



Looking Back to Look Forward: The Value of ORG's Approach to Conflict

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Summary

This briefing, the penultimate contribution to a series that began in 2003, revisits some of the early issues. These briefings were written at the beginning of the so-called "war on terror", when the Taliban had been overthrown in Afghanistan and the Iraq war still in its infancy. While many saw the initial successes of these episodes as proof that the war was the correct response to the 9/11 attacks, Oxford Research Group (ORG) was one of the few organisations to take a different view. It warned that the war would start a cycle of violence, causing greater instability and human suffering in the long term. ORG argued that, to truly resolve conflict, what was needed is an approach that analyses and addresses the root causes of insecurity. Much has changed since 2003, but the approach developed by ORG to understanding insecurity will be even more needed in the coming decades. Fortunately, there are plenty of people ready to continue the work that ORG started.

Introduction

As this is the penultimate monthly briefing in a series that started in May 2003, this contribution looks back on some of the early issues. These briefings were written just after the start of the Iraq War when it already appeared to have been concluded successfully and Afghanistan appeared to be recovering from the Taliban era. Instead, over the past 17 years, there has been continuous conflict across the Middle East, North Africa and West Asia and it is appropriate

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to reflect on this sequence of events in relation to ORG's work at the time, the briefings being among some of ORG's many outputs.

The Reaction to 9/11

The immediate response of the United States government to the appalling attacks of 9 September 2001 was to engage in what was rapidly termed a "war on terror". Shortly after the attack, during a joint session of Congress, George Bush declared, "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated." This initially had much support in many Western countries.

However, ORG was one of the few groups that was much more cautious and a month after 9/11 the founding director of ORG, Scilla Elworthy, and I wrote an analysis of the reasons for the impending war and whether it was a wise response. In the piece, entitled "[The United States, Europe and the Majority World after 11 September](#)", our view was that once a war against a movement such as al-Qaida started it could very quickly expand into something much more substantial with unforeseeable consequences.

Scilla, in particular, argued that a cycle of violence might start with an atrocity causing terror, shock and horror which is followed by fear and grief, then anger, hatred and revenge. These conditions lead to further atrocities (see diagram below). But the cycle could be broken at the point of anger by working with allies to build a coalition following the rule of law and bringing the perpetrators to justice. Furthermore, a terror movement could be countered partly by intelligence cooperation, but the overarching approach would be to analyse the underlying causes, understand the antagonism and seek to address the root

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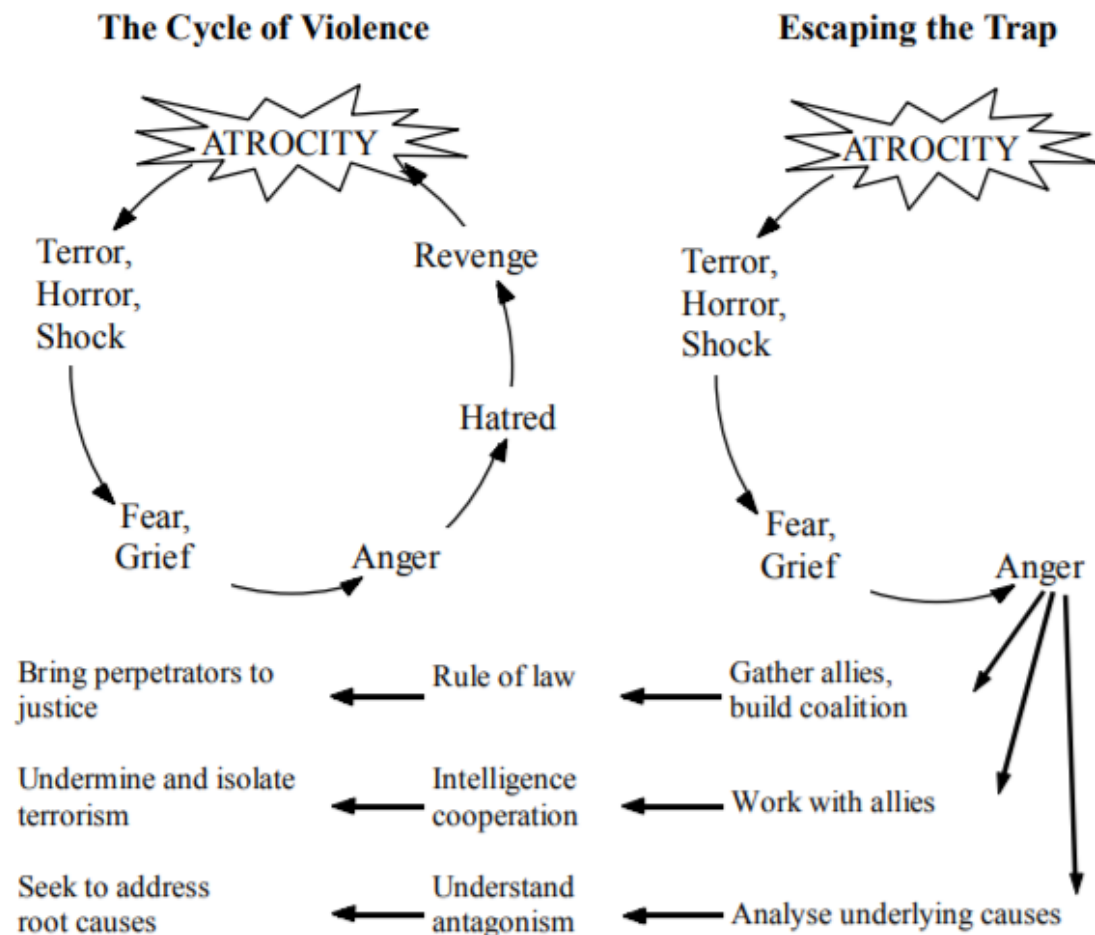
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causes.



In the event, that approach was not followed. The Taliban in Afghanistan did appear to be defeated and al-Qaida dispersed easily enough. Furthermore, in President Bush's *State of the Union* address in January 2002 he made it clear that the action in Afghanistan was the start of a much-expanded war that would

be aimed primarily at an “axis of evil”. This described states who supported terrorist movements and who were determined to develop their own weapons of mass destruction.

The three main elements of the axis were Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and subsidiary members were Libya, Syria and Cuba. Following this considerable expansion of priorities, ORG was once again one of a small number of groups that questioned the wisdom of this move and published a series of follow-up papers during 2002. The current series of monthly briefings was an expansion of that work. The first was published in May 2003 and the series has continued since.

The War on Terror in 2003

The first briefing, *A Mission Accomplished?*, took its title from a banner on the tower of a US aircraft carrier, the *Abraham Lincoln*, where President Bush delivered an address to the crew on 1 May 2003. This was three weeks after the Saddam Hussein regime had been terminated in Iraq and the mood in the United States was very positive. In May 2003, for instance, a Gallup poll found that 79% of Americans thought the military invasion of Iraq was justified. At the time, Iraq appeared to mark the second of two very impressive victories in the war on terror.

The briefing raised three major issues. The most obvious one was that one of the core reasons for going to war was to prevent the regime developing weapons of mass destruction. But it was already becoming clear that there was no evidence that the regime had them ready for use and no evidence of actual preparation.

The two further points raised at this very early stage were that the Bush administration was planning a military occupation of Iraq and the restructuring of the state's politics. It also noted that a mood of anti-Americanism was developing in the country. Furthermore, just a few weeks into the war there were indications that the Iraqi military casualties were as many as 10,000 killed with at least 3,000 civilians dead.

As civil disorder and anti-American paramilitary action started to develop in the country, the briefing noted that the US Secretary of State for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld and others were singling out Iran "as the very cause of the opposition to US occupying forces in Iraq" and that this might be greatly underestimating the depth of opposition within Iraq. It would also make the Iranians even more concerned about their own security, given that they had been declared part of the "axis of evil". The first briefing concluded:

“ Perhaps what is most surprising about the immediate post-war period has been the extent of the immediate opposition to US forces within Iraq. There seems to have been little expectation of this either in Washington or London, but it is likely to create substantial obstacles to any attempt to ensure that an ‘acceptable’ regime gains power in Baghdad. Given this early opposition, any regime in Baghdad that is not broadly acceptable across Iraq is likely to have to maintain power forcefully, with that position being backed-up by the availability of US military power. This is not a recipe for a stable and peaceful post-war Iraq. ”

The two following briefings reported on the manner in which violence increased rapidly in Iraq. *Losing the Peace* (June) and *A Growing Insurgency* (July) reported on the extent of the casualties, especially among civilians as regular US forces trained primarily for conventional warfare faced well-armed and determined insurgents operating in crowded urban environments. The frequent response of US soldiers and marines on the ground to their own people getting killed or terribly maimed was to use the massive firepower advantage, but this

resulted in more civilian casualties leading to even more anger and bitterness among ordinary Iraqis. Ominously, the June briefing also noted that the anticipated transition to peace in Afghanistan was simply not happening and that:

The United States is having to maintain a force of over 10,000 troops and is continuing to use strategic bombers such as the B-1B to engage in substantial air raids against Taliban units, along with regular deployments of troops. Efforts to train the Afghan National Army are proving very difficult and there is an acceptance that a substantial military presence will be maintained in the country for some years.

No Withdrawal

In Iraq, that same briefing pointed to the original plans for the Pentagon to scale down the occupying forces from 100,000+ to 70,000 by September or even much less. The long-term intention was to establish three or four large and well-equipped air bases, but the primary purpose would be the containment of Iran not the occupation of Iraq. The presumption was that post-invasion forces would be almost entirely withdrawn. Instead the briefing noted that:

“ At the beginning of June, the picture was very different, with about 160,000 US and British troops in Iraq itself, supported by another 40,000 in Kuwait and neighbouring countries. Moreover, moves were underway to reinforce the military presence – instead of some units being replaced by incoming troops, the former would stay on and the latter would supplement them. It is now probable that forces will be maintained at the present level for many months. ”

A Matter of Attitudes

The June 2003 briefing also reported on the remarkable results from the Pew Research Center's polling on attitudes to the United States in countries across the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. Comparing public attitudes to the United States in May 2003 with one year previously, unfavourable opinion had risen from 75% to 90% in Jordan, 59% to 71% in Lebanon, 69% to 81% in Pakistan, 55% to 83% in Turkey and a pronounced 36% to 83% in Indonesia. There was also polling evidence of strong support for the al-Qaida leader, Osama bin Laden with the *Washington Post reporting* that in Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and the Palestinian Authority he was chosen as one of three people “trusted to do the right thing in world affairs”.

Given the changing public mood in much of Europe including the UK, the support for the United States immediately after 9/11 had diminished to the extent that those polling results would have been readily understood if not endorsed. In the United States, on the other hand, there was little concern or even understanding of its wider predicament. The shock of the 9/11 attacks was profound, especially as the world had previously looked bright for the creation of the New American Century. For supporters of the war on terror, the early successes of Afghanistan and Iraq were seen as proof that the war was precisely the right response to the 9/11 attacks. These episodes also gave renewed optimism to those who believed that, as the world's pre-eminent power, the United States could lead the world to greater prosperity.

Conclusion

ORG and a few other groups took a very different view, with ORG's early work on [assessing casualties](#) led by John Sloboda being an important component, as was the thinking on sustainable security that had been initiated by Chris Abbott. ORG's work on mediation, which had been initiated by Scilla Elworthy, continued and was developed further by Gabrielle Rifkind. Even by 2013, ten years after the start of the briefings, the failed and failing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and across the Sahel continued with little sign of a recognition of failure by the military and security establishment.

The military-industrial complex cited back in 1960 as a potential impediment to real security by the former Second World War General and [later](#) US President Dwight D Eisenhower continued on its way with scarcely any desire to rethink its purpose. The fighting of wars might change- with fewer boots on the ground and much-increased use of armed drones, special forces, private military companies, local militias and offensive cyber operations, but force was still

seen as an appropriate response to insecurity in direct opposition to the view embodied in the “cycle of violence” approach.

Taking a detached position, the view from the United States could readily be understood, especially as it was bolstered by the influence of the military-industrial complex and its remarkable lobbying power. Prior to 9/11, the United States had become the world's sole superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. President Bush was elected in 2000 based on a policy of restoring US influence and leading the world to a stable, civilised free-market polity. To see the World Trade Centre, its towering symbol of world business success, destroyed and the headquarters of the world's most powerful military on fire was a visceral shock. The war on terror, then, was the near-certain reaction, however ill-judged and counter-effective it proved to be.

From another perspective, the view of those many millions caught up in the violence of US-led western occupation in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere it was of a brutal superpower determined to maintain rigorous control and impose its own version of a civilised world. In a perverse way, for many people in the majority world, there was little sympathy for the United States after 9/11. Indeed, its overwhelming military response, with all the innocent people killed, was surely positive proof of what it really was, just another violent hegemon.

To see those two perspectives as polar opposites is stating the obvious, yet that kind of divergence persists seventeen years later and is even exacerbated by the hugely more complex world of nationalist populisms, a global pandemic, increased poverty, marginalisation and the great challenge of preventing climate breakdown. The work done by Oxford Research Group over nearly forty years is one of the few examples of people seeking a different way and this

approach will be even more needed in the coming decades. There are, fortunately, plenty of people ready to take up the challenge.

Image credit: Marion Dross/Flickr.

About the author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in International Security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His **'Monthly Global Security Briefings'** are available from our website. His book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.

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