

Humiliation as a Precursor to Religious Violence

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The two greatest group humiliations of the modern age produced the two greatest movements of genocide and terrorism in the modern world: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire along with the imposition of European colonialism on the Arab world and the rise of the jihad; and the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War and the appeal of Nazism in Germany.

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire ended trans-national Muslim rule and represented a tremendous loss of power and prestige by the followers of Mohammed. This was soon followed by the force of European colonialism that subjected and further humiliated the Arabic world. The failure of secular nationalism to create a pan-Muslim civilization and return it to power further humiliated the Muslim world. And the Muslim world's inability to influence world events was further exemplified by the imposition of the state of Israel without any negotiations with Arab leaders and their defeat in the 1967 war. These collective humiliations still cast a shadow over the Muslim world and are an important background for the rise of militant and violent Islamic groups who seek to restore the ancient caliphate and with it the pride and power of the Muslim civilization. Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual forefather of the jihadi movement, insists on the moral and spiritual superiority of the past Muslim civilization and that the Muslim world has nothing to learn from a decadent West. Rather this glorious past must be restored by the use of violence. Bin Laden's speeches make clear he too desires to undo the humiliation of the Muslim world at the hands of the "crusaders" and restore it to greatness through violence. Virtually all the interviews I have seen with jihadis and recruits to fanatical Muslim groups in Europe and the Middle East have mentioned humiliation. The same is true of many interviews with members of Christian Identity and White Supremacist groups in the United States.

The Treaty of Versailles, which was imposed on Germany as punishment for the First World War, removed all its colonies from German control, laid on it onerous sanctions, and demanded its disarmament. All of these had been sources of pride and their loss was a total humiliation. These humiliations along with the virtual collapse of the weak Weimar government and the German economy laid the groundwork for Hitler's rise to power. German veterans returning to a defeated and destabilized nation reported such feelings as "as a Front-fighter the collapse of the Fatherland in November 1918 was to me completely incomprehensible," or "a great hopelessness was in me," or "I had believed adamantly in Germany's invincibility and now I only saw the country in its deepest humiliation—the entire world fell to the ground." People holding such sentiments became the core of the Nazi movement. National humiliation caused by military defeat, internal political weakness, and economic collapse had at least two disastrous results for Germany and for the rest of the world: it set off a furious search for scapegoats, for some one or some group to blame and to punish for all this suffering; and it unleashed a ferocious drive to undo the humiliation by defeating those who had humiliated Germany. Many

citizens were vulnerable to someone who could explain which group was to blame and could offer a way to overcome the humiliation. That person was obviously Adolph Hitler who pointed the finger of responsibility at Jews and other “non-Aryans” and had a plan to restore German prominence through military conquest.

These two historical examples make clear that a nation, a trans-national group, or a sub-group within a society who experiences profound humiliation is exceedingly vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment into movements and cultures of violence.

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