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Do These Two Have Anything in Common?

President Bush has equated Islamic radicalism with communism. Is the comparison sound? Is it wise?

By Zbigniew Brzezinski

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In a series of recent speeches to the American people, President Bush has sought to equate the current terrorist threat with the 20th-century menace of communist totalitarianism. His case is that the terrorist challenge is global in scope, "evil" in nature, ruthless toward its foes, and eager to control every aspect of life and thought. Thus, he argues, the battle against terrorism demands nothing "less than a complete victory."

In making this case, the president has repeatedly invoked the adjective "Islamic" when referring to terrorism and he has compared the "murderous ideology of Islamic radicalism" to the ideology of communism.

Is the president historically right in his diagnosis of the allegedly similar dangers posed by Islamic extremism and by totalitarian communism? The differences between the two may be more telling than their similarities. And is he wise to be expounding such a thesis?

By asserting that Islamic extremism, "like the ideology of communism . . . is the great challenge of our new century," Bush is implicitly elevating Osama bin Laden's stature and historic significance to the level of figures such as Lenin, Stalin or Mao. And that suggests, in turn, that the fugitive Saudi dissident hiding in some cave (or perhaps even deceased) has been articulating a doctrine of universal significance. Underlying the president's analogy is the proposition that bin Laden's "jihad" has the potential for dominating the minds and hearts of hundreds of millions of people across national and even religious boundaries. That is quite a compliment to bin Laden, but it isn't justified. The "Islamic" jihad is, at best, a fragmented and limited movement that hardly resonates in most of the world.

Communism, by comparison, undeniably had worldwide appeal. By the 1950s, there was hardly a country in the world without an active communist movement or conspiracy, irrespective of whether the country was predominantly Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist or Confucian. In some countries, such as Russia and China, the communist movement was the largest political formation, dominating intellectual discourse; in democratic countries, such as Italy and France, it vied for political power in open elections.

In response to the dislocations and injustices precipitated by the Industrial Revolution, communism offered a vision of a perfectly just society. To be sure, that vision was false

and was used to justify violence that eventually led directly to the Soviet gulag, Chinese labor and "reeducation" camps, and other human rights abuses. Nonetheless, for a while, communism's definition of the future bolstered its cross-cultural appeal.

In addition, the intellectual and political challenge of the communist ideology was backed by enormous military power. The Soviet Union possessed a huge nuclear arsenal, capable of launching in the course of a few minutes a massive atomic attack on America. Within a few hours, upwards of 120 million Americans and Soviets could have been dead in an apocalyptic mutual cross-fire. That was the horrible reality.

Contemporary terrorism -- though nasty and criminal, whether Islamic or otherwise -- has no such political reach and no such physical capability. Its appeal is limited; it offers no answers to the novel dilemmas of modernization and globalization. To the extent that it can be said to possess an "ideology," it is a strange blend of fatalism and nihilism. In al Qaeda's case, it is actively supported by relatively isolated groupings, and its actions have been condemned without exception by all major religious figures, from the pope to the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia.

Its power is circumscribed, too. It still relies largely on familiar tools of violence. Unlike communist totalitarian regimes, al Qaeda does not use terror as an organizing tool but rather, because of its own organizational weakness, as a disruptive tactic. Its members are bound together by this tactic, not by an ideology. Ultimately, al Qaeda or some related terrorist group may acquire truly destructive power, but one should not confuse potentiality with actuality.

But in the meantime, is Bush smart to be making this comparison?

The analogy to communism may have some short-term political benefit, for it can rekindle the fears of the past while casting the president in the mold of the historic victors of the Cold War, from Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan. But the propagation of fear also has a major downside: It can produce a nation driven by fear, lacking in self-confidence and thus less likely to inspire trust among America's allies, including Muslim ones, whose support is needed for an effective and intelligent response to the terrorist phenomenon.

It is particularly troubling that Bush has also relied heavily in his recent speeches on what to many Muslims is bound to sound like Islamophobic language. His speeches, though occasionally containing disclaimers that he is not speaking of Islam as a whole, have been replete with references to "the murderous ideology of the Islamic radicals," "Islamic radicalism," "militant jihadism," "Islamofascism" or "Islamic Caliphate."

Such phraseology can have unintended consequences. Instead of mobilizing moderate Muslims to stand by our side, the repetitive refrain about Islamic terrorism may not only offend moderate Muslims but could eventually contribute to a perception that the campaign against terrorism is also a campaign against Islam as a whole. They may note that the United States, in condemning IRA terrorism in Northern Ireland or Basque

terrorism in Spain, does not describe it as "Catholic terrorism," a phrase that Catholics around the world would likely find offensive.

Bush's recent speeches also stand in sharp contrast to his mid-September address to the United Nations, in which he not only refrained entirely from labeling terrorism in any religious terms but also spoke thoughtfully of social "anger and despair" as contributing to the rise of terrorism. He stressed that the war against terrorism "will not be won by force alone. . . . We must change the conditions that allow terrorists to flourish and recruit." By contrast, Bush recently has dismissed altogether the notion that there could be any "set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed" in order to eliminate the sources of terrorism.

It should be cause for concern to U.S. policymakers that only one major foreign statesman comes close to emulating Bush's rhetorical emphasis on the Islamic aspects of the current terrorist threat, and that is Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin has deliberately seized upon the theme of Islamic terrorism to justify his relentless war against the Chechens' aspirations for self-determination. That war has the dangerous effect of generating rising tensions with Russia's sizable Muslim population.

It certainly is not in the United States's interest, especially in the Middle East, to prompt a fusion of Muslim political resentments against America with a wider and stronger sense of Islamic religious identity. When the president talks of Iraq as "the central front" in the war against Islamic terrorism, he links Iraqi and Arab anti-American nationalism with outraged Muslim religious feelings, thereby reinforcing the case for bin Laden's claim that the struggle is, indeed, against "the crusaders."

That fusion could endow terrorism with fanatical intensity, compensating for the weakness that it suffers in comparison to the organizational and military threat posed earlier by communism. Indeed, the limitations of al Qaeda and similar organizations could change, especially if the president fails to pursue policies that aim at isolating terrorist groups as well as undercutting their recruitment campaigns.

Unfortunately, the military character of our presence in the Middle East may be helping to bring this change about. Robert A. Pape, a political science professor at the University of Chicago, has analyzed the motivations of contemporary suicide-attackers. He demonstrates that in the majority of cases, the attackers' basic impulse has been hostility toward foreign invaders, and he concluded a recent TV interview by observing that "the longer our forces stay on the ground in the Arabian Peninsula, the greater the risk of the next 9/11."

America would be better served if Bush avoided semantic traps that create uncertainty about our true motives or fuel the worst suspicions regarding U.S. strategy in the Middle East. Neither Islamophobic terminology nor evocations of the victorious struggle with communism help generate a better public understanding of what policies are needed in order to pacify the Middle East and to speed the fading away of terrorism, whose origins lie mostly in that region of the world. Americans need to hear more of what Bush was

saying not long ago to the United Nations and less of what he has been propagating lately in the United States.

Zbigniew Brzezinski was national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter. He is a professor of American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and a trustee of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.