

# The Humiliation Myth

*Humiliation doesn't explain terrorism; the spread of Political Islam does.  
A response to Peter Bergen and Michael Lind.*

**A**s Peter Bergen and Michael Lind ably demonstrate in their recent article [“A Matter of Pride,” Issue #3], the notion that poverty causes terrorism—and that, absent poverty, terrorism would diminish radically—is a fallacy. Indeed, the “myth of deprivation” is so manifestly inadequate that it is worth asking whether its supporters actually believe it or whether, instead of confronting the complexities of terrorism’s causes and the difficulty of combating it, they prefer to mouth a platitudinous perspective that poverty causes all ills and that alleviating poverty (which will not happen soon) cures them. Bergen and Lind are also certainly correct that a sense of humiliation fuels terrorism. After all, the terrorist movements they discuss, as well as others, so often speak its wounded idiom and the associated, though analytically distinct, idioms of vengeance and justice for perceived wrongs.

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Yet whatever the substantial virtues of Bergen and Lind's analysis, they seek to replace one misguided and reductionist master explanation with another. The threat we face is not merely a humiliated Muslim populace that can be assuaged by putting an end to the putative humiliation. Rather, we are in a struggle with a powerful, highly aggressive, and dangerous *political* movement, Political Islam. This is distinct from the *religion* of Islam and its many non-Political Islamic adherents. Because of this, focusing on the "humiliation" that we are said to cause Muslims obscures the central issues regarding the real nature and magnitude of the current threat.

**T**he problems with the humiliation perspective of Bergen and Lind partly mirror those of the poverty position. The authors take humiliation mainly as a given and thus fail to investigate why terrorists and their supporters feel so humiliated in the first place, especially while other peoples and groups subject to similar or greater indignities do not. For instance, while they note that many non-Middle Eastern countries have not given birth to terrorist movements, they fail to note that many of those countries have also suffered substantial exploitation, domination, and all manner of indignities by Western powers, which often exceeds anything experienced by Middle Eastern countries. But, even assuming that Bergen and Lind are correct, they still fail to explain what exactly humiliation is—because, far from being an objective characteristic, as they seem to propose, it is a subjective quality that manifests itself in different quantities and intensities in different places, even in response to similar stimuli. And unless we delve deeper to understand what makes some people more prone to humiliation, we avoid the central issue and set ourselves up for misguided policy decisions.

Nor do Bergen and Lind explain why humiliation in and of itself leads to such disproportional will to violence and slaughter. For example, they claim that humiliation is the master explanation for the rise of Adolf Hitler and the politics he, with the willing aid of so many Germans, pursued. Its historical absurdity aside, this argument actually highlights the reductionism and untenability of their claim. There is simply no way to explain how the "humiliation" of a lost war (World War I) and a perceived unjust peace (Versailles) led Germans to attempt the annihilation of an entire people (the Jews) who had nothing to do with either; exterminate the mentally ill of Germany and elsewhere; conquer the Eurasian continent; slaughter additional millions of so-called subhumans (Poles, Russians, and others); turn entire peoples into slave populations; create a vast concentration camp system with more than 10,000 installations; and seek to destroy Christianity—and that's only a partial list of the Nazi regime's assault on humanity and Western civilization. Such an apocalyptic and

cataclysmic politics can come only from a mix of many other ideological and other factors, including eliminationist anti-Semitism, a profound racism that held the world to be composed of warring races in a struggle for dominance and survival, and a strategic vision and the opportunity to finally fulfill certain long-standing imperial aspirations. Much the same can be said of today's Political Islamic terrorists who seek to destroy the West; of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who seeks a world "without the United States and without Zionism"; and of Hamas, whose leader, Khaled Meshal, would desire to "sit on the throne of the world." In each case, a grandiose, uncompromising, and apocalyptic vision of Islam is the motivating force. Humiliation has played, at most, a tertiary part in producing such hopes and plans.

This points to a third problem with Bergen and Lind's singular emphasis on

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humiliation: It ignores the other critical factors that govern terrorist aspirations, especially the political-religious ideologies that shape their political goals and through which they understand the actions of Western powers. This is not to say that Bergen and Lind make no mention of ideology. They do

several times, and they do see it as a critical factor. But they treat it only in passing, and wrong-headedly. In their analysis, ideologies are principally an outgrowth of humiliation and not the framework that governs people's understanding of their own situation in the world. Such a cursory theory of ideology cannot explain why, for example, Arabs—and now with the Islamification of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, so many Muslims worldwide—conceptualize the very existence of Israel as an intense humiliation. Such a phenomenon can only be explained by plumbing the worldviews of those who feel humiliated by a political fact that has, objectively speaking, nothing to do with the vast majority of them.

Bergen and Lind also categorize the relevant ideologies as "radical" and "revolutionary," spread by "madmen and isolated sects" and "revolutionary extremists"; in doing so, the authors render them as extreme, unusual, artificial, or perhaps artifactual of something else (namely humiliation). But the ideologies at issue are not in fact obscure ideas but rather foundational political-religious worldviews, grounded not in the minds of "madmen" but in extremely widespread (though by no means universal) interpretations of Islam. They precede and then evolve in conjunction with political developments and acts, including (but hardly restricted to) those acts that are interpreted as humiliating.

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A fourth flaw in their analysis is that it treats terrorism as a foundational problem and policy issue, when in fact it is but one very serious manifestation of the most basic problem: Political Islamic movements that threaten to extend the sway of a totalitarian understanding of Islam and politics, and that use a variety of political and violent means, including terrorism, to achieve their ends. To be sure, there is nothing analytically wrong with focusing on terrorism as a problem. But no treatment of the contemporary terrorism that emanates from Islamic countries and groups can be deemed adequate without an account of its relationship to the Political Islamic movements and countries—and to their understandings of Islam—that provide its followers and general sustenance.

Put simply, Political Islam, whatever its various manifestations, collapses the distinction between religion and politics, holding that politics must be subordinated to a fundamentalist understanding of Islam. And it is animated by a death cult—an explicit glorification of mass murder and of dying for Allah—exceeding that of any major, modern political movement or regime save Nazism and perhaps Imperial Japan. Both genocidal slaughter (as practiced or merely called for) and totalitarian tendencies define the Political Islamic Sudanese regime (which Bergen and Lind treat, despite its several genocidal onslaughts, as having “not given birth . . . to a radical ideology”), the Taliban, al Qaeda, the Iranian leadership, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, and various lesser-known Political Islamic movements. Terrorism is but one important and powerful tool in the Political Islamists’ arsenal.

Related to this is a fifth problem, namely that Bergen and Lind treat Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda as stand-ins for terrorists in general. This is misleading, as other terrorists and other Political Islamic regimes have differing aspects and qualities. Bergen and Lind make no mention, for example, of Iran, with its financing of and support for the terrorists of Hezbollah and Hamas; its insistent drive to acquire nuclear weapons; its expressed desire to annihilate Israel; and its repeated threats to terrorize the Europeans should they not kow-tow to its demands. The Iranian regime, in power for 27 years and governing a wealthy, oil-rich country of almost 70 million people, hardly suffers from humiliation. And so while their goals and ideologies may be similar (despite their Sunni-Shia antipathies), Iran cannot be understood by subsuming it into an analysis of a loosely coordinated, deadly network of a few thousand terrorists.

**A**s one deepens and broadens the understanding of these themes, the picture of the conflicts becomes more complex and more intractable, the policy prescriptions change, and the time horizons for dealing with the problems lengthen. If indeed we are in conflict against Political Islam, as

I and many others believe, then we must look beyond humiliation as a source of real solutions.

Of course, many actions of the West—the war in Iraq, the Israelis’ ongoing conflict with the Palestinians—fuel the Political Islamic movements because they, their followers, and those Muslims vulnerable to their appeals perceive any slight, let alone subjective setback for Islam at the hands of the West, as humiliation. But this is not humiliation as Bergen and Lind describe it. The relatively tame Danish political cartoons that ran in 2005 unleashed a torrent of protests among Political Islamists on three continents, threats of mass murder, and actual violence and killings. What does this reaction have to do with any reasonable sense of humiliation? Pope Benedict XVI’s strange attempt at comparative religious enlightenment last September (in which he quoted a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor’s deprecating statement about Islam) was greeted by some leading Political Islamists in different countries with calls to “hunt down,” kill, or imprison the pontiff. What does such an outlandish response to a few words have to do with any reasonable sense of humiliation? When else in modern history have significant religious and political leaders called for the Pope to be killed? And all because of a few objectionable words?

To be sure, we could adopt measures, along the lines that Bergen and Lind propose, to reduce conflict points and thereby undercut some of the Political Islamists’ appeal. But would such steps really be effective in the long-term? Closing our bases and ending our “perceived occupation of the sacred territory of Saudi Arabia,” which supposedly inflamed the Political Islamists against us, did little to end Political Islamic terrorism and their imperial and totalitarian desires, plans, and existing policies. Moreover, much Political Islamic violence and terrorism (as Bergen and Lind note in passing) is directed at other Muslims who have more pluralistic, nontotalitarian, or merely different Political Islamist understandings of Islam. Humiliation is not the issue. An all-consuming, divinely ordained desire to impose theocratic totalitarian control is.

Moreover, it is not clear that we can put the humiliation “genie” back in the bottle. Whatever role it played in the emergence of Political Islam, that ideology now powerfully exists and has a vibrant life of its own, controlling countries and threatening to take over others. To return to the example of Nazi Germany, whatever the multiple causes of Nazism’s rise, by 1938 it was not within the Allies’ power to pacify the Nazis and the majority of Germans who supported them merely by reducing further “humiliation”; by that time, the humiliating terms of Versailles had been reversed and Germany had already regained its status as a great power. To be sure, Bergen and Lind acknowledge that by 1938 “no concessions . . . short of acquiescence” would have sufficed. But they do not draw

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the policy conclusion that follows for today. We must recognize that likewise “no concessions . . . short of acquiescence” will satisfy the Political Islamists. We must therefore fashion policies with a clear-eyed view of the underlying political-religious ideology that structures their enmity and aspirations, the varied and widespread political manifestations their movements and governments assume, and the broad and determined threat they pose to governments and peoples that goes well beyond al Qaeda’s by-now-classical terrorist means.

Abandoning the Middle East to the Political Islamists and having Israel capitulate (and ultimately surrender its existence) is the only thing that will satisfy them—the only thing that will stop Political Islamists, in Bergen and Lind’s language, from feeling “humiliated” (and then only partly, given the growing number of Muslims in Europe). Needless to say, this would be extremely self-injurious, not to mention immoral. Instead, we should recognize the broad-based danger not merely of terrorism, but of Political Islam. And we must realize that it can only be defeated by active diplomatic, economic, and military containment and, when practical, rollback by the United States and its allies in Europe and in the Middle East. We should stop fixating on al Qaeda and terrorism, narrowly construed, as the overwhelming problem and recognize that the biggest danger is the Political Islamic colossus and aspiring hegemon: the soon-to-go-nuclear Iran. ■