ultimate goal was nothing less than to cleanse the world of evil. But the jihadists would accomplish their aims through voluntary death in combat, in a sublime, phantasmagorical act of self-sacrifice on the part of believers.

From their sanctuary in Pakistan, Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri sent out a flood of jihadist proclamations after 9/11. Ac-

cording to these narratives, the hijackers were not murderers but martyrs who laid down their lives for Islam. They, and their thousands of imitators in Afghanistan and Iraq, were the vanguard of a larger community of believers that Al Qaeda sought to recruit to its cause. Bush's war on terror, in the view of Al Qaeda, was nothing less than a last, doomed crusade intended to humiliate Islam, and in the fight against this ignominious assault Al Qaeda was the best defender of the faith—an umbrella organization well suited to coordinate the multiple martyrdom operations of local jihads.

Spurred on by rhetoric from Al Qaeda, waves of would-be martyrs flowed into Iraq following the American invasion. But unlike Israeli victims of suicide bombers during the second intifada, most of the victims of martyrdom operations in Iraq were not "infidels" such as coalition troops but were fellow Muslims—Iraqi Shiites killed by Sunnis who took advantage of the chaos to settle scores with their age-old foe. The cult of martyrdom promoted by Al Qaeda, far from leading to triumph over the enemies of Islam, became a devastating war of Muslim against Muslim.

In Europe, the dubious quest for martyrdom was epitomized by the suicide attacks of July 7, 2005, which targeted London's transportation system. They were followed by other operations, almost all of which were foiled at the eleventh hour. This unprecedented, stupefying violence dealt a blow to preconceived notions of British multiculturalism and induced a soul-searching review of what was supposedly at stake in the Muslim presence in Europe. The 7/7 bombings mingled with other crises, like the assassination of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands by an Islamist of Moroccan origin; the outcry over the Danish cartoons; the riots in the French ban-

lieues; and even the pope's declarations about the Prophet Muhammad. But contrary to the expectations of Al Qaeda's leadership, the strategy of martyrdom did not galvanize or mobilize the Muslim masses, especially in Europe.

The struggle between the Bush administration and Bin Laden's Al Qaeda for the minds and hearts of more than a billion peaceful Muslims coincided with the dawn of the digital age, where the possibilities for uncontrolled communication were practically infinite. Satellite television networks were the first media to broadcast the competing narratives of terror and martyrdom, and some stations, like Al Jazeera, made this their specialty. But the Internet, with its proliferation of sites in all languages, offered limitless opportunities to tout the self-sacrifice of the jihadists or stoke the outrage of America's warriors. Unlike the propaganda of the cold war, which was carefully policed by both sides, Zawahiri's declarations were joined on the air and online by the interrogation and beheading of blindfolded hostages, raids and bombings, the suffering of detainees at Guantánamo, and pornographic piles of naked prisoners in Abu Ghraib. All these images played simultaneously on ideological edification and morbid voyeurism, in a register where traditional vocabulary and postmodern grammar intertwined, the better to erase critical thinking, historical perspective, and social context.

When Saddam himself was hanged for crimes against humanity on December 30, 2006, the fallen dictator's execution should have provided an object lesson in the triumph of law and universal justice over barbarity. But instead, Saddam's death turned into a lynching—a shameful settling of accounts between Sunnis and

Shiites, captured in stolen images taken on cell phones by witnesses and replayed on the same Internet sites that had displayed beheadings of Western hostages and torture at Abu Ghraib.

By that time, Iraq was awash in blood, with over 34,000 people having met violent deaths in 2006 alone. Most were victims of suicide bombings; many others had been kidnapped and tortured before being killed. The number of U.S. soldiers dead exceeded the number of victims of the 9/11 attacks. The war became so unpopular in the United States itself that the Republicans were routed in the November 2006 midterm elections, losing their majority in the Senate and the House. The Baker-Hamilton report, compiled by the Iraq Study Group at the urging of several members of Congress and with the agreement of President Bush, drew up a catastrophic tally of the costs of the Iraq occupation and advocated a radical change of strategy, but in vain. The president's response was to initiate a military "surge" which temporarily halted deterioration on the ground by dividing Iraq along territorial and sectarian lines. High concrete T-walls separated Sunni from Shiite neighborhoods—similar to the barriers separating Palestinians from Israelis on the West Bank.

Despite its narrative of good versus evil, democracy versus totalitarianism, the war on terror embodied the same policy objectives that the United States had pursued in the Middle East since 1945. For Bush and his advisers, the presumed weapons of mass destruction in Iraq merely offered a new opportunity to square the circle—to guarantee both Israel's security and the unimpeded flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. In the bid to eliminate Saddam Hussein, the aim was to control Iraqi oil fields, take Iraq out of OPEC, break the anti-Israeli Arab front, weaken the Saudi oil monarchy,

punish that kingdom for failing to suppress radical Islamists, and provoke a grassroots demand for regime change in Iran, following the model of a newly democratic Iraq.

Along the same lines, the grand narrative of martyrdom was supposed to lead the Muslim masses to identify with Al Qaeda, to hasten a general uprising against “apostate” pro-Western governments such as Saudi Arabia, precipitate the establishment of a universal Islamic state, and crush the nation of Israel. And like the war on terror, this ideology, in its turn, crashed against a wall of reality within the Muslim world. The Al Qaeda jihadists were hijacked by other political and religious actors with their own agendas. The Sunni Muslim Brothers and figures linked to them, such as Youssef al-Qaradawi, a superstar Islamic preacher on Al Jazeera, condemned the 9/11 attacks even as they applauded martyrdom operations in Israel and, for a time, in Iraq. They took advantage of Washington’s democratic model for the Middle East to put forward their own anti-American candidates, who, to Zawahiri’s chagrin, swept the polls in Egypt, Palestine, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Zawahiri could not find language strong enough to denounce the Muslim traitors who swapped the blood of jihadist martyrs for electoral victories.

More galling still, Ahmadinejad recycled the grand narrative of martyrdom to the benefit of Iran’s own political interests and nuclear ambitions in the region. In so doing, Iran returned to its roots, for the Islamic Republic had invented the modern suicide attack in the 1980s, when it sent waves of young Shiites to blow themselves up in Iraqi minefields during the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war. Iran then went on to inspire Hezbollah, whose “martyrs” in Lebanon willingly drove to their deaths in booby-trapped vehi-

cles that killed hundreds of American, French, and Israeli soldiers. Hamas in Palestine and finally Al Qaeda in the 9/11 attacks had merely adapted this revolutionary Shiite tactic to the Sunni world.

Terror or martyrdom—these were the two grand narratives created to transform the international landscape, particularly the Middle East, at the beginning of the second millennium. This book aims to analyze them in detail, and for the most part it will tally their failures. Bush, Cheney, and the neoconservatives on one hand, Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and Al Qaeda on the other—both sides staked their claim to power on a vision of global rectification through violent means. But the utopian ends that supposedly justified those means—universal democracy or a universal Islamist state—proved impossible to achieve, and in a few short years the opposing dreams of Bush and Bin Laden had devolved into an endless shared nightmare.

What caused the failure of these two ambitious, transformative fictions, and what lessons can help the world emerge from the horrible reality they created in the Middle East? This book will explore these questions, in an effort to discover the disastrous assumptions of the antagonists and to disentangle the tragic, unforeseen consequences of their decisions. It will then go on to examine the case of Europe, home to diverse populations of second- or third-generation Muslims, where the challenges and richness of lived experience suggest some alternatives to the fantasies of violence perpetrated by ideologues on both sides of this dangerous divide. Europe has been a hostage of the war on terror and a target of martyrdom operations, but it sits at the heart of one of the world's

most dynamic regions—a vast area centered around the Mediterranean and reaching to the North Sea and the Gulf—whose economic power is on a par with the American and Asian poles. This region hosts a civilization with a shared cultural legacy over fifteen centuries long. How can Europe, in collaboration with countries surrounding the Mediterranean and the Gulf, turn the crisis that has deepened since September 2001 into a factor for peace and prosperity, when the war on terror failed in this task? How can it make the saga of martyrdom obsolete?

In its final pages, this book will sketch a way to move forward—a third "narrative" that draws together the multicultural experience, economic strength, security, and diplomacy of Europe, the investment capacity and energy resources of the Gulf states, the entrepreneurial ambitions of their educated youth, and the vast labor pool and rich cultural traditions of Mediterranean countries from the Levant and North Africa. Running counter to the narratives of both Bush and Bin Laden, which considered force or violence to be a prerequisite for change in the Middle East, a new framework for sustainable prosperity would take up the challenge of building an integrated civilization stretching from the North Sea to the Gulf. Grounded in the kind of economic dynamism that remains at the core of the European Union, this alternative vision would meet the stability requirements of the United States and address the security needs of its ally, Israel, and the viability of a Palestinian state.

Intelligence services regularly express their greatest fear, a culmination of the dialectic of terror and martyrdom—that some terrorist/martyr from Birmingham or Karachi will carry out a

nuclear suicide attack in a Western metropolis, by blowing up a plutonium charge stolen from the arsenal of the former Soviet empire. It is impossible to rule out this apocalyptic scenario, but we can minimize the risk by nurturing a web of social and economic relations that transcends the conflictual logic of terror and martyrdom.