

Politics after Al-Qaeda

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Abstract

One of the consequences of Al-Qaeda's terrorism has been its blurring of the distinction between national and international politics, both of which have lost a great deal of their former autonomy by serving as hosts for a set of new global concerns and practices. The Global War on Terror can be seen as an effort to externalize Al-Qaeda's global threat by internationalizing it in a conventional war, and thus reinforcing both the autonomy of international politics and its separation from that of a national variety. More than a conservative move to protect the international order, however, the War on Terror was also an ambitious attempt to remake global politics in the wake of the Cold War. But despite the transformations it has wrought, the War on Terror failed to create either a new global order or even a new global politics.

Keywords

Al-Qaeda, the Cold War, globalization, Islam, politics

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Osama bin Laden's demise was the global response it generated. In private, we know, the Pakistani government was both embarrassed by the inability of its security forces to find a man who had apparently been living for years in a suburb of the capital, and afraid that it might be accused of harbouring Bin Laden in Abbotabad. In public, however, Pakistan's government joined its military and people in condemning what they saw as America's infringement of their sovereignty in launching a covert operation against Al-Qaeda's founder. This rather prosaic reaction, in other words, included no popular demonstration of support for Osama bin Laden and little regret about his death. Indeed even the posters of Bin Laden being sold in many Pakistani cities during this period indicated that his popularity had been disconnected from the cause he represented, found as they often were beside boxes of Barbie dolls and photographs of

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heavily made-up starlets from Lollywood, as the Punjabi film industry based in Lahore is known. Osama bin Laden, then, seems to have become one icon among many others in a consumer society for which militancy was turned into a commodity.

The reaction to Bin Laden's death in the rest of the Muslim world was if anything more subdued than Pakistan's, and even countries like Spain and Britain, which had themselves been the victims of Al-Qaeda's terrorism in the recent past, saw no popular demonstration of satisfaction at his killing. Only in the United States was there an upsurge of patriotic feeling after the event, one that seemed so unique in the circumstances that global interest soon focused on what was happening on the streets of Washington rather than Abbotabad. And so it appeared as if Osama bin Laden now attracted global attention primarily because of his infamy in the USA. But in addition to demonstrating Al-Qaeda's loss of support in the Muslim world, this Americanization of the response to Bin Laden's demise illustrates the disintegration of Al-Qaeda's global profile along with that of the war fought against it. Indeed I want to argue here that despite the great transformations it has undoubtedly wrought, the War on Terror failed to create either a new global order or even a new global politics in the wake of the Cold War.

The loss of geopolitics

The Cold War is important in the narrative of militancy not only because Al-Qaeda emerged from its last great battle in Afghanistan, but also because the end of a hemispheric rivalry between the superpowers left the global arena without a politics of its own. And this is what gave Al-Qaeda's militancy, together with non-state and non-governmental movements of all kinds, the space in which to operate. It was the loss of geopolitics in a global arena that had been created by the Cold War, in other words, which, I want to claim, provided the context for Al-Qaeda's emergence. Neo-conservative thinkers in the USA had recognized this loss very soon after the Soviet collapse, though they saw it as a sign of America's victorious domination of the global arena. Thus Francis Fukuyama's celebrated 'end of history' thesis, as elucidated in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, was the first important statement about America's inability to engage in a global politics, now seen as having resolved itself merely into an extension of her domestic conflicts and interests. While ostensibly disagreeing with Fukuyama's thesis, Samuel Huntington's equally influential 'clash of civilizations' argument, as elaborated in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, also recognized the end of a traditional geopolitics based on states and sought to redefine worldwide conflict in cultural and non-statist terms. For in their own ways both thinkers saw that with the Soviet collapse, a global arena had come into view that was no longer circumscribed by states or even the international system, and thus did not possess a politics proper to itself.

Al-Qaeda's emergence, then, was part of a cold war narrative and did not signal the beginning of a new historical sequence. Perhaps because it was a transitional phenomenon of this kind, Al-Qaeda seems to have collapsed as a movement enjoying any global support. For it is not the War on Terror that has defeated militancy, with the loss of Muslim interest in Al-Qaeda taking western security and intelligence agencies by surprise.

Indeed it was precisely because western governments, led by the USA, had gambled on Al-Qaeda's representing the beginning of a new historical sequence in global politics that they made such large and long-term investments in the War on Terror. And of course Osama bin Laden did bring something new to the political table. An admirer of Huntington's book, for instance, he put into action its idea of a geopolitics determined by non-state actors. In doing so he sought to occupy a global arena that had remained politically vacant since the Cold War's division of the planet into rival hemispheres and its nuclear brinkmanship of 'mutually assured destruction'. For the new global arena that came into view following the Soviet collapse now possessed a sociological reality but no longer a political one. And this new reality, I would like to suggest, has been made thinkable primarily by way of humanity as a figure representing the object of both violence and compassion in the global arena, as a victim of nuclear, environmental, biological and other threats which must be addressed by various forms of humanitarian relief and intervention.

Now the human race, which before the Cold War had only been an abstraction, suddenly assumed a sinister reality with the possibility of nuclear apocalypse, though we might recognize its more prosaic manifestation in the actuality of planetary population control, which also relied upon the apocalyptic imagery of the 'population bomb'. Humanity therefore became the great subject and simultaneously the true object of the Cold War's new global arena, though one that still enjoyed only a negative existence given its lack of institutional representation. Modelled on the human race as a new kind of actuality that was supposedly under threat of extinction, the Muslim *ummah* or global community, too, emerged during this period as a reality lacking political form. For in times past this 'community' had been a metaphysical rather than sociological reality, and was often seen to include Muslims who had already died as well as who were yet to be born alongside those who were living. So there exists a famous tradition attributed to the Prophet, in which he is said to have voiced the desire that his followers should outnumber those of Jesus and Moses on the Day of Judgement, thus representing a posthumous vision of the *ummah*.

Having been reduced to a strictly contemporary entity whose empirical character was demonstrated by its capacity for enumeration, it was now possible for the Muslim *ummah* to represent the only political aspiration for the species similarly conceived as an empirical entity which had become de-politicized after the Cold War, and which could now only adopt a sociological form as the selfsame agent and victim of environmental threats like climate change, themselves conceived of in economic rather than political terms. Like a human race under threat from the environmental catastrophe that had replaced the Cold War's nuclear apocalypse, the Muslim community both existed and yet could not be said to exist. So it is no accident that Bin Laden referred very frequently to the Muslim *ummah* at risk of western violence in the same breath as he bemoaned the threat that global warming posed for the human race. And the equivocal existence of both *ummah* and species not only in Osama bin Laden's rhetoric, but also in our everyday world more generally, serves to foreground the fact that the globe possesses neither political actors nor any institutions of its own.

The extraordinary politics of speculation and spectacle that Osama bin Laden deployed to lend a kind of reality to such entities as the Muslim community, however, posed neither a political nor indeed a military threat to the United States or any other

country, including Afghanistan, despite the great violence associated with it. Instead what was new about the militant threat was that it happened to be global without being international, and domestic without being national. As a non-state actor, in other words, Al-Qaeda quite evaded the terrain of geopolitics, becoming a domestic problem for any number of countries, one that could create internal strife, put law and order at risk and imperil the electoral support of governments that were unable to guarantee the security of their citizens. If militancy did pose a threat to the sovereignty of these countries, then, it was largely in the domestic arena, where it broke the states' monopoly over the violence to which their citizens might be subjected. And in this sense the War on Terror can also be understood as an attempt by the United States to recover her right to dispose of American lives as much as those of the sundry foreigners and 'home-grown' terrorists who threatened them. This might be why the comparison that the war's critics often draw, between the numbers of Americans murdered in 9/11 and those subsequently killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, has had so little political effect. For the larger number of those who have been sent to die in these places at their government's behest allows the USA to reclaim sovereignty over her own citizens.

And yet Al-Qaeda's domestic threat could by no means be adjudged as arising from any national history or conflict, which is why we have been so keen to trace it to foreign recruiters and training camps in far-away places. Whatever the reality of such long-distance influence, however, it is clear that 'home-grown' militancy was also a reality, and so there were many efforts made to attribute this aspect of militancy to a national politics of racism, discrimination, or even dissent from a country's foreign policy. But their focus on global issues and distant battlefields also made it difficult to accommodate these home-grown militants within the circle of national politics, not least because the limitless responsibility these men attributed to certain powerful countries ended up putting into question the latter's integrity as nation-states. Perhaps it is because the global arena possesses a sociological but not a political reality that it manifests itself in the domestic realm, and its doing so deprives it of a national character to produce instead a hybrid or mutant political space within the USA. One of the consequences of Al-Qaeda's terrorism, therefore, has been its blurring of the distinction between national and international politics, both of which have lost a great deal of their former autonomy by serving as hosts for a set of new global concerns and practices.

Precisely because it possessed no political space of its own, therefore, Al-Qaeda's rhetoric, and its practices, had always been drawn from the world of its enemies. For despite the exotic appearance and terminology of its militants, Al-Qaeda operated not as an external enemy but rather internally, by turning the logic and instruments of the West against itself. This form of assault was in full evidence with the 9/11 attacks, whose perpetrators trained at American flight schools and used American aircraft to strike their targets. But the internality of this threat was not merely instrumental. So Bin Laden and his acolytes, for example, used constantly to argue that their attacks were only mirror images of western ones, and in doing so not only disclaimed any responsibility for them, but also deprived these acts of any ontological weight by rendering them purely negative. Indeed the only thing they claimed for themselves was the act of martyrdom, which is to say another form of negativity and disappearance that served to represent the equivocal reality of the global arena itself in the form of a cipher. Given their glorification of

violence, the militants' evasion of moral and political responsibility should be seen not as an attempt to escape censure, but rather as an acknowledgement of its ambiguous and undifferentiated universality in a global arena.

Crisis of the international order

Its other and more local aims apart, the Global War on Terror can be seen as an effort to externalize Al-Qaeda's global threat by internationalizing it in a conventional war, and thus reinforcing both the autonomy of international politics and its separation from that of a national variety. More than a conservative move to protect the international order, however, the War on Terror was also an ambitious attempt to remake global politics in the wake of the Cold War. With the United Nations as its institutional apex, the international order had itself been a cold war artefact, functioning as a kind of force field created by the superpowers and their respective blocs. Intended precisely to manage and keep global conflict cold, this order allowed for proxy wars in some parts of the world, Indochina, for example, while making for stability in other regions. Thus a number of amenable dictatorships were tolerated by both superpowers in places like North Africa and the Middle East that are only now being removed due to popular discontent. In many ways the so-called Arab Spring can also be seen as part of the Cold War's undoing. For its protests in North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East are revolutionary not in any conventional sense, involving political parties, ideologies and historical utopias, but precisely because they lack such traditional political forms.

Once the Cold War drew to a close, conflict could no longer be limited to proxy wars, and therefore restricted by them, but moved to disrupt even those areas that had previously been stabilized by superpower rivalry. In the initial instance these new zones of political instability were confined to the former Soviet Union, and it was common to think of what was happening there in terms of the recrudescence of long-suppressed nationalism, whether manifested in its positive form in eastern Europe and the Baltic, or in its negative aspect of supposedly age-old hatreds in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. But it soon became clear that the mechanistic image of suppressed or even perverted identities reasserting themselves once the Soviet hand was lifted would not do, since even western client states started behaving in unexpected ways with the effective disintegration of an international order that had been in place from the end of the Second World War. So a new arms race for nuclear weapons began among second- and third-rate powers including India, Pakistan, North Korea and, most recently, Iran. But more than this, previously loyal client states suddenly turned against their patrons, Saddam Hussein's Iraq being the chief example, and rather than being coerced into mending their ways by international isolation and the threat of overwhelming force, actually opted to commit political suicide by engaging in hopeless wars with the entire international community.

Whether we look at the wars that decimated Saddam's Iraq, Milosevic's Serbia, the Taliban's Afghanistan or, most recently, Gaddafi's Libya, striking about all these cases of political suicide is that all involved the spectacular self-destruction of otherwise opportunistic regimes dedicated to their own survival. Surely we cannot attribute such behaviour simply to ideological commitment, delusions of power and popular support

or even the lack of any other option, and must consider more seriously how it flouts the very principle of self-interest upon which the international order was built. Indeed the fact that we can only 'rationalize' these sacrificial actions by abandoning political theory altogether, and attribute them to the mistakes and delusions of individuals, should tell us something about the opportunism of such analysis. It is almost as if sovereignty can now manifest itself outside and indeed against this order, by claiming not the ability to kill so much as the willingness to die. But in this way the 'rogue' states that emerged as the international order's solitary enemies after the Cold War were only imitating the United States, whose own vision of global sovereignty prevented it from being bound by the very international institutions it claimed to protect, from the League of Nations after the First World War to the International Criminal Court following the Cold War. The sacrificial sovereignty of such rogue states, however, of which the first was Manuel Noriega's Panama, resembled that of Al-Qaeda's martyrs more than it did the power of the United States, and in doing so served to illustrate the coming-apart of the international order and its politics of deterrence more effectively than American exceptionalism ever could.

Having ceased to constitute a force field between two superpowers, the international order following the Cold War seems to have become as self-destructive as the rogue states that oppose it. For the community of nations now routinely turns against and destroys one of its recalcitrant members in what can only be described as an act of cannibalism, given both the disparity of force involved and the fact that by attacking one of its own the international community is only weakening itself. For such interventions generally end up creating dysfunctional new states like Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, or South Sudan that can survive only as wards of the international order. Of course the creation of new states by the international order has a long history in the 20th century, one that includes the establishment by the League of Nations of many European and Middle Eastern countries in the aftermath of the First World War, and most importantly by the United Nations' founding of Israel following the Second. And in doing all this the comity of nations represented today either in the UN or by NATO claims to be acting in the name of humanity. For the species that had possessed only a negative existence during the Cold War, as potentially the victim of nuclear annihilation, has now become the subject of a global politics.

Of course the human race still enjoys no positive reality, but by lending its name to an international order whose politics is increasingly defined by humanitarian considerations rather than ideological or even merely political rivalries, it has transformed all this order's enemies into figures of the inhuman whose annihilation can be contemplated with equanimity. The idea of a battle for humanity has of course been important since the First World War, but I would like to argue that its cannibalistic violence achieved a certain political reality only after the Cold War. Rather than departing from international norms, I want to suggest that the politics defined by a War on Terror should be seen as fulfilling them in a fantastical way. Among other things the effective abolition of the principle of neutrality in this conflict, and the exclusion of militants from both national and international jurisdictions of law, if only by defining them as old-fashioned pirates on the high seas, have fulfilled a certain ideal of the international order as a form of governance in the name of humanity. But in doing so these procedures have also made the concept of war itself into a red herring and in truth done away with it, since conceived of in purely juridical terms the international order can no longer tolerate

conflict as anything more than a form of criminality deserving punishment. This is why the Just War tradition of medieval Christendom has been so much invoked during the War on Terror, invalidating as it does principles like neutrality as well as the recognition that any legal or political order has limits and cannot be universal.

If archaic traditions such as that of the Just War and pre-modern legal conceptions regarding piracy have come to define the language of the War on Terror, it is because the latter has only managed to fulfil the ideal of an international order in a fantastical way. In fact this ideal itself belongs to the past, having been elaborated during the period between the two world wars as an ideology for the League of Nations. It was only following the 'war to end all wars' that international law came to be thought of as being universal rather than European or Euro-American for the most part and intended for the benefit of humanity as a whole. It was also in this period that efforts were made to render war illegitimate by recognizing only the international community's punishment of 'criminal' states as legal. While the League of Nations did not end up constituting an international order as a kind of super-state, the ideal appears to have survived its own demise and has returned to us in the language of the War on Terror. In our own day, too, of course, such an ideal has proven incapable of fulfilment, and its very reiteration may represent nothing more than a mask for this war's ultimate failure to re-internationalize the global arena. But the effort itself has not been without certain major consequences in addition to the spread or containment of violence. Crucial, for example, is the fact that the 'internationalist' imperatives of human rights, and the securing of life chief among them, seem to have trumped nationally defined politics having to do with civil liberties, which in forms like privacy, free expression and dissent have suffered greatly all over the world.

New American century

As an effort to repoliticize the global arena by internationalizing conflict, the War on Terror has not only failed but also damaged the international order even further. Yet this failure is evident not in the fate of Iraq and Afghanistan so much as in America's domestic politics. For if US administrations during the Cold War were naturally interested in securing America's economic and political dominance, they were also fighting for a vision of the world that was greater than their self-interest. But the collapse of the Soviet Union meant that US geopolitics suddenly shrank to become merely an aspect of her domestic concerns. Is this why every move in the War on Terror has been denounced by its critics not simply as bad international politics, but instead as the consequence of purely domestic compulsions having to do with corporate greed or personal vendettas? However mistaken or irrelevant such accusations may be, they certainly indicate an inability among the administration's critics to distinguish between national concerns and international politics. Her global victory in the Cold War, therefore, has ended up domesticating America's politics so that the nation's greatest enemies can now only be internal ones. Surely the escalating and now unprecedented tension between liberals and conservatives in the USA, whose mutual hatreds had their origin in the culture wars of the 1980s, demonstrates this truth in full measure.

America's great power has robbed it of geopolitics as a distinct field of action, confining its practices to the kind of self-interest that is incapable of distinguishing domestic

from international arenas. So quite apart from the mutual recriminations of Republicans and Democrats, there is the increasing use of War on Terror procedures within the USA itself for purposes like crime prevention that restrict the civil liberties of American citizens while having nothing to do with terrorism. It is also indicative of this turn inwards that Muslims today are seen by many Americans more as an internal threat than an external one, with their co-religionists abroad still free to become clients and allies of the USA. The early years of the War on Terror had seen nothing like this rise in what is often called 'Islamophobia', which has gained ground in the USA only after years of uninterrupted security and the absence of terrorist attacks. Linked to this collapse of geopolitics and the blurring of distinctions between the national and international domains is the so-called 'birther' movement, whose adherents hold that President Obama was not born in the USA and thus cannot hold office. Whatever its other characteristics, surely this widespread belief is indicative of the anxiety created by the vanishing politics of the nation made into a globalized mutant, as much as by the crisis of the international order.

Like these domestic concerns that are part of neither a national nor an international politics, Osama bin Laden's killing, together with the reaction it has elicited, offers us the clearest possible example of America's loss of geopolitics and its withdrawal from the world. After all, Bin Laden could not have been captured alive and handed over to an international court without compromising US sovereignty in the global arena. But neither could he be put on trial in the United States without entirely dismantling the legal procedures regarding enemy combatants and secret evidence that are so central to the War on Terror. And so with neither an institution of national justice available to try Osama bin Laden, nor an international court as an alternative, Al-Qaeda's founder had to be killed in an action that could not even draw its justification from combat.

We have seen that the greatest political consequence of Bin Laden's killing, an event that supposedly possessed global meaning, was nothing more than an exaggeration of its merely American character. Is this why the White House issued instructions that the 10th anniversary of 9/11, which followed Bin Laden's death by a few months, should be commemorated as an event of global rather than merely American significance? After all, Bin Laden's demise, which had enjoyed only symbolic significance in the rest of the world, served to gain President Obama an all too brief moment of popularity among his own people, having simply become an episode in the domestic politics of the United States. With the decline of Al-Qaeda, what has come into view is only the inability of states to address the planetary concerns of our time. These include climate change and food security, which the international system seems incapable of grappling with for structural reasons having to do with the limits of its institutional procedures rather than because of any lack of will. And so the global arena remains vacant and deprived of a politics, the very situation that had made Al-Qaeda possible in the first place.