

THE WAR ON TERROR: MARGINALISED CONFLICT AS A CHALLENGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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September 11, 2001 was a day that changed everything. In the wake of the attacks on New York and Washington optimistic vestiges of a decade-old hope for a New World Order vanished, rapidly replaced by a generalised sense of foreboding. Rather than order, the future suddenly seemed to promise a protracted, and extremely dangerous, time of disorder –an indefinite period during which an enemy who had already proved to be effective, elusive and possibly endemic in large parts of the world would threaten all that was familiar, comfortable and hopeful. A swirl of ominous events, ranging from the savage slaying of journalist Daniel Pearl and murderous attacks against French citizens in Pakistan to a spate of arrests of potential terrorists in Western Europe, Asia and the United States soon enhanced the unease. ‘Insecurity’ became the global watchword of the hour.

This essay argues that September 11 may well have been a historical turning point – a disjunctive moment in human affairs. It further maintains that, despite the immediate sense of menace emanating from that date and its aftermath, it is possible that recognition of its pivotal significance may help guide us to rational choices that will make mankind’s future better and brighter than in the past. In the process of seeking this silver lining to the present moment’s dark clouds, I will broadly deal with tentative evidence in support of my conclusions, as well as touch on –in more specific terms– areas of further research that are well worth pursuing.

At bottom, of course, the basic question is “What is happening in the world today, and what can be done about it?” What is implied is no more than basic logic –that the nature of a problem must be clarified before an effective solution can be devised. The most efficient route to grappling with the essential question does not begin with a focus on the attacks of September 11, but rather with an examination of the response they generated– the War on Terrorism.

ON THE WAR ON TERRORISM

It is easily understandable why the US response to September 11 was to declare the War on Terrorism. The use of civilian airliners as weapons to take the lives of thousands of individuals, the overwhelming majority of whom were civilians, provided a compelling vision of terrorism, regardless of how the term itself might be defined. It was also clear that those behind September 11 had no goal other than to wreak maximum damage and, moreover, that the results of these attacks would not satiate their animosity. At the same time, the events of September 11 left no doubt that the United States faced an enemy that was not only determined but also cunning and skilled. In short, it was evident that the struggle against Washington's adversary would be dangerous and prolonged. The American people needed to be prepared for this, which largely meant that this new enemy –one that could not be branded as any particular state on the global map– had to be identified in easily understandable terms. 'Terrorism' was admirably suited as a label. It was aptly descriptive of the attacks on New York and Washington DC, it was soundly opprobrious, and (at least in an American context) it appeared to draw a clear-cut distinction between the enemy and its intended victim.

Unfortunately, the label was, and remains, erroneous, for the War on Terrorism is not at all really against terrorism. One consequence of the mislabelling has been a degree of confusion over the extent to which it is solidly in the interests of the governments and peoples of the world to support the United States in its current struggle. This, in turn, has led to a widespread, and very silly and unproductive, discourse condemning the so-called War on Terrorism as the height of Western (i.e. US) hypocrisy, largely on the grounds that such a war is but the latest product of a double-standard that discriminates against the poor and powerless on earth.

To be fair, the critics have a point –but only so long as the current war is discussed within parameters that take seriously the erroneous label under which it is marketed. The problem with that label is that there is simply no denying the old adage that 'one man's terrorist is another's freedom-fighter'. It must be remembered that all of mankind's many wars have been an extension of politics; a truth encapsulated by Clausewitz's dictum that war is "a continuation of political relations...by other means".

If it is accepted that terrorism essentially involves the infliction or threat of infliction of harm upon non-combatants for political ends, the inevitable conclusion is that few, if any, wars have seen an absence of terrorism. The works of the reputed Fathers of History, Herodotus and Thucydides, provide multiple examples. One need only recall the latter's account of the Athenians' calculated destruction of Melos in 417 BC and the slaughter of its adult male population to see that terrorism has not only always been with us but also enthusiastically practised whenever deemed politically necessary by societies on the cutting edge of civilisation. It is also clear that the true horror of this has long been recognised by at least

some members of such societies. Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, first performed in Athens only about a year after the fall of Melos, was clearly written to remind the Athenian conscience of the human cost of war's political requirements.

However, the twentieth century stood out above all others in providing proof that the infliction of harm upon non-combatants is a common tool for the pursuit of political ends. The catalogue is vast and irrefutable, and shows conclusively that the leading powers of the twentieth century were the greatest practitioners of terrorism against civilian populations. We cannot avoid this conclusion considering such things as the sinking of the *Lusitania* in World War I, the saturation bombing all sides practised in World War II, the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the killing fields of Vietnam, and the destruction of Beirut in 1982. Common sense and the most cursory acquaintance with history, and particularly with recent history, belie and render untenable the moralistic pretensions inherent in the label 'War on Terrorism'. This, of course, is what has confused all too many people regarding the world's clear interest in seeing an American victory in its current war.

The real issue this war is being fought over is actually deeper and more sinister than simple terrorism. The most basic and salient fact emanating from the September 11 attacks strikingly revealed this: a non-state actor had not only launched a war against the most powerful state on earth but also achieved major success in its first strike. What has been fundamentally at stake from the September 11 attacks onward is whether the international system can afford to permit non-state actors to use international war as an instrument of political action. The readiness of states around the globe to support Washington's post-September 11 stance shows that the true issue was widely and immediately understood, at least at governmental levels.

At the heart of Washington and other capitals' determination that non-state actors must not be allowed to wage international war lies a fearful awareness of the human race's technological proficiency. Suitcase weapons of mass destruction, whether nuclear, biological or chemical, are either already with us or not far off. The suicidal commitment that marked the September 11 attacks leaves no doubt that those who planned them would employ such weapons at the first opportunity.

The dimensions of the threat are easily seen. Horrible though it was, the direct damage the United States suffered on September 11 was relatively minor. Vastly more Americans die annually in automobile accidents than perished in the attacks, and only a handful of buildings were destroyed or damaged. What is notable, however, is the severity of the attacks' immediate repercussions, for it was evident that the terrorist action threateningly affected the country's economy, social fabric and way of life. In addition to the grief and outrage that swept the US, a prolonged economic recession appeared far more likely than was the case before September 11, popular outbursts against American Muslims and citizens of Arab descent occurred with disturbing frequency, and multiple restrictive measures were

implemented or proposed in the name of national security. All this offers a very troubling insight into what might have happened had the attackers employed four mini-weapons of mass destruction rather than four airplanes.

The bottom line is that the threat posed to the United States after September 11 bordered on the mortal. The country's existence as we know it was placed in jeopardy. Because of the United States' centrality to the contemporary world's political, social and economic fabric, a similar threat faced the international system. The Bush Administration's rhetoric may have boosted popular desire for revenge, but it aimed to steel public resolve for a war that cold calculation, rather than passion, identified as necessary.

The issue is stark. Should non-state actors be allowed to wage international war, it is overwhelmingly likely that available technology will soon lead to the degeneration of modern life into a Hobbesian nightmare; the possibility of the collapse of the international system into the horror of "wars of all against all" has been removed from the realm of science fiction. For, sooner or later, such protagonists –unconstrained by the responsibilities of government or concern for constituencies or territories against which retribution could be aimed– would in all likelihood use weapons of mass destruction. Whatever justice may be attributed to the causes of non-state actors, the cost of countenancing non-state international belligerents is simply unacceptable.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

In hindsight, it is evident that as many as three warning signs might have alerted the world to the very high possibility that a non-state actor would soon carry out a major act of international war. One of these was the development in various parts of the world during the 1990s of what may be a type of conflict that pitted movements of economically, politically and socially marginalised peoples against their respective governments in what appeared to be hopeless armed struggles. This possibility will be dealt with more concretely below. For now, the discussion will concentrate on the remaining two, far less speculative, forms of warning that preceded September 11.

The first such sign came in the form of evidence relating to specific actions of Osama bin Laden and his followers. Quite apart from bin Laden's public calls for jihad against the United States and Americans, indications that non-state actors were trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction were rife by the mid-1990s. In the torpid jargon of the US Department of Defense, "radical Islamics" loomed as a large threat in this regard.¹ This knowledge, however, led to no more than the perception of a somewhat vague and theoretical menace, not to the apprehension of an imminent danger. To a great extent, the reason for this complacency appears to have been an inability to believe that hostile terrorists could really commit

themselves to wreaking mass destruction. This, at least, seems to have been the case of officials at the International Atomic Energy Authority, who reportedly changed their views after September 11 “because 20 terrorists were prepared to sacrifice their own lives and because of the [attacks’] level of sophistication.”²

A second category of warnings –not as immediate as reports of bin Laden’s Qaeda’s activities– was also significant. It was composed of the works of various scholars who increasingly cautioned that a global system marked by the power of the technological and communications revolutions and international capitalism would face growing resistance from the marginalised –those whom David Apter long ago pointed out were rendered socially and economical “superfluous” by dominant currents of modern life.³ Among the views of scholars who insightfully analysed linkages between the individual and globalising forces at the end of the twentieth century, those of Manuel Castells are especially relevant:

“Globalization and informationalization, enacted by networks of wealth, technology and power, are transforming our world. They are enhancing our productive capacity, cultural creativity and communication potential. At the same time, they are disenfranchising societies. As institutions of state and organizations of civil society are based on culture, history and geography, the sudden acceleration of the historical tempo, and the abstraction of power in a web of computers, are disintegrating mechanisms of social control and political representation...people all over the world resent loss of control over their lives, over their environments, over their jobs, and, ultimately, over the fate of the Earth. Thus, following an old law of social evolution, resistance confronts domination, empowerment reacts against powerlessness, and alternative projects challenge the logic embedded in the new global order.”⁴

Many others besides Castells have discussed at length the weakening of the state as the intermediary between the individual and the forces of globalisation and we need not belabour the subject here. What must be stressed is the enormous differential in the process: the debilitation of the state, though general, has in fact proceeded at a faster and deeper pace in the inherently relatively weaker states of the world. That is, the relatively underdeveloped states have been less able to cope with the wilting forces of globalisation than the relatively stronger powers on the planet.

Indications that one form of conflict launched by the most marginalised segments of societies may be a widespread response to governments’ failure to cope with globalisation began to emerge in the 1990s, as insurgents in various parts of the Third World charged ruling regimes with betraying the state’s true values and embarked on armed rebellions in the face of hopeless odds. Among the most notable instances were Mexico’s Zapatista rebellion and the uprising of Egypt’s Gama’a al-Islamiyya. Contemporaneous outbreaks of similar sorts of political violence in other Third World locales –such as Nigeria’s Ogoni conflict, Chile’s Mapuche problem, and tensions surrounding the Philippine’s Cordillera people– lend weight

to the prospect that modern life may be generating dynamics that lead to a common, and militant, reaction by those who are marginalised from the march of progress.

‘MARGINALISED VIOLENT INTERNAL CONFLICT’

AS A POSSIBLY GLOBAL PHENOMENON

Hailed by some as the world’s first post-modern conflict, the 1990’s Zapatista campaign in the Chiapas Highlands pitted a numerically small number of insurgents –mainly impoverished Maya Indians– against the full power of the Mexican state. In the eyes of the rebels, however, they –and not state authorities– were dedicated to preserving the true values of the state.

At the same time, and half a world away, Egypt’s militant Muslim movement, the Gama’a al-Islamiyya was claiming an identical justification as its own limited cadres challenged the Egyptian state.

Both insurgencies sprang from the economically, politically and socially most marginalised elements of their respective societies; both were rooted in communities whose marginalisation was historically linked to geographical isolation from national power centres and to a striking degree of cultural distinctiveness from the dominant national society. Both were also traditionally linked to, and subordinated by, the national society through the agency of clientelistic ties among local and national élites. Both also shared two more strikingly similar features. Each conflict was preceded by situations that, first, engendered rising hopes of upward mobility and then, as those hopes evaporated, saw mounting frustrations among the marginalised. Also, in each case mobilisation for political, and ultimately militant, action proceeded on the wings of unorthodox –that is, syncretistic– radical religious activism.⁵

I have elsewhere endeavoured to demonstrate that in each case the combined impact of deprivation, hopelessness and a syncretistic religiously-rooted ideological conviction that justice will always prevail underpinned the insurgents’ willingness to challenge the objectively unchallengeable power of the state:

“What made the mobilizer’s message credible to those who followed their lead? ...What caused these relatively small numbers of mainly impoverished Indian peasants in Mexico and lower stratum Upper Egyptians to believe they could force desired change despite the full military resources available to governing authorities? Undoubtedly, the answer is complex and probably includes an intensity of frustration, anger and desperation that galvanized some to conclude that the effort must be made regardless of cost. But this alone cannot explain the conviction of those who took up arms that their cause would ultimately win. Perhaps the answer also partly lies in the deep impact of a cultural context permeated by a syncretistic

religious orientation in which the miraculous or magical is accepted as a normal part of life. The suggestion is that the folk-religions of the Chiapas Highland peasant Indians and Upper Egyptian fellahin fostered cognitive frameworks that were receptive to the notion that a just cause will eventually triumph, regardless of objective power relationships.”⁶

That unorthodox religion currents filled this role is not surprising when it is recalled that the unorthodox elements of the mobilising religious interpretations in both Chiapas and Upper Egypt were found precisely in an activist, militant orientation that challenged the prevailing status quo. Cast in this light, religion could simultaneously support conservative demands for cultural protection and radical demands for far-reaching socio-economic political change.

Whether Marginalised Violent Internal Conflict was indeed a widely spread type of conflict in the underdeveloped world by the closing decade of the twentieth century remains an unverified, though intriguing, proposition. While parallel dynamics have been established in the cases of the Zapatistas and the Gama’a al-Islamiyya, further investigation is obviously required before a category of conflict can credibly be claimed. As mentioned above, low intensity conflicts involving Nigeria’s Ogoni people, the Mapuche in Chile and the Cordillera people of the Philippines invite further research in this regard.

MARGINALISED VIOLENT INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

Castells has correctly noted that our age is marked by “the sudden acceleration of the historical tempo.”⁷ Just a short while ago, the type of conflict in which Zapatistas and the Gama’a al-Islamiyya engaged could arguably be labelled Marginalised Violent Internal Conflict. On September 11, Osama bin Laden and his Qaeda cohorts may have catapulted the essential dynamic of that sort of conflict to a higher level: Marginalised Violent International Conflict. That development may well point to the most pressing international political problem of the twenty-first century.

That the Arab-Islamic World gave rise to Al Qaeda and its decision to launch war against the United States is not surprising. For it is here that authoritarian regimes, strongly supported by Washington and the West, have most clearly failed in all ways, except for their tenacious abilities to cling to power. Over the past decade or so, those opposing this situation found themselves decidedly on the losing end. Authoritarian governments, which they correctly perceived as supported by Washington and its allies, effectively barred them from significant political participation in their own national settings. The outcome was the growth of an internationally marginalised body of frustrated militant activists. Olivier Roy has penetratingly described the mindset and context that is characteristic of international marginalisation:

“In effect, they exhibit a new characteristic: they are international and ‘deterritorialized,’ that is, their militants wander from jihad to jihad, generally on the margins of the Near East (Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bosnia) and are indifferent to their own nationalities...They define themselves as internationalist Muslims and do not lend their militancy to any particular national cause. Their ‘centers’ are in the no-mans land of Afghano-Pakistani tribal zones.”⁸ (Author’s translation.)

The militants were, and are, inspired by an ideology that promises ultimate victory, regardless of objective imbalances of power. At the end of 2001, US officials captured a video recording in which Osama bin Laden was seen gloating over the September 11 attacks. Journalist James Poniewozik’s assessment merits attention:

“...the tape is a firsthand look at the absolute religious certainty of bin Laden and his followers. Repeatedly, he and the sheik [who appears on the tape] talk about visions and dreams that associates had, before the attack, about planes crashing into buildings. This, perhaps, is something that Americans do not yet fully appreciate: these people live in another millennium, another mental universe. These are people who think magically, who see the world in terms of visions and fate, who honestly feel they have a divine mandate. We can say all we want, however truthfully, that September 11 does not represent true Islam. But we will never fully understand it until we understand, as this video graphically showed, that their entire world is defined by their belief in their divine sanction.”⁹

The truly important thing here is not the religious content of this ideological orientation. Instead, it is two other qualities: the promise of ultimate justice, despite all odds and, on the other hand (as proved by widespread positive reactions in the Muslim world to the September 11 attacks), the ideology’s capacity to strike deeply responsive chords among people whose governments have regularly denied them the amenities and dignity supposedly accessible to all in this modern world.

It would be fatally short sighted to think that religion has a monopoly on promises of ultimate justice. Purely secular visions of historical necessity have promulgated the same message in the past, and can easily do so again. This, of course, is also true of secular visions of racial or ethnic destiny.

One need only cast a quick mental glance at the current plight of Sub-Saharan Africa, or at the masses of those in other parts of the world who see themselves and their children condemned to exclusion from the benefits that modernity supposedly offers, to understand the potential attraction of militant ideologies that super-cede the state.

Castells argues, “The ability, or inability of the state to cope with the conflicting logics of global capitalism, identity-based social movements, and defensive movements...will largely condition the future of society in the twenty-first century.”¹⁰ At a time when the list of dysfunctional states in the world appears to grow steadily longer, this assessment is ominous. The implication is clear: if governments cannot or will not offer hope of responsiveness to the needs of the governed, non-state actors will find, or create, ideological grounds upon which to mobilise resistance, regardless of the forces arrayed against them. September 11 leaves no doubt that such resistance may well take the form of international war.

The –admittedly still uncertain– dissolution of Mexico’s Zapatista rebellion may carry an important lesson for hopes of international security in the coming decades. By the summer of 2001, the Mexican state’s growing responsiveness to demands for full inclusion seemed well on the way to ensuring a peaceful resolution of the once violent conflict. Many of those who strongly resisted the prospect of accommodation with the rebels now welcome the changes that have occurred in Mexico’s political climate and system.¹¹

It is beyond question that the immediate requirements of international security demand that the war on terrorism be fought to a successful conclusion. The destruction of Al Qaeda and the cowing of its actual or potential state sponsors must be accomplished as quickly as possible. Yet, it must also be recognised that a victory on that front –however complete– will not provide long-term security for anyone. If the Hobbesian horror of successive international wars waged by non-state actors is to be avoided, the conduct of international relations must henceforth be fundamentally reordered. International politics must give priority to creating political and economic conditions that will allow, persuade, and even require governments to function in ways that not only sustain their own legitimacy but also that of the state-dominated global system.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE ‘WAR ON TERRORISM’ TO A SECURE WORLD

The obvious paradox in what has been argued so far is the contention that the state must in some senses be weakened so that the state-system may be strengthened. As I have just said: “International politics must give priority to creating political and economic conditions that will allow, persuade, and even require governments to function in ways that not only sustain their own legitimacy but also that of the state-dominated global system.” It is necessary to explain and resolve this paradox.

If, as seems undoubtedly true, the world simply cannot afford to allow non-state actors to employ international war on behalf of their political ends, the state must be strengthened. Yet, the world also cannot afford to strengthen the state in ways that will allow it to promote rather than reduce marginalisation within its borders, for to do so will only enhance chances of militant non-state actors entering the world stage. In the interest of greater security for all, the powers of the state must, therefore be directed in ways that reduce marginalisation and which,

by doing so, enhance the legitimacy of the state-system. Clearly, then, true global security requires that the legitimacy of the state-system take precedence over the legitimacy of the state itself. In short, a state's legitimacy must come to be seen as contingent upon the degree to which it promotes the legitimacy of the state-system. The use of political and economic instruments by the international community to ensure this will increasingly have to be the foundation upon which global security rests.

And this, of course, obviously points to the need for yet another instrument, a key matrix, that must be relied upon to lend consistency, purposefulness and predictability to what could, and would, otherwise be only provocative political and economic interventions. The matrix exists: international law and, particularly, international human rights law. The strengthening of international law must no longer be looked at as an ideal to be deferred to the indefinite future but rather seen as a vital task whose time has come.

To the extent that Marginalised Violent Internal Conflict can be considered a valid category of conflict dynamic, differences in the Egyptian and Mexican experiences seem to reinforce the argument that has just been offered. Mexico's Zapatista rebellion appears have been settled by the Mexican state's willingness to undertake reforms that will lead to the full inclusion of the disaffected communities from which the Zapatistas drew their strength. Egypt, on the other hand, consistently pursued a hard-line policy against the Gama'a al-Islamiyya. The result is that while the Gama'a has been ground into quiescence, its possible re-emergence remains a pressing ongoing threat. In its determined drive to preserve the status quo, Egypt's regime, as Joshua Stacher notes, continues to function as "a democracy of fangs and claws."¹²

It is undeniable that the current War on Terrorism casts a pall over any consideration of what the foreseeable future of world politics may hold. Yet, it is possible that the impetus of events unleashed by September 11 will bring us to some unforeseeable future date at which the threat of global terrorism will be seen as having been the catalyst that led to an international system truly guided by law.

1 See Chapter 9 of the US Department of Defense's 1997 Annual Defense Report, available at www.dtic.mil/execsec/adr_intro.html. According to testimony given to a US court in February 2001 by Jamal al-Fadl, a Saudi Arabian national and aide to bin Laden, the latter was actively seeking to purchase uranium at least as early as 1993. See, Julian Borger and Ewen MacAskill, 'Bin Laden is Looking for a Nuclear Weapon: How Close Has He Come?', *Guardian*, November 7, 2001.

2 Borger and MacAskill, *op. cit.* (fn. 2).

3 David E. Apter, *Rethinking Development: Modernization, Dependency, and Post-modern Politics*, Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1987, p. 308.

4 Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. III, 'The Power of Identity', Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp. 68-69.

5 Dan Tschirgi, 'Marginalized Violent Internal Conflict in the Age of Globalization: Egypt and Mexico', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 21:3, summer 1999, pp. 13-34; Dan Tschirgi, 'In Egypt and Mexico, a New Type of Conflict: Zapatistas and Islamists Fight the Odds', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English edition), January 2001.

6 Tschirgi, *ibid.*, p. 26.

7 Castells, *op. cit.* (fn. 4).

8 Olivier Roy, 'Tragique impasse du fondamentalisme sunnite', *Manier de voir* 60, (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, November-December 2001, p. 51. The original reads as: "Ils presentent en effet une caracteristique nouvelle: ils sont internationaux et 'deterritorialises', c'est-a-dire que leurs militants nomadisent de djihad en djihad, en general aux marges du Proche-Orient (Afghanistan, Cachemire, Bosnie) et sont indifferents a leur proper nationalite...Ils se defissent comme des internationalists musulmans et ne lient leur militantisme a aucune cause national particuliere. Leurs 'centers' sont dan le no man's land des zones tribales afghano-pakistanaises."

9 James Poniewozik, 'The Banality of bin Laden', www.time.com, December 15, 2001.

10 Castells, *op. cit.* (fn. 4), p. 109.

11 Interview with Manuel Burguete, former Mayor of San Cristobal de las Casas, San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, August 21, 2001.

12 Joshua Stacher, 'A Democracy with Fangs and Claws and its Effect on Egyptian Political Culture', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 3, summer 2001, pp. 83-99.