TERRORISM: TODAY'S MINI-WARS
- By Bassam Madany

On Christmas Day 1986 an Iraqi Airways plane took off from Baghdad for Amman, Jordan. The passengers were being served lunch on the two-hour flight when suddenly a young man burst out of his seat and headed for the pilot's cabin. Security men ran after him and tried to subdue him, but somehow he managed to get away from them. There was utter confusion. He exploded a small plastic grenade. Shooting broke out. The pilot got in touch with Saudi authorities, who granted him permission to land at a small airstrip. Unfortunately, the plane was already severely damaged. It did not make a successful landing. The majority of the passengers lost their lives. A few survived to share with the world the horrors of their flight.

This tragic incident highlights the problem of terrorism in our times. The world is haunted by the plight of people who are still held captive in Lebanon. Their plight has already had a great influence on the conduct of United States foreign affairs. It has forced us to focus our attention on terrorism, the very disturbing phenomenon that plagues many parts of the world, especially the lands of the Middle East.

Perspective on Terrorism

To understand this problem, we need to develop a proper historical perspective. Terrorism is not just a modern occurrence; neither is it to be associated with a specific race or region of the world. Terrorist acts have occurred in many nations: Japan, Northern Ireland, Spain, Italy, France, and West Germany, to mention just a few.

However, at the moment it's Middle Eastern countries that come to mind. North Americans still remember the long captivity of their embassy staff in Tehran, the high jacking of the TWA plane in the summer of 1985, and the bizarre takeover of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* with the brutal murder of an aged, handicapped passenger.

Personally, I can recall a day in 1946 when the radio station to which I was listening stopped its regular programming to announce the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. A huge section of the structure was demolished, burying about one hundred civil servants, British and Arab.   Christians and Muslims died as a result of that brutal terrorist act. Who were the perpetrators of the bombing? An underground terrorist organization known as the Irgun. One of its members was an extremist by the name of Menachem Begin. Years later he became the prime minister of Israel and signed a peace treaty with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt at Camp David, Maryland!
I mention this terrorist event simply to underline the fact that both sides of the Middle East conflict have resorted to violence. I do not mean to minimize the criminality of

terrorist acts; I simply mention it here to set the record straight. Soon after the birth of Israel in 1948, I read an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* written by a reporter who had visited the Syrian and Lebanese refugee camps that housed around 200,000 Palestinians. The writer warned readers about the consequences of postponing the solution of the Palestinians' desperate situation. I quote him from memory: "desperate people may resort to desperate means to achieve their goals.' Was he forecasting the multiple highjackings of Western civilian airplanes in 1970? The attacks against Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972?

Millions of people have lost their homes and homelands since the end of World War II. We never hear, for example, of Poles asking for the part of their country that is now in the U.S.S.R. Why, then, does the Palestinian-refugee problem seem to defy solution? And why are Arabs killing other Arabs? We watch glimpses of their fratricidal war in Lebanon on our TV screens. Christian militias fight Muslim militias. Palestinians are encircled in their camps by the Shi'ite Amal militia. What kind of an equation makes the freedom of America hostages hinge on the release of the Shi'ite terrorists who tried to assassinate the ruler of Kuwait?

A Theological Problem

Unlike the West, the Middle East has not succumbed to a secular worldview. Religion forms the very heart of various outlooks on life among the people of the area. Even though, for example, many Israelis are not religious Jews, Israel is a Jewish state. Muslims find it incomprehensible that a non-Islamic state was planted at the very heart of their world. In the final analysis, the Arab-Israeli problem is a theological one-- especially now that fundamentalist Islam, revived in the Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution in Iran, is becoming a potent force.

What complicates the picture even more is the persistence of the ideal of a theocracy among many Muslims today. They view their early history in the seventh century A.D. as one that was blessed by God for their obedience to his revealed will in the Koran. While a critical study of that "golden" period of the Arab/Muslim community has shown that that era was far from perfect, the belief persists among the masses that the ideal of an Islamic theocracy must be revived. If only they would return to God and apply his law (Shari'a) to their personal, social, national, and international lives, all their problems would disappear!

When theocratic beliefs gain the upper hand and are coupled with a romanticized view of early history, Muslims tend to follow the utopian dreams of their leaders. As a Middle Eastern writer said recently, "The idea of a strictly Islamic state in which Islamic sacred laws would exist and function in modern times is indeed utopian at its best" But until this utopianism is discarded, a fertile ground for acts of violence continues to exist. At a conference dealing with terrorism, held in June 1986 in Washington, D.C., Professor Bernard Lewis of Princeton University referred to the extremely complicated nature of the problem in its Middle Eastern manifestation by saying, "The enemy . . . is God's enemy." When this is the conviction of the people and their leaders, any means may be

used to achieve "God's purposes." In this way of thinking, even acts of extreme violence are deemed acceptable and necessary.

What can we, as Christians living in the Western world do about this tragic state of affairs? Here are some reflections based, I believe, on a biblical understanding of history in its New Testament phase:

(1) We must plead with our representatives in government to deal justly, equitably, and evenhandedly with the nations of the Middle East.

(2) The church must double its efforts to proclaim lovingly and courageously the only message that heals and reconciles: the gospel of redemption. We can never expect perfect order in the world this side of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the meantime, our words and deeds must manifest clearly the true nature of the good news of the Bible.

(3) We must encourage the moderates among the Muslims to speak out against utopianism and terrorism. This can happen only if our governments' dealings with them are devoid of double-talk and duplicity.

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