

# Failing to Understand the Terrorists

by Theodore Dalrymple



If there were one word that we should expunge from the political lexicon, it would be “cowardly.” This is not because there are no acts or deeds to which it can rightly be applied, but because our politicians and officials have lost the ability to use it aptly. They fail to make the proper moral distinction between cowardice and other qualities.

Time and again this description is given to acts which, though repellent or evil, are certainly not cowardly, indeed are conspicuously brave. The latest instances are Mayor de Blasio’s comments after an Uzbek man driving a rented truck killed eight people and injured a dozen others on a busy bicycle path in New York City on Tuesday, and the United Nations Special Envoy to Somalia, Michael Keating, and the British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, responding to the slaughter of at least 239 people in a bombing in Mogadishu by a suspected al-Shabaab terrorist on October 14.

Mr. Keating said: "Such cowardly attacks reinvigorate the United States to assist our Somali and African Union partners." Mr. Johnson condemned "in the strongest terms the cowardly attacks in Mogadishu." Would either of them care to fill a truck with explosives and deliberately blow it up with himself inside in order to kill as many other people as possible? Certainly it would take more courage than I possess to do such a thing: though I hasten to add that I have reasons other than lack of courage to inhibit me.

Nonetheless, it is an important point in moral reflection that what is ordinarily thought of as a virtue, namely courage, is not virtuous in a free-standing way, independent of its purpose. Messrs. Keating and Johnson, and Mr. de Blasio, too, forget this. Many a moral monster has been courageous, but his courage in no way lessens his moral reprehensibility. Whether it actually *adds* to it is another question; it may certainly increase its effect in practice.

The danger of using the word "cowardly" in so obviously mistaken a way is that it gives the impression that, if the attack were not cowardly, if to the contrary it were brave, it would not be as bad and indeed might even be worthy of admiration. And since to blow yourself up in a truck is conspicuously brave by comparison with what most of us would be prepared to do, it follows that these denunciations perversely invite us to consider terrorists acts as in some way admirable—which, I need hardly add, they are not.

Somalia has played only a very small part in my life: I visited its capital in the 1980s, when Mohamed Siad Barre was still President. Brief as was my visit, however, it was instructive.

I flew from Riyadh to Mogadishu on Saudi Arabian Airlines. For the first and only time in my life I flew first class, for lack of seating anywhere else. As soon as the plane took off, the black *niqabs* of the women were thrown off with a flourish,

revealing the women underneath to be stylishly, expensively, and in some cases scantily dressed in tight-fitting designer clothes, as well as heavily made up. The reality of a society is often different from at least some of its appearance; and many years later, a doctor who had worked in Saudi told me that the inviolability of the women's quarters in a Saudi household and the *niqab* itself were conducive to extramarital affairs, provided the male lover was prepared to don a *niqab* himself, which he often was.

The strongly Italian atmosphere and influence in Mogadishu, despite the many years and dramatic events since independence in 1960, surprised me. Whatever else might have been said of the Italians as colonial overlords, they knew how to build a graceful city (now, of course, comprehensively destroyed), and they had a beneficial effect on the cuisine.

I received a lesson in the politics of aid in Mogadishu that I have never forgotten. Siad Barre was a dictator, and though from a later perspective his reign may have seemed almost like a golden age, this is not how it seemed then (history being experienced forwards and not backwards). The country was not prospering. Far from it; there were reports of famine, there was a cholera epidemic raging in the north, and there was fighting with Ethiopia in the Ogaden.

I went to the offices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to obtain information about what was happening, but the staff of that august office were on strike and there was no one to receive me. According to the notice board, the staff of the UNHCR had two grievances. The first and lesser of the two was that the portions of food in the staff canteen were too small; the second and more serious was that the Somali government wanted to force the staff to convert their hard currency salaries into Somali shillings at the official rate, which was many times that of the open, or black, market rate.

The Somali government wanted to use what amounted to aid money as a source of foreign currency, not of course for the benefit of the country or its population as a whole, but for that of its own elite, while the aid workers expected to live at least at the standard of the former Italian colonialists. I repeat: There was a famine and cholera epidemic at the time of the strike. Aid certainly aided, but it did not aid the poor.

Another lesson I learned was that neither alliances nor political friendships were permanent, but rather as mutable as a *gestalt* switch. For many years, Somalia had been an ally of the Soviet Union, as Ethiopia had been that of the United States. Indeed, Siad Barre came to power promising, and trying to implement, a regime of "scientific socialism" as it was then still called. What Marx and Engels would have made of it is anybody's guess. Somalia was not home to much of an industrial proletariat, to put it mildly.

But then Ethiopia had its revolution and tried a little collectivization of its own (leading to millions of deaths), and in the process became a firm ally and client of the Russians. Since the mutual hatred of Somalia and Ethiopia ran far deeper than mere ideology, Somalia promptly forswore the Russians and now sided with the democratic West in the Cold War. It would have been comic if it had not been tragic.

Interestingly, in Somalia, there was no nostalgia for Soviet days (as there was for the days of Italian rule). The one remnant of Soviet influence that I found was an English-Somali phrase book which I still treasure, with such useful phrases as, "How many workers are there on your collective farm?" and "Hand me the opera glasses, please."

Finally, my brief visit to Somalia taught me to be skeptical of one theory purporting to explain why post-colonial Africa had experienced such difficulties in its development: namely that the borders of countries were the purely arbitrary constructions of the colonial powers, such that the politics

contained within them attracted no loyalty from their populations.

In fact Somalia was not so arbitrary a construction. Its borders corresponded—not perfectly, but reasonably well—with the extent of the Somali population. But the clan nature of the Somali people led to seemingly perpetual conflicts over who should control the state. Other African polities that more or less coincided with their “natural” borders varied greatly in their fate, from Botswana (formerly Bechuanaland), by far the most successful country in Africa, to Rwanda and Burundi, long bywords for the most vicious and devastating of catastrophes, passing through Lesotho (formerly Basutoland) and Swaziland.

Occasionally I encounter Somali immigrants, and though my experience of their country was very limited, they are (unless I delude myself) delighted to meet someone who has even a brief firsthand experience of their homeland. It creates at least a momentary connection or understanding between us; and that must come as some slight relief to people living in a social world that is alien, and frequently hostile where it is not indifferent, to them.

First published in the [\*Library of Law and Liberty\*](#).