

A surfeit of martyrs

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[MARTIN REGG COHN](#)

Language, like terrorism, keeps evolving.

So when the media cite the menace of "jihad", the word is now used without translation and understood to mean Islamic Holy War against infidels.

Except that it doesn't, not quite.

To mainstream Muslims, jihad also translates as "struggle"; a personal striving.

It also describes what I experienced during two overseas postings for the *Toronto Star* — a journalistic journey that evolved into a personal struggle, a kind of journalistic jihad, to understand the roots of religious radicalism and the pull of ethnic extremism.

How does faith mutate into fundamentalism? What motivates young men to massacre innocents in pursuit of martyrdom? Why does ethnic identity — and the quest for self-determination — descend into intolerance or tribalism?

These questions became the focal point of my decade-long odyssey, leading me down blind alleys and into the occasional dead end. There are no certainties when faith, ethnicity and extremism are involved.

I watched these volatile ingredients form a combustible mix that fuelled terrorism. Together, they are the transcendent forces of our time.

And much misunderstood. Many Canadians still equate fundamentalism almost exclusively with Islam; more often than not, Muslims get all the bad press thanks to the gruesome exploits of groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Al Qaeda.

My travels exposed me to the reality that no one is immune to religious radicalization. I encountered the pogroms of Hindus against Muslims in India, the bloody-mindedness of Buddhists against minority Hindus in Sri Lanka, the misplaced messianism of Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank, and the deep-rooted intolerance of Christians towards Muslims in the Philippines.

From the desert religions of the Middle East to the mystical faiths of Asia, fundamentalism holds a powerful, universal appeal for people of all faiths.



MARTIN REGG COHN
A village girl in Sri Lanka is guarded by local Buddhist militia against attacks by Tamil Tiger fighters.

Leaving Canada for Jerusalem in the mid-1990s as the *Star's* Middle East correspondent, I landed in the middle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: a tale of two faiths fighting a Hundred Years War. In the battle between Jewish settlers and Palestinian martyrs, rivals became soulmates by jointly undermining the fledgling peace process.

Fundamentalist Jews took land, Islamic jihadis took lives. And each side dehumanized the other.

Amid the symbiotic self-destructiveness, both claimed spiritual justification for their transgressions and profited from the fallout: a renewed Palestinian intifada and predictable retaliation from Israel's armed forces. And as the peace process unravelled, terrorism moved into the void to capture the world's attention.

In Jerusalem, terror had its own special sound: the dull thud of a suicide bombing followed by the wailing of sirens and the moaning of victims.

The most unnerving part of my job was rushing to the scene of a bomb blast, like the one that exploded at a crowded food market near our office. I remember threading my way past throngs of panicked shoppers fleeing in the opposite direction. Using my notebook as a kind of psychological shield, I moved through the carnage: Cobs of corn strewn among severed limbs and shards of glass. Bits of human flesh splattered on market stalls. Chunks of watermelon immersed in pools of blood. Elderly victims slumped amid the detritus of the daily market, groaning in pain or eerily silent from the shock. The charred, decapitated torso of a bomber splayed on the street alongside the corpses of his victims. United in death.

Surrounded by the misery, I tried to fathom the method behind the madness. The bomber's family, brimming with pride, would invariably erect a mourning tent to celebrate the good deed, distributing sweets to mark the happy occasion. There would be talk of how the "martyr," by righting Israeli wrongs, could look forward to 72 virgins in paradise.

I had presumed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict placed me at the epicentre of terrorism, but it didn't take long for the growing popularity of suicide bombings to create an arc of terror stretching across the Middle East, with Muslims slaying Muslims over theological disputes.

The next leg of my journey took me to Algeria and Egypt on the trail of mujahedeen Holy Warriors who thought nothing of planting bombs in holy places. On assignment in Yemen, I visited the tribal battleground that doubled as a recruiting ground for Osama bin Laden. In Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and latter-day crucible of intolerance, I found a place of faith and loathing, where pious bombers attacked civilians with impunity. In Sudan, I covered the civil war over the imposition of Sharia (Islamic law) and brutal mistreatment by tribal militias.

In Iran, the testing ground for an Islamic revolution that promised a kinder, gentler theocracy, I saw a regime lapse further into brutality toward its own citizens. In Lebanon, I listened as Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, defiantly laid out his anti-Israel agenda from his heavily guarded South Beirut headquarters, and vowed never to disarm his Iranian-backed fighters. Across town in his fortress-like prime ministerial offices, a fearless Rafik Hariri described his vision of peaceful coexistence — a patriotic voice silenced, last year, by Syrian assassins.

Posted four years later to the Asia Bureau, I felt the puritan terror of Taliban Afghanistan and the menace of Pakistan's jihadis well before 9/11. Their rudimentary reading of Islamic scriptures,

superimposed upon centuries-old tribal laws, wrought intolerance toward both family and foreigners. Afghanistan became the breeding ground for the conspiracies of Al Qaeda and fostered the Talibanization of Pakistan, where attacks against minority sects were rife.

It is nightfall in Karachi, October 2001; time for evening prayers as American warplanes rain bombs across the border in Afghanistan. A month after the carnage of 9/11, the United States is at war next door, and this port city of 12 million people is on edge. Pakistan is a flashpoint in the West's fight against the neighbouring Taliban, but it is also a country at war with itself: Muslim against Muslim, moderate against extremist, Shiite against Sunni.

Together with my translator, I am awaiting a rendezvous on a dimly lit street with one of Pakistan's most notorious militant groups: the Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet, soon to be banned by Pakistan's military government for inciting hatred and assassinating enemies. A spotter in flowing robes and sandals looks us over from a distance. Satisfied, he leads us through winding alleys to the group's headquarters in a heavily guarded mosque. After a final invocation of "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great), the head of the Karachi wing emerges from evening prayers and summons me for an audience.

With his untrimmed beard and white skullcap, Ilyas Zubair is a picture of piety — and possessed of a charismatic brand of Islam that can be lethal. His group accuses Christians and Jews of conspiracies against Islam and condemns fellow Muslims from the minority Shiite sect as infidels. Inconveniently for my translator and me, we fit both descriptions: Shiite Muslim and Canadian Jew collaborating on a reporting assignment.

"The Shiites are anti-Islamic," Zubair complains bitterly in rapid bursts of Urdu, rendered into English by my increasingly nervous translator.

"They are not Muslims, they are *kaffirs* (infidels)," he continues, fingering his prayer beads reflectively. "They should not be allowed in mosques, nor in Mecca. My feeling is the same as if a Jew were entering Mecca."

With Zubair's blessings, assassins have gunned down dozens of Shiite physicians in the waiting rooms of Karachi. Thousands more Shiites have been slain in the city's honeycomb slums or soaring mosques. Young disciples sit at Zubair's feet on the carpeted floor, listening raptly as he outlines a jihad against perfidious Jews and heretical Shiites.

The sermon concluded, we are offered sweet tea and pleasantries before being escorted to the door. A guard clutching an AK-47 springs to attention as farewells are exchanged in the courtyard. Unfamiliar with my Jewish surname, the militants offer a warm embrace and tell me to go in peace. But my translator, Hussain Askari, tarred by his identifiably Shiite name, is refused a handshake or a glimmer of eye contact. On this occasion, at least, the Jew felt safer than the Muslim.

But such luck cannot always be counted on. A few weeks later, another Jewish journalist attempting a story about Karachi's tangled web of terrorism meets a different fate: *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Daniel Pearl is kidnapped by the Islamic extremists he sought to interview. Instead of the Islamic salutation and hug bestowed upon me, he is beheaded.

I had crossed paths with Pearl on assignment in Iran — where we shared the same translator — and again in Israel. As his death sank in, fellow journalists warned that my own conspicuously Jewish surname put me in danger: Along with my notebook and Nikon, I carried the extra baggage of being a

Cohn in the lion's den. No longer could I venture into hostile territory with the comforting assumption that a Canadian passport granted any kind of protective immunity.

Years earlier, when I had ventured into Hezbollah's South Beirut headquarters to interview Nasrallah, his personal gatekeeper, Ibrahim, had questioned me closely about the *Toronto Star*. Oblivious to my own background, he demanded to know whether my newspaper was "pro-Israel," if any Zionists worked there, and how many Jews were on staff.

"About average for Canada," I deadpanned. Thus reassured, he gave armed guards the signal to hustle me into a utility vehicle with black curtains drawn for the drive to Nasrallah's salon. For more than an hour his protectors meticulously checked my belongings for any incriminating evidence, until at last I was ushered into a room with his translator.

The encounter seemed to go well until my post-interview chat with the trusty Ibrahim. The press aide caught sight of my official Lebanese government press card listing my surname, "Cohn," ahead of my given names, "Martin Regg." He had approved the interview on the assumption that my surname was "Reggcohn."

Turning pale, Ibrahim interrogated me feverishly.

"Cohn — is this really your name?" he sputtered. "Isn't this a Jewish name?"

I nodded, Yes.

"But are you a Jew?" He seemed in a state of shock. I wasn't sure who was in greater peril — me for being Jewish or Ibrahim for having allowed a Jew into the inner sanctum. After an interminable silence, he calmed down.

"No problem, we are not fanatics here," he mused.

On other occasions, my surname had a calming effect, like the time I encountered a gun-wielding Jewish settler in the West Bank. No one had ever pointed a gun at me before, not until Noam Shapiro came speeding down from his hilltop settlement of Yizhar to confront us. With his wife and baby watching blithely from the back seat, the bearded settler was dressed for battle: a machine gun in hand, a kippa prayer cap on his head, and the prayer fringes of an orthodox Jew on his waist. Shapiro was the first fundamentalist of any faith to take aim at me, only to remove his finger from the trigger upon inspecting my press pass.

In Beirut and the West Bank, I had come a little too close for comfort. Now, in the wake of Pearl's death, the comfort zone was narrowing even more.

Leaving the Middle East behind to travel through the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, I was reminded that far more Muslims live in Asia than the Middle East, and that they tend to be more moderate. The often violent Islamic extremism of the Middle East — radiating out of the Arabian Desert as far as Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan — is quite unlike the nuanced, mystical Islam practised in most of Asia.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic country with 200 million Muslims, remains a bulwark of moderation and pluralism. Islam came to the archipelago only in the 14th century, long after Hinduism

and Buddhism had taken root, so Indonesians adapted Islam's more mystical Sufi strain and melded it with their own animist beliefs to forge a tolerant faith that endures to this day.

India's Muslim population, the world's second largest, has been heralded as among the most progressive, democratic and successful anywhere. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reminded me in an interview, Indians "take pride in the fact that these 150 million Muslims live as peaceful citizens of our country, that there is not a single incident of their being involved in Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups."

Despite the relative restraint shown by India's Muslim minority, the same could not always be said for its Hindu majority, nor for the Buddhists in its northern territory of Ladakh and in neighbouring Sri Lanka.

My first exposure to India's religious extremism came in Ayodhya, a graceful town of temples and mosques. The streets are lined with gentle Hindu priests and sadhus (ascetic holy men), marking it as one of Hinduism's holiest sites — but also its bloodiest.

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Overflowing with pilgrims, it brims with hate. Fifteen years ago, zealots demolished a mosque to make way for a Hindu temple. Hindu fundamentalists have camped out at the site ever since and taken the entire nation hostage. I listened as the Hindu hardliners taunted the Muslim minority with fundamentalist slogans.

"Hindi Hindu Hindustan," they chanted, which translates roughly as "India for the Hindus and the Hindi-speakers."

"Katua Bhago Pakistan," they continued: "Circumcised (men) run to Pakistan" — a reference to Muslim men for whom circumcision is a religious obligation.

Hindutva, or Hinduization, has been dubbed the "saffronization" of India: the rooting out of Islamic or Western influences that are deemed "foreign" to the population of one billion.

Back in 2002, *Hindutva* was the declared ideology of the governing BJP party in New Delhi and the western coastal state of Gujarat, where tensions over Ayodhya culminated in anti-Muslim pogroms that claimed as many as 2,000 lives.

At the scene of the Gujarat massacre, I came upon one of the survivors, Abeda Begum. From her perch along the muddy, garbage-strewn alley where chickens and cows jostled for space with pedestrians, Begum had witnessed the slaughter that spared the domestic animals but claimed her loved ones. There is a dead end where the Hindu mob doused her Muslim neighbours with kerosene and burned 92 of them to death. Among them were the mother and sister of Begum's husband.

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When I visited, she was looking after one of the orphaned survivors, 12-year-old Samina Begum. Together they rolled incense sticks with their blackened hands for 30 cents a day, their only income since Begum's husband was let go by Hindu employers in an economic boycott.

"I'm doing all this work because the Hindus won't keep Muslim workers any more and our houses were destroyed, so we have to start from scratch," Begum told me plaintively, adjusting the folds of her purple sari.

I was struck by her clothing and manners. The flowing saris worn by women like Begum often leave their midriffs partly exposed, which might appear immodest for Muslims elsewhere in the region. But in Gujarat it was the local Hindu fashion, and so it had been adopted by Muslims as their own in a state where people of both religions wore the same clothes, spoke the same local dialect, and watched the same movies.

Yet they remained worlds apart in Gujarat, fearing for their lives in the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi. The killing fields of this coastal state were a reminder that nearly six decades after Gandhi's dream of a pluralist state for Indians of all faiths, the country is still haunted by the ghost of communal violence.

India's disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir, where Muslims are in the majority, adds another dimension to the country's religious tensions. It is not only the minority Hindus who feel besieged here, but also the Tibetan-Buddhists living along Kashmir's northern border with China.

In the high-altitude enclave of Ladakh, I listened to Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the 86-year-old chief lama, explain why his fellow Buddhists were struggling to separate from Kashmir's Muslims. Swathed in scarlet robes in his monastery residence, he argued passionately that Buddhists wanted nothing to do with Muslims, because their religions were so utterly incompatible with one another: "We have nothing in common."

I had a chance years later to recount those xenophobic musings to Tibet's Dalai Lama at his residence-in-exile in the nearby Indian hill town of Dharamsala. His Holiness tried to laugh off the chief lama's combative remarks but later turned deadly serious about the subject of Buddhist fundamentalism:

Every religion, he acknowledged, is susceptible to extremism, and Tibetans are no exception. The only difference, he argued, is that Buddhist fundamentalists tend to take potshots within their own faith, rather than attacking others.

Not so in Sri Lanka, where warmongering monks have long raised a battle cry against the Hindu minority. This small South Asian island of 18 million people, which claims to be the centre of Buddhism, has transformed itself into a textbook case of religious radicalism and tribal identity run amok — a microcosm of the planet's ethnic conflicts.

When I visited their temples, Sri Lanka's most influential religious leaders cast the Sinhalese majority as custodians both of Buddhism's sanctity and the island's territorial integrity. To be sure, they feared separation by the Hindu Tamils in the northeast, but they bitterly opposed the very policies that could easily have fostered national unity, such as equal rights, official bilingualism and local empowerment for the minority. The monks cited a mythological prophecy that Buddhism would be entrusted to this island off India's southeast coast for 5,000 years, with the Sinhalese deemed a chosen people on a sacred mission.

mission.

Years of incitement against the minority Hindus gave rise to one of the world's most feared guerrilla movements, the Tamil Tigers. Rebelling against Buddhist chauvinism, government discrimination and army atrocities, ordinary Tamils rallied to the guerrillas despite their often grisly tactics that plunged the country into two decades of blood-curdling violence.

The Tigers claim credit for pioneering the phenomenon of suicide bombers long before it became identified with Islamist visions of religious martyrdom. They are an avowedly secular fighting force, yet they encourage cult-like loyalty toward their supreme commander, high-school dropout Velupillai Prabhakaran. Cyanide pellets dangle from the necks of recruits to avert capture. Female fighters, pledging blind obedience to their leader, are selected for the most daring suicide attacks.

When I travelled to the jungle headquarters of the Tigers' political leader, S.P. Thamilselvan, he painted a portrait of earnest young women yearning to be selected for the elite Black Tigers force so they might lay down their lives for the leader. Unlike Islamic suicide bombers, he stressed, the Tigers don't martyr themselves in hopes of entering paradise. They do it so their fellow Tamils can walk freely in their own homeland.

I let his words sink in during a stroll through the nearby Tiger cemetery, where a calligrapher was adding names to the thousands of headstones bearing the bones of slain guerrillas. Some had swallowed their cyanide capsules, others had incinerated themselves as suicide bombers.

They didn't do it for Allah. They did it for their kin, their cause, their cult — in the thrall of ethnic extremism.

We forget, amid today's heightened fear of fundamentalism, that so-called freedom fighters seeking ethnic and religious homelands have all evoked their own brand of terror in our time: not just the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, for example, but the Sikh warriors who took up arms in India's Punjab in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Canada endured a bitter taste of their tactics in 1985 when the terrorist bombing of an Air India flight claimed the lives of all 329 people aboard. Now, the fight for a separate Khalistan seems a footnote to history, one of the few violent separatist movements ever to fizzle out.

On a visit to Amritsar's Golden Temple, the centre of Sikh worship, the ordinary voices of the devout told the tale: alienated by the gratuitous criminality of so many separatists, the local populace gradually sided with the iron fist of the Indian security forces, providing vital intelligence to wipe out terrorism in their own land.

The pacification of the Punjab is a rare exception to the rule that old self-determination movements fade away but never die. Nearly six decades after independence, India is still struggling to wipe out perennial rebellions along its border regions. Apart from Kashmir, more than 30 rebel armies clustered in five tribal states along India's northeastern fringe still bitterly resist central rule; in the east coast state of Andhra Pradesh, Maoist Naxalite rebels wage ideological warfare with a peasant-style rebellion.

And the list goes on. The Indonesian archipelago was the battleground for three distinct separatist movements — in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh.

In southern Sudan, the Christian minority wanted to break away from an Islamic government, while on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao a Muslim minority tried to separate from the Christian majority.

In China's remote western frontier province of Xinjiang, Uyghur Muslims wanted a separate state of their own.

Covering the competing claims for nationhood in India and beyond, I soon found myself suffering from self-determination fatigue.

Throughout my travels, Muslim intellectuals would not let me forget the plight of their peoples, but I couldn't help noticing their lack of empathy for that of non-Muslims — be it the suffering of southern Sudan's Christian minority at the hands of Islamic militias, or the military occupation of East Timor and West Papua by Indonesia's Muslim soldiers.

Deal with our demands, Islamic intellectuals averred, and the violence would vanish. Yet the grievances invariably depended on the geography of the aggrieved: to Pakistanis, the suffering of Kashmiris was the strongest evidence of Western perfidy; in the Arab world, the Palestinian cause was the priority; Indonesians blamed the West after "losing" sovereignty over East Timor; Arab sympathizers of Al Qaeda cited the presence of American troops on sacred Saudi soil as justification for Osama bin Laden's attacks. Today, Iraq and Lebanon top the Islamic world's list of grievances.

To be sure, resolving these problems would reduce resentment against the West; but the Islamic perception of victimization — and the Islamist path of violence — won't magically melt away if any or all of those perennial trouble spots recede from the horizon.

After a decade abroad, I came to the view that fundamentalism, tribalism and terrorism cannot be so easily explained away or wished away. It's not just about poverty. It's not solely about schooling. It's not entirely about injustice. And it's not really about Islam or other religions.

Craving status and purpose, aspiring martyrs find a *raison d'être* in their jihad — a mission, an opportunity to rise above their dreary surroundings. The closer I came to these pious men, the more they looked like lost souls. They sought death not so much as a shortcut to paradise but as a quest for purpose in a mundane life.

We learned shortly after 9/11 that the roster of bombers was dominated by well-off Egyptians and Saudis leading privileged lives abroad. And we now have an inkling, after the arrests of 17 accused terrorist plotters in the GTA, that young Muslim men living comfortably in the banality of suburbia can become intoxicated by fantasies of saving the world by blowing up targets in Toronto.

Much has been written in recent times about the fight for Islam's soul, manifested by a battle between moderates and fundamentalists. We pay great attention to the small number of bombers who do the most damage, but it is also the believers — who make up the mainstream among the world's 1 billion Muslims — who must be engaged, along with those of other faiths.

In my travels across Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, I had always assumed that the fanatics were on the fringes. In fact, it was not only the foot soldiers of fundamentalism who had been pedalling poisonous ignorance, but many of the best minds, as well — either for what they said or left unsaid.

Most condemned the violence, but I found a surprising number who condoned it, excused it, or lapsed into denial. On assignment, I came across prominent, educated Muslims in every walk of life — scholars, doctors, politicians, generals — who blamed 9/11 and other attacks on Israel's Mossad secret service while exonerating Al Qaeda.

Quite apart from their readiness to vilify Jews, I marvelled at the willingness of so many in the Islamic world to besmirch one another as apostles, infidels, or inferior Muslims.

Equally, ultra-orthodox Jews excelled at self-hatred when vilifying their fellow Jews; Hindus excoriated their brethren of lesser castes or questionable orthodoxy; and Buddhists spouted insults at believers from rival sects.

Fundamentalism, like revolution, eats its own children.

Canadians can no longer turn a blind eye to the world beyond our borders; the globalization of terrorism has shattered our splendid isolation. Overseas, there is a different mentality: You are your tribe, and your tribe is you.

Fundamentalism and tribalism, once so alien to the Canadian psyche, have migrated from foreign war zones to our own shores. If we want to maintain our Canadian values of tolerance and harmony at home, we need to wake up to the terror and hatred abroad — not only infecting the Middle East but now poisoning the rest of the planet.

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