

# The Origins of the War on Terrorism Paradigm

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It is now widely accepted among scholars that a new national security paradigm emerged in the United States after 9/11. This paradigm shift accompanied the George W. Bush administration's declaration of a "global war on terror" and consisted of new interpretations of domestic and international law, new recognition of the threats posed by non-state actors, and a stated determination to eradicate threats everywhere before they emerged. Yet most scholarship has neglected examination of this paradigm's origins. It became dominant after 9/11, but it did not originate then. Examination of these origins and the original context shows that the war on terrorism paradigm was not created in response to a catastrophic attack on the American "homeland"; rather it arose out of anxieties about U.S. capacity exert its will in the Third World. Its foundations were established long before its post-9/11 revival. This paper places these origins within the context of U.S.-Middle East relations in the 1980s. It reads together the public discourses of Lebanese Hizbullah and of U.S. Secretary of State George P. Shultz who, more than any other U.S. official, promulgated the justifications for the war on terrorism, to show that the notion of a jihad aimed at American power and of a war on terrorism had a basis in anxieties about the capacity of American power in the Middle East. The article uses the author's original translation of the Hizbullah's 1985 "Open Letter to the Oppressed" alongside George Shultz's public pronouncements between the start of the U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1982 and the climax of the Iran-Contra scandal. It argues that provocations of the war on terrorism and the war on terrorism itself emerged out of emotions connected to the efficacy of American power in the Middle East.

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In the July/August 2018 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, in an article entitled "The Long Shadow of 9/11", Robert Malley and Jon Finan write that since 9/11, "the United States has become captive to a national security paradigm that ends up magnifying the very fears from which it was born". Like many other commentators, Malley and Finan assume that this paradigm, what we might call the "war on terrorism" paradigm, spontaneously came into being in reaction to al-Qa'ida's "planes operation" in September, 2001. In fact, this paradigm and its companion paradigm, what we might call the "jihad against American power in the Middle East" paradigm, have longer histories. This article examines conceptualizations of political violence against the United States circulating in the 1980s that were important in the construction of both paradigms.

In February 1985, a spokesman for an organization calling itself "Hizb Allah" (literally "Party of God") (hereafter Hizbullah) delivered an "open letter to the oppressed" at a press conference in the Shiyāh neighborhood of Beirut. In this lengthy letter, published at the time in the Lebanese daily newspaper *al-'Ahd*,

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its authors directly addressed the depictions of themselves as “terrorists”. “America has attempted” read the text of the letter,

by way of its analysts, to give the impression that those who work against its arrogance in Lebanon, and expose it as a contemptible failure, and destroy its plans for the oppressed in this country, are nothing except a handful of fanatical terrorists.

In the typical American caricature of overzealous Muslims in Lebanon, the letter continued, these “terrorists” have “nothing to do except to explode establishments offering alcohol, gambling, entertainment, and the like”. In the end, however, said the spokesman, these caricatures fooled nobody, because “the world knows that he who considers confronting America ... does not have recourse to anything except these ... operations, which engage it immediately at its head”.<sup>1</sup>

Examining Hizbullah’s “open letter” alongside what key U.S. politicians said about “terrorism” around the same time helps us to see the parallel ways in which conceptualizations of political violence against the United States on both sides were informed by deep anxieties about political relevance, potency, and national purpose. By reading together the public addresses of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz and Hizbullah’s “open letter”, we can see that underlying these conceptualizations were anxieties, fantasies, distortions, and denials about American power, and particularly the exercise of that power in the Middle East.

Hearing these voices together, we notice the parallel ways in which both sides were comfortable operating within the conventional terrorist versus freedom fighter binary for understanding irregular political violence. Both U.S. officials and Hizbullah spokesmen saw the use in making the terrorist versus freedom fighter distinction. Hizbullah found it useful, for example, to deride any notion that what it was up to was “terrorism”, or that it was made up of “terrorists”. At the same time, the open letter expressed pride in the 1983 Beirut bombings, of the U.S. embassy and the marine headquarters, crediting the latter act with kicking off a liberation war in Lebanon against the “unjust” occupation of the country by Israel, the United States, and France.

Likewise, we find Israeli politicians, like Menachem Begin and Benyamin Netanyahu, Reagan administration officials, like Shultz, and others, making the “terrorist”/“freedom fighter” distinction in different terms. Indeed, what came to be called the Reagan Doctrine was premised on the neat distinction between “freedom fighters” and “terrorists”. The administration supported “freedom fighters”, such as the Contras in Nicaragua and the mujahidin in Afghanistan in their use of irregular warfare because they were on the right side of that divide (Fanon, 2004/1961). Meanwhile, they inveighed against Hizbullah and PLO leaders because they were on the wrong side of that divide.

### **George Shultz: Delusions of Terrorism and Counterterrorism as Strategy**

Secretary of State George Shultz, the most prolific speaker on terrorism among Reagan officials, did not easily fit Hizbullah’s depiction of U.S. analysts. Far from dismissing violence against U.S. forces in Lebanon as the irrational outbursts of religious fanatics, Shultz understood these acts as a manifestation of a widespread political strategy global in reach. In a series of speeches between the arrival of the marines in Beirut as part of the multinational force in August 1982 and the nadir of the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987, Shultz self-consciously conceptualized terrorism and how the United States ought to counter it (Netanyahu, 1986; Shultz, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup> “Al-risālaal-maftūhali-l-mustad‘afin” February 16, 1985. My discussion of the open letter in this paper is based on my own original and complete translation of the document.

Shultz's experience of 1983 brought about an epiphany about terrorism and the danger it posed to American power. His newfound insight was most explicitly articulated in his speech at New York's Park Avenue Synagogue in October 1984, entitled "Terrorism and the Modern World", but he reiterated its themes numerous times. The crux of Shultz's revelation was this: The terrorism seen around the world since 1968 that spiked in 1983 ought not to be understood as disparate acts spurred by the availability of new technologies or the pull of new causes. Rather it ought to be understood as a deliberate effort involving states and insurgents across the globe to force the United States into retreat and to frighten it away from using its hard power in the third world.

The events that crystallized Shultz's epiphany on terrorism were the same ones that Hizbullah glorified in the open letter. From Shultz's perspective, the Beirut bombings chillingly spurred the ominous conclusion that international terrorism was increasing while the United States was becoming more and more the favored target. Because of the number of Americans victimized in the Beirut bombings, 241, 1983 was, according to Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] data on terrorism, the most deadly year on record. Yet the question of whether those bombings ought even to have been understood as "international terrorism", or as anti-colonial resistance by an oppressed population under foreign occupation, or as something else, were impossible to answer by referencing universally understood and accepted criteria, and simply did not arise for Reagan officials.

Distortions pervaded Shultz's discourses on terrorism. He inflated the number of international terrorists out there, seen in his references made to the 10,000 "terrorists" in Beirut in 1982. He also had a tendency to exaggerate the degree to which this supposed network of terror states and non-state terrorists strategically collaborated and operationally cooperated. Shultz emphasized, for example, the connections between the PLO and the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, which connections affirmed the terrorist threat that Nicaragua supposedly posed to U.S. home soil. Reagan, for his part, referred to what he called "Murder, Incorporated", Cuba, North Korea, Nicaragua, Iran, and Libya, which he said was run by the "strangest collection of "misfits" and "loony tunes" since the Third Reich. Both Shultz and Reagan expressed the fear that these misfits would use terrorism to peck away at American power gradually but persistently, while the U.S. political class and public remained complacent. This depiction of the threat transcended the cold war paradigm and presaged later articulations of the terrorism menace and its implications (Sterling, 1981; Reagan, 1985).

There was a deeper level, however, upon which distortion operated in Shultz's discourses. He repressed political violence perpetrated by the United States, its allies, or those non-state actors supported by the United States in insurgencies, such as the Contras or the Afghan mujahidin. Shultz showed no consciousness that the U.S. government or any of its allies had ever engaged in what he called terrorism. The most brutal acts perpetrated by U.S. allies in the preceding years, such as the 1981 massacre in El Mozote, El Salvador carried out by U.S.-supported death squads, which killed over 1,000 people in a single village, or the Phalange militia's rampages in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, under the protection of Israeli forces and with U.S. acquiescence, received no mention in Shultz's depiction of barbarism in the modern age. A counter-discourse on terrorism did emerge at the time. A number of leftist academics and public intellectuals exposed the Reagan administration's denials and the hypocrisy of its preoccupation with a narrowly demarcated "international terrorism" while it organized what Edward Herman called the "real terror network". Shultz made no effort to refute these portrayals. Rather, he ignored them (Malkin, 2018; Anziska, 2012; Herman, 1982; Said, 1986; Chomsky, 1988).

Regardless, Shultz's moralizations about terrorism helped to rationalize an aggressive posture for the United States in the world. The premise that international terrorism was part of a global strategy led to the conclusion that U.S. national security managers in turn had to think strategically about how to combat it. Lurking here was a heads you win, tails you lose argument. If the terror network sought to force the United States to change its foreign policies in the third world, then thwarting the terrorists meant doing the opposite. Within this framing, acts of violence perpetrated against U.S. forces indicated that the United States was achieving its goals. Reagan appealed to this logic in his narration of the 1983 marine headquarters bombing, for example. If, on the other hand, such terrorism declined, this too indicated the success of U.S. policies (Young, 2003; Reagan, 1983).

Despite these distortions, Shultz and other officials articulated key components of the war on terrorism paradigm over these years. Shultz took the lead in speaking in public about the United States' ongoing "war against terrorism" more than any other official. He suggested that the logic of deterrence applied in this war. If the United States punished terrorists in one context, this would deter those specific terrorists, while also deterring terrorists elsewhere. Underpinning this logic was the notion of the essential terrorist. It mattered little that the terrorists might not be connected anywhere but in U.S. officials' minds. Just as significant, in the "war against terrorism" the pursuit of retaliation and preemption become interwoven. This interweaving could be seen in Reagan's rationalization of the 1986 bombing of Libya in which he invoked Article 51 of the UN Charter as a pretext, thereby portraying the raid as preemptive self-defense against an imminent attack. While he did so, Reagan reiterated the mission's retributive qualities, saying in his folksy way that if Qaddafi failed to desist in his support for terrorism, "we shall do it again," until he got the message (Reagan, 1986). By constructing international terrorism as a threat that required preemptive national self-defense, and by imbuing retribution for individual acts of terrorism with national purpose, Shultz and Reagan furthered construction of the war on terrorism paradigm.

Shultz's phobia-like obsession with international terrorism over these years in part suggested a broader effort to undo the humiliation suffered by the U.S. political class during Israel's war in Lebanon, especially including the marine interventions there. Of course, the Reagan administration's preoccupation with international terrorism predated these events, but earlier it fit more with the effort to reinvigorate the cold war. Shultz's anxieties about whether the marines would be enabled to perform U.S. power were heightened by Israeli generals and Shi'i militants alike. In the end, as a result of what they considered the worst act of "international terrorism" against "American citizens" in history, the administration was forced to withdraw the marines ignominiously. This outcome fed the anxieties that underlay the post-1983 U.S. "war against terrorism" most elaborately rationalized, justified, and articulated by Shultz.

### **Hizbullah's Open Letter and the Fantasy of a New Islamic Anti-Colonialism**

While the authors of Hizbullah's open letter addressed it generically to the "oppressed", they simultaneously directed it at the United States as a taunt. At the time of its promulgation, those connected with Hizbullah held U.S. hostages, including the CIA station chief, William Buckley (who died in captivity months later). U.S. officials, such as NSC operative Oliver North, watched video footage of Buckley wasting away in captivity, and fumed over their helplessness to do anything. In celebrating the 1983 bombings, the letter added insult to injury.

Yet while these facts might have allowed Hizbullah to close its case on the realities of American weakness, instead the open letter painted a picture of American power as broad and encompassing (North & Novak, 1991).

Perhaps what captured this projection of hegemonic omnipotence onto the United States best was the heading early in the letter that read: “America is behind all our ills”. Hizbullah held the United States responsible for Israel’s behavior, which at this point had produced thousands of civilian deaths, an ongoing occupation, and the imprisonment of Shi’is inside Israel, with rumors of torture. The letter also held the United States responsible for the role its NATO allies played in Lebanon, in particular France and Italy; and it deemed the United States complicit in the behavior of Maronite politicians. All of this indicated, for Hizbullah’s spokesmen, an old-style colonialism. Indeed, the letter made little distinction between European colonialism through World War II and American power after. To be sure, such representation of American power had a long history in the Arab world. What made Hizbullah’s discourse unique was its seamless interweaving of this traditionally Marxist and Third Worldist vocabulary about American imperialism with Qur’anic vocabulary.

With its Qur’anic language, Hizbullah presented the United States as the epitome of the “arrogant” ones who had exploited the “noble oppressed” in the name of one materialist ideology or another. The “open letter” thereby portrayed the confrontation with American power as part of an eschatological struggle that would only be resolved with God’s help.

We can think of the open letter as the first collective call to jihad against the United States by Arab actors. Paralleling Abdullah ‘Azzam’s calls to jihad in Afghanistan, in the open letter Hizbullah proclaimed it to be an “obligation” for all Muslims everywhere in the world to help the oppressed in Lebanon expel the colonizers, either as fighters or by sending aid. To be sure, this was a “defensive jihad” whose main ambition was to “liberate” Lebanon. But because the call was transnational, indeed global in reach, and because American power was understood to likewise be global in its oppressive nature, it was far from clear what the limits to this defensive jihad would be.

Hizbullah presented itself as the hub of an ecumenical liberation struggle involving Sunni and Shi’a, Muslims and non-Muslims. In addition to addressing an expansively conceived umma, the imagined global Muslim community, the letter urged liberation movements in many locales to form a “world front” of armed strugglers, whatever their animating ideology. It was like an updated version of the Tricontinental, except that now it was Ayatollah Khomeini rather than ChéGuevara who was idealized and whose words were depicted as sacrosanct. Khomeini, like Guevara before him, had impeccable credentials as a rebel against American power, having helped, as Guevara did, to overturn one of America’s favored dictatorships in the third world. Guevara became a martyr for the cause; Khomeini, as Hizbullah understood it, was a conduit for God’s guidance on earth. The letter indicated a wholehearted embrace of Khomeini’s concept of “rule of the jurist” [*wilāyat al-faqīh*], taking him to be the leader since he had brought the true Islamic revolution to fruition in Iran. Conflicts lurked here that would be difficult if not impossible to resolve. If Islam was the true path and Khomeini was the rightful leader, how could a unification of liberation movements include non-Islamic movements that rejected Khomeinism? If the Islamic revolution was destined to spread, how could Hizbullah’s assurance to Christians in Lebanon that it did not seek to impose Islam by force be accepted?

But what form was this confrontation to take? What was jihad to look like in Lebanon in the 1980s? What was martyrdom to look like? Here we come to the particularly contingent aspect of this history for which the open letter offered no specific answers. Based on various actions taken by Hizbullah leaders over these years, we can surmise that “confrontation” as Hizbullah’s leaders understood it included kidnapping, hostage taking, assassination, and the hijacking of commercial airlines; it also included “martyrdom operations,” what came to

be called “suicide bombing” by critics. In other words, it included precisely those actions that U.S. officials like Shultz obsessed over as the problem of “international terrorism”.

Yet Hizbullah’s leaders expected that U.S. officials would be outliers in seeing things this way. Hizbullah expected that the letter’s hoped for global audience would understand that tactics, such as these were the only ones available to an oppressed people fighting a liberation struggle against a brutal colonialism orchestrated by multiple powers. The struggle in Lebanon, the letter led its audience to understand, was the latest iteration of active resistance to Western colonialism valorized in the decolonization struggles of earlier decades. If Hizbullah had to adopt new and more shocking tactics that was only because the nature of the colonial oppression faced in Lebanon required new means to combat it.

### **Conclusion: Toward an Imperial History of the War on Terrorism Paradigm**

The 1983 Beirut bombings, just as al-Qa’ida’s “planes operation”, represented anomalous events from the perspective of U.S. national security managers. As such they each provided the occasion for the reshuffling of national security paradigms. These anomalous events took place in the context of the ongoing exercise of U.S. power in the Middle East. Hizbullah’s open letter held the United States accountable for, among other things, Israel’s invasion and occupation of Lebanon, Iraq’s war on Iran, and the denial of the right self-determination to the Palestinians. It promised continual resistance to these policies. The more U.S. officials experienced of this kind of resistance as an indication of American impotence, the more alluring the war on terrorism paradigm would become.

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