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Politico

Sex as a flash point in clash of civilizations

PARIS Sex and the Clash of Civilizations. Great title. Book not written yet. But it is out there, a different idea about a root cause of terrorism beyond the wholly political abrasions pressing Islamic fundamentalism against the West.

Exaggerated hedonism vs. excessive piety, you could say. But that's academic-sounding, and trusses up the issue into a term paper that gets away from a question that many people want to avoid: how much sexual rage or confusion drives terrorism, particularly the homegrown terrorism of radical Muslims in Europe and North America?

The state of play of current discussion is mostly no discussion at all. Not because sexuality's impact on Islamic terrorism is implausible, but because it is demonstrable only with difficulty, and as spiky emotionally as talking about a connection between race and intelligence or Olympic records.

An organization in France like Ni Putes Ni Soumises, or Neither Whores nor Submissive Women, a group born in the mean Paris suburbs, has pointed to fundamentalism as an explanation for gang rapes, the brutalizing of Muslim women who lead Western life styles, or even why some teenage girls, fearing sexual assault in their housing projects, wear head scarves and robes as defensive camouflage.

But sexual rage as a component in a notional police profile of a prototypical Islamic radical terrorist suspect in London; Toronto; Kiel, Germany, or Patterson, New Jersey?

It's at this point that art enters, or at least two novels, bearing an idea still uncomfortable in politics or sociology.

Two books, one in the United States, the other in France, appeared this summer with an amazingly common hinge: They are constructed around literary pivots that make sexual anger a central cause for a young man and woman to turn to fundamentalist Islam and become (or almost become) terrorists in the service of hatred.

The novelists, John Updike in "Terriorist" and Max Gallo in "Les Fanatiques," stake most of their central characters' plausibility on the notion that their disgust with their single mother or father's open and multiple sex lives — we're not talking depravity here — provide part of the psychic propellant, boosted by a rigid interpretation of Islam, that leads to a bomb plot or a suicide attack.

In both Updike and Gallo's books, Islam opens itself to readings by fundamentalists that create revulsion with every Western notion of freedom. It was as if both men wrote their novels while leafing through "Milestones" by Sayyid Qutb. That book has influenced a generation of fundamentalists with its condemnation of the West for immorality and vulgarity, and its argument that the Koran does not dispense "learning" but orders to be obeyed.

Updike's teenage fundamentalist, Ahmad, lives with his Irish-American mother, Terry Mulloy, in battered public housing in northern New Jersey. He has been abandoned in babyhood by his Egyptian father. Terry says of Ahmad, "He has always hated my hairy male friends." Her lovers, Updike explains, vie with Ahmad for dominance in the apartment. To Ahmad, their manner shouts, she may be your mother, but I sleep with her — a cautious paraphrase of Updike's diction.

Both Ahmad's view of Terry, who wears underwear around the house, and his search for a link to his missing father, make him ripe (and willing) to be manipulated by a radical

imam against impure America. Gallo, who writes fiction and popular histories that have made him one of France's best-selling authors, sets his story in intellectual milieu in Paris and Geneva. "Cowardice and submission, prudence and apology" is the mark of the novel's cast of academics. They run from challenging fundamentalist horrors, the author says, and flee into a sham "dialogue of cultures."

Gallo does not have Updike's once-in-a-generation elegance, but he grabs for the same lever of suspension of disbelief and motivation: sexual rage. In "Les Fanatiques," the Islamic-fundamentalist convert daughter of a Paris university professor tells of growing up in her single father's apartment that was a public thoroughfare for passing women.

"I heard you laughing and gurgling and I covered my ears. Afterwards you'd question me about what I thought of this one or that one. You covered me in filth," Claire Nori says to her father. And indeed Julien Nori admits to himself that, "I used Claire, this little girl, as a part of my seduction routine. How touching, no, this father living alone with his little girl?"

But neither Gallo nor Updike spares blame for Islamic fundamentalism's rigidity by making a Western parent's sexual indiscretion a justification for a creed that admits only its own notion of purity.

Rather, each writer points to sex as a zone of incompatibility — or clash — involving radicalized Muslims, desire, repression, and Western sexual freedoms managed imperfectly by Europeans and Americans. And their books insist it's no incidental matter in relation to terrorism.

I asked Gallo last week to describe the place of sexuality in a supposed clash of civilizations. "It's a central issue," he said.

It's certainly a less than welcome subject for those Westerners, like Gallo's fictional professors, who do

Two writers point to sex as a zone of incompatibility.

not want to hear of civilizations' collisions — and believe that if just Bush, Blair, Merkel and/or Israel vanished, all would be cool, and life suddenly revert to one without Islamic bombers.

Gallo's novel's vision is black. Claire, now called Aisha Akhban, plants a bomb in Baghdad, killing 33 people and herself. Her father, who struggled to win her back from her rage and robes, is murdered.

Updike, who has always been on the side of sexual freedom, lets a crack of light into a Lincoln Tunnel bomb plot. Along the way, a CIA infiltrator of Lebanese descent fixes Ahmad up with a semipro hooker named Joryleen who he silently craved as a classmate in high school. Back then, she sang "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" in her church choir.

In the end, Updike makes Joryleen's sigh turn out for Ahmad like "a gust of life on his neck." Subverted, he tells his imam he wants his "I'ala, or martyr's compensation, to go to 'a female friend my age."

Can fundamentalist rage be transformed into sexual healing? Updike, now 74, doesn't skirt the question.

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Tomorrow: Roger Cohen on Günter Grass and Germany.

Afghanistan's 'Little America' unravels

PROVINCE, From Page 1

mistake which I believe is coming back to haunt the United States now."

The lack of security was just one element of a volatile mix. Twenty years of conflict had shattered government and social structures in Afghanistan, the world's fifth-poorest country, where the average life expectancy is 46. American aid totaled \$900 million in 2002 and \$4.8 billion by 2005, but fell 30 percent this year.

The Taliban, meanwhile, found safe haven in Pakistan and later seeped back across the border. The government of President Hamid Karzai, hailed as Afghanistan's eloquent new leader in 2001, has increasingly been criticized for indecisiveness, corruption and inaction. In Helmand, this absence of security and government control has enabled the province to become the largest heroin-producing area in Afghanistan.

Richard Boucher, assistant secretary of state for South Asia, defended the pace of progress, saying expectations among Afghans and others that the war-ravaged country could be quickly rebuilt were unrealistic.

"Afghan development is a long-term project, even without the security problem," Boucher said. "Over all, I think it's pretty incredible what we've accomplished."

Despite continued violence, he said, 1.6 million Afghan girls are attending school, 1,200 kilometers of roads and 500 schools and clinics have been reconstructed, and the country has its first democratically elected president and Parliament.

Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman, explained the recent surge in violence by saying that the Afghan central government and NATO were exerting their authority in remote areas, prompting retaliatory attacks from the Taliban, drug traffickers and warlords.

Rauzia Baloch, a 33-year-old teacher, was one of a half dozen women elected to Helmand's provincial council last year. In December, the American government sent her on a study tour of the United States that included visits to Congress, a domestic violence shelter in Phoenix and Thanksgiving dinner with a family in Indiana.

When Baloch returned to Helmand, she found the Taliban assassinating government officials. "I learned a lot. But unfortunately the situation is not the same as in America," she said. "We cannot do anything."

During the Cold War years, dozens of American engineers and their families carried out a sweeping project designed to develop southern Afghanistan and wean locals from Soviet influence.

For more than 30 years, the American government and the Morrison Knudsen corporation, which built the Hoover Dam, restored and expanded an ancient irrigation system. Its source of life, then and now, was the surging Helmand River, a finger of green that snakes through thousands of kilometers of desert, from the mountains of central Afghanistan to Pakistan and the Gulf.

The project never irrigated as many acres as hoped, but its training programs produced hundreds of "American minded" Afghan engineers and technicians.

"Most of them have lived and worked and studied in the United States; some have married American wives," the British historian Arnold Toynbee wrote after visiting the area in May 1960. "The new world that they are conjuring up out of the desert at the Helmand River's expense is to be an America-in-Asia."

But the Americans abandoned the city just before the 1979 Soviet invasion. Twenty years of guerrilla and civil war ensued. Hope rose again in 2001, when American bombs drove the Taliban from power.

Residents like Olomi, the women's rights advocate, said they dreamed of another American-backed renaissance. "At that time, we really felt so happy," she said. "We felt that we were free now."

But divisions emerged in Washington over what role the United States should play in rebuilding and securing the country.

During meetings in January 2002, Robert Finn, the first U.S. ambassador to post-Taliban Afghanistan, proposed that Washington undertake ambitious construction projects as a way to cement the loyalty of Afghans.

Top among them was rebuilding a pulverized road linking Afghanistan's major cities. "I argued for them to build the road and all I got was 'no,'" Finn recalled. "It was just across the board in Washington: 'We don't do those kinds of projects anymore.'"

In the end, the United States pledged \$297 million in reconstruction money to Afghanistan in 2002. The European Union pledged \$495 million. Japan and Saudi Arabia made smaller pledges, but were slow to deliver.

When aid officials arrived in Kabul,



Police officers at a one-day "refresher course" in weapon maintenance run by the American contractor DynCorp in Kandahar.

they were shocked by the country's decrepit state. They had to build their headquarters from scratch, they said, and contend with the lack of skilled workers.

At the same time, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld clashed with Powell, who wanted an international peacekeeping force to bolster Karzai's fledgling government. Haass, the former State Department official, said informal conversations with European officials led him to believe that the United States could recruit a force of 30,000 peacekeepers, half European, half American.

Rumsfeld and his aides were skeptical. They feared European countries would not provide enough troops, according to Douglas Feith, the former

'Little America' is at the epicenter of a Taliban resurgence and explosion in drug cultivation.

under secretary for policy.

Over all, Pentagon officials hoped to minimize the number of American troops in the country, he said, to avoid stoking Afghans' historic resistance to foreign occupation.

The United States eventually deployed 8,000 soldiers, but they focused on capturing or killing members of the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

As an alternative, officials came up with a loosely organized system designed to empower Afghans to secure the country.

The United States would train a 70,000-soldier army. Japan would demobilize some 100,000-militia fighters. Britain would mount an anti-narcotics program. Italy would carry out judicial reform. Germany would train a 62,000-member police force.

But problems arose immediately. When Finn, the ambassador, reviewed the first Afghan Army troops trained by the Americans in the summer of 2002, he was dismayed.

"They were illiterate," he said. "They didn't know how to keep themselves clean. They were at a much lower level than people expected."

The police were even more challenging. Seventy percent of the existing 80,000 officers were illiterate. Eighty percent lacked proper equipment and corruption was endemic.

Afghan police did not patrol: They set up checkpoints and waited for residents to report crimes, with bribes of

ten demanded for any reaction.

In Lashkar Gah, veteran police officers and judges who returned from living in exile during the reign of the Taliban were aghast at what they found. Only one-third of the province's 3,000 policemen were, in fact, trained. The rest, including the provincial police chief, were former guerrilla fighters who punished members of other tribes and turned a blind eye toward rogues from their own.

"They did not know about the law," said Abdul Shakoor, a veteran police lieutenant. "They had their tribal ideas."

The only foreign troops to deploy in Helmand, with a population of one million, were several dozen American Special Forces who focused solely on hunting Taliban and Qaeda remnants.

The province's voluble young governor, Sher Muhammad Akhund, was largely left to do as he pleased. The son of a famed Helmand local who fought the Soviets, Akhund entered Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 2001 at Karzai's request and won control of Helmand with the help of Special Forces. Rumors abounded about the governor.

In interviews with journalists, Akhund said he was in his early 30s and a high school graduate. Afghan aid workers said he was in his late 20s and illiterate.

Whatever he may have lacked in administrative skills, he made up for in muscle. As the head of Helmand's largest and most influential tribe, the Alizai, he commanded several hundred gunmen.

As time passed, community leaders grew frustrated with Akhund. Haji Ahmad Shah, a wealthy local farmer, said Akhund initially refused to meet with him to discuss farmers' problems. When he finally did, the governor ignored the complaints.

"When I was sharing these problems with the governor, he didn't do anything," Shah said. "He thought we were useless people. He was just working for his own benefit."

In 2003, Akhund confiscated 200 shops owned by a local minority group, a State Department report states. Outside the city, the governor doled out parcels of land to his relatives and tribe, according to residents. Akhund has previously denied these accusations.

Later on, reports began to reach Kabul that Akhund was promoting the growth of poppy, said an American official who spoke on condition of anonymity, making an accusation that Akhund vehemently denied.

After being decimated in open battles with American troops through 2002,

U.S. jets kill Canadian soldier

The Associated Press

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan: Two U.S. warplanes accidentally strafed their own forces in southern Afghanistan on Monday, killing a Canadian soldier and seriously wounding five others, NATO and the U.S. military reported.

Also, a British soldier attached to NATO and four Afghans were killed in a suicide bombing Monday in Kabul, the capital, NATO and Afghan officials said. Sixteen suspected Taliban militants and five Afghan police officers died in other violence.

The intense fighting was part of Afghanistan's deadliest spate of violence since U.S.-led forces toppled

the Taliban regime for giving shelter to Osama bin Laden after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The "friendly fire" incident occurred during a NATO operation in Kandahar Province's Panjwayi District after ground troops requested air support, NATO said.

The alliance said in a statement that the International Security Assistance Force provided the support but "regrettably engaged friendly forces during a strafing run, using cannons." It later identified the planes as U.S. A-10 Thunderbolts. An American military spokesman, Sergeant Chris Miller, confirmed that American planes were involved. An investigation of the incident has been started.

IN OUR PAGES | 100, 75 & 50 YEARS AGO

1906: Fight Against "Hearstism"

ALBANY: In this city will be held to-night [Sept. 4] and to-morrow conferences on which the eyes of the entire state are centred. They may mark the turning point in the fight against "Hearstism." They may mark the formation of a forlorn hope for the battle to keep the Democratic standard out of the hands of the Independence League, since they constitute the first effort to organize against the Hearst movement outside New York City. The situation is critical. It is expected that Mr. Jerome will prove a figure around whom Democrats will rally in this desperate hour. If attended by large numbers, the fight will be carried on with spirit and confidence; if few come then Mr. Jerome, in all likelihood, will declare that the contest must be carried on in or out of the convention.

1931: Veil-less Persian Art Envoy

PARIS: As the first woman in Persia to lay aside the veil, and the only one of her sex to hold an official passport of the Persian government, Mrs. Zohra Heidary has further broken down old customs in her country by holding a post in the administration. She is an international envoy, sent on the diplomatic mission of interesting other countries, especially the United States, in Persian art. Mrs. Heidary has been in Paris the past week, at the Hotel Napoléon, where she arrived from New York. In a month she will return there, and hopes to make arrangements for the exhibition of Persian art, which was shown in London for three months, this spring. Though the Metropolitan Museum in New York had asked for the exhibition, Mrs. Heidary is awaiting word from her government.

1956: Race Rioting Spreads in U.S.

OLIVER SPRINGS, Tennessee: National Guardsmen rolled into this coal-mining town with tanks as racial violence spread with armed fury from near-by Clinton. About three hours later, the guard has dispersed a mob and returned to Clinton with 15 prisoners, members of an armed mob which had held the city in terror most of the night. A Guard spokesman said it will be determined later whether charges will be pressed against them. The Guardsmen came to quell violence which followed racial integration of Clinton High School. It could not be learned immediately just who shot the deputy sheriff sitting in a highway patrol car, but first reports were that the deputy was wounded in the shoulder by a member of a white mob of more than 250 persons.

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