



**Scott Atran** Anthropologist; Author, 'Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists'

## What's Really the Matter With Kansas and Cairo?

Posted: 05/06/2012 8:59 pm

Political effervescence and division within many nations is approaching levels not experienced around the globe since the 1920s. Structural failures in economic management bring on such crises when they fail to maintain expectations for improvement in the standard of living among the middle class, the mainstay of democracies and principal source of political stability in the modern world. Such conditions open the way for revolutionary rethinking in politics, when the old moral order teeters and competing ideologies vie to replace it, as with the rise of Fascism and Communism in the 1930s.

In 1928, on the eve of global economic collapse, the wealthiest .001 percent of the U.S. population owned 892 times more than 90 percent of the nation's citizens. Today, the nation's increasingly wealthy top .001 percent owns 976 times more than the bottom 90 percent, a situation that instigates both the growing Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements, however differently they apportion blame and seek solutions.

In Europe, a resurgent far right rooted in a stagnant middle class has helped to oust government after government. This is true even in France, where a socialist victory in this week's presidential election bucked the rightist trend with the support of the far left, but with the collusion of a far right that refused to support the center-right incumbent.

In Greece's elections this week, the once predominant center-left and center-right parties lost more than half of their popular support since 2009, while the far left and far right surged.

In North Africa and the Middle East, a better-educated but increasingly impoverished and morally outraged middle class ignited the Arab Spring and continues to fire its aftermath. But decades of brutally sundering secular political alternatives by previous authoritarian regimes now gives surviving forms of militant Islam an opportunity to rapidly establish moral hegemony over society -- especially if allowed (democratically or not) to take control of the coercive power of the state, as happened with the Iranian revolution.

One thing is clear: People are yearning for a moral sense and direction to redefine their nations' political life, and with it a meaning to individual existence that transcends self-interest (after all, the very existence of any religion or nation is predicated on willingness to sacrifice for some larger group of genetically unrelated strangers, which is unique to our species). For this, many of society's most active members are willing to further delay material gratification: "Dignity before Bread," was the heartfelt motto of many young people in the countries of the Arab Spring; disregard of one's own immediate economic interests for the party of "more God and less government" is evident in America's Red States.

To win even more than just an election -- to help us all win the future -- President Obama needs a transcendent moral message that goes beyond economic arguments and taps into the sacred: the kind of sentiment for which the founding fathers were willing to pledge "our lives, our fortunes," more the freedom to hope and dream than just to make a living. Making the debate primarily about "economic fairness" versus "economic liberty" misses the moral mark, not only for own people but also for those in political turmoil throughout the world upon whom our future increasingly depends. Neo-Fascists, Neo-Communists, and religious fundamentalists are rushing to fill the gap.