



Connecting the Dots: The West's Wars at Home and Abroad

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28 February 2020

Summary

The war on terror has been underway for nearly two decades. Yet there is still little appreciation in some political quarters of how this approach has often been counterproductive and even created the conditions for violent extremism to thrive. If we are ever going to move towards a less violent future, this must change.

Introduction - Why Do They Hate Us?

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the understandable desire in the United States to respond with force was interspersed in some minds with the question “Why do they Hate Us?” It was rooted in the need to understand why any group could attack the United States in this appalling manner, given that America was an undoubted force for good, consistently acting as the world’s police force and ensuring peace and stability.

Although not at the same level, something of that thinking persists nearly twenty years later and surfaces from time to time when there is a violent attack or even a court case involving charges of terrorism. Now, though, the attitudes have changed somewhat as most of the attacks, whether planned or executed, are small-scale and often involve individuals or very small groups. These are people commonly seen as radicalised into extreme views, quite often while in prison, and the main counter-terror efforts therefore go into detaining such individuals or groups before they carry out their acts. Along with this go programmes such as the UK government’s [Prevent scheme](#) which seek to

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identify potential extremists and ensure that they undergo re-education in order to de-radicalise them.

While this is a societal reaction to be expected, it does not contribute much towards understanding what might drive people in the first place to succumb to extreme cultish values as are commonly seen among supporters of al-Qaida, ISIS and similar movements. Exploring this element of human behaviour may not be comfortable as it raises issues of whether much of the problem lies with the whole Western approach to the war on terror. Questioning that can all too easily be criticised as sympathising with those carrying out appalling acts of violence. This briefing looks at how the post-9/11 western-led conflicts have contributed to a sense of animosity towards certain Western states in the Middle East and elsewhere and the broader consequences of this development.

The 7/7 Experience

On 7 May 2005 four al-Qaida supporters bombed a bus and three underground trains in London, killing 52 people as well as themselves and wounding and traumatising hundreds. This was two years into the Iraq War which was already becoming **unpopular** in Britain and the Labour Government led by Tony Blair was insistent from the start that those behind the mass murder were dangerously warped individuals whose actions had nothing to do with the war on Iraq.

It was an approach which was politically understandable given the sensitivity of the government to criticism over its Iraq policy but was seriously undermined by the later release of “suicide videos” by two of the bombers. One of them, Mohammad Sidique Khan **said**:

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“ Your democratically-elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security you will be our targets and until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation. ”

The second video, by Shehzad Tanweer, said:

“ What you have witnessed now is only the beginning of a string of attacks that will continue and become stronger until you pull your forces out of Afghanistan and Iraq. And until you stop your financial and military support to America and Israel. ”

The publication of those videos (which may have been subject to some editing before release) had some impact in explaining the motivations, but this was largely discounted as people continued to recoil from the horror of the attacks. Fifteen years later and at a time of persistent if low-level threats, the problem is very largely seen as the actions of warped individuals largely unconnected with wars overseas. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to argue that there are connections, and these must be taken into account if we are to move towards a more stable era.

Legacy of Empire

The main Western states involved in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been the United States, the United Kingdom and France – all with claims to past or present “great power” status. The UK and France can look back to the era of empire, still persisting in their view that they brought peace to much of the world. There is an old West African joke that the reason the sun never set on the British Empire was that God did not trust the British in the dark, but to have tried that joke in 1890s London when the Empire was thought of as the

great civiliser would have been met with anger, incredulity or at the very least blank stares.

The rise of the United States to globalism after the Second World War was not as clear-cut an imperial endeavour but the strong belief in a positive world leadership role was certainly there. Moreover, it had come to the fore in the late 1990s with the highly influential [Project for the New American Century](#), resolutely promoted by neoconservatives and assertive realists.

In their different ways, these histories did much to embed in political culture that the countries of the West, especially the US, Britain and France, have been and are “the good guys”, facing up to irrational threats from warped minds and dangerously nihilistic movements.

Remote Warfare

During the first decade of the post-9/11 era, the wars against extreme Islamist paramilitaries in Afghanistan and Iraq were fought very much in the open, with tens of thousands of boots on the ground, many Western journalists reporting on the conflicts and some media coverage of the damage and destruction caused by air strikes and ground warfare. Those in power stuck resolutely to the rightness of what they ordered but there was unease across civil society, persistent opposition and even some recognition that the wars were proving counterproductive.

In the past ten years that has changed as Western ground forces have been largely withdrawn and their roles replaced by a mix of heavy air power, especially the use of armed drones, and Special Forces, private military companies and the use of local militias. This has meant that the ongoing

conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are scarcely reported in the Western media, even if their intensity has been remarkable.

For example, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) began compiling records of casualties in 2009 and since then **has recorded** 100,000 Afghans killed or injured including nearly 34,000 civilians, many of them children, even though, in recent years, Western troops numbers have been barely a tenth of those a decade ago. Back in 2010 and 2011 US **forces dropped** 5,100 and 5,411 munitions each year respectively, both missiles and guided and unguided bombs at a time when there were and 100,000 troops on the ground. Compare this with 2018 and 2019, when the troops numbers were down to 13,000 but munitions **used were** 7,362 and 7,423 respectively.

In Iraq this change is even more pronounced. As of this month, the **Iraq Body Count** assessment of deaths in Iraq since the start of the war in 2003 is 280,000, of which at least 184,000 are civilians. This is an actual “count” and does not include the many thousands of deaths caused indirectly by the impact of war.

What is really significant, though, is the impact of the intense 2014-17 war against ISIS which started shortly after the movement took control of Iraq's second city of Mosul and threatened the security of Baghdad. Compared to the 2003 Iraq War, that campaign was scarcely reported in the Western media since it was fought by Western forces almost entirely from the air, yet the US Special Operations Command **reported** the death toll of 60,000 ISIS supporters. US sources speak of **only 841** of those being civilian, but the independent monitoring group Airwars **puts the figure** at 6,200.

Impact and Motivation

The common Western political view is that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of just wars against dangerous threats and have been entirely reasonable. This is not how they have been seen across much of the Middle East and especially in the countries most affected, where they are commonly seen as yet more foreign intervention. Opposition to Western actions in Afghanistan and Iraq have not just come from the Taliban, al-Qaida, ISIS or the Saddam Hussein regime but from much wider sectors of the populations. US sources may claim that almost all of the 60,000 people killed in the war against ISIS were paramilitaries, but thousands were civilians. Every one of them would have many relatives and friends and many of those would have been greatly angered and embittered by the deaths.

That would apply also to the ISIS paramilitaries themselves, where hundreds of thousands of family members and friends would have been affected by the deaths, whether or not they supported the movement itself. We then have to add to that the effect of the persistent use of social media by ISIS and other propagandists to communicate these impacts to a much wider audience right across the world.

Conclusion

What needs to be recognised are mirror images of conflict. For most people in the West, the intense air war against ISIS was scarcely on their horizon, little was known of the casualties and it would hardly be possible to make a connection between these small wars in far-off places, and violent jihadi-linked attacks in their own countries. In those “far-off places” though, the effects would be greatly felt and would also be communicated across the world, the sustained message being that this was all part of a never-ending “crusader” war against Islam. It is a message that reverberates across the Middle East but

also strikes a chord more widely. That has to be understood if policies are to be developed that might prevent decades more of war.

Image credit: US Army/Flickr.

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