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Politics After Al-Qaeda

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Released by the Pentagon following the American assassination of Osama bin Laden in Abbotabad, an already “iconic” image showing Al-Qaeda’s frail leader watching footage of himself on an antiquated television set inadvertently reveals some truths about the War on Terror. For one thing it is difficult to imagine this setting as part of a command centre for global terrorism. And for another the international reaction to Bin Laden’s assassination casts doubt on the US narrative of war and victory on a global scale. Crucial about this reaction, after all, has been the fact that people around the world seemed interested in the event primarily because of the extraordinarily pugnacious public response it generated in the US, and not for any reason of their own. Thus even in countries like Britain and Spain, which not so long ago had themselves been the victims of Al-Qaeda’s militancy, there was little if any public demonstration of satisfaction at Bin Laden’s death, though it continued to be the subject of massive media coverage precisely as an element in American politics.

In the Muslim world, too, those who mourned the “Sheikh’s” death did so for a variety of reasons, many of which had more to do with local politics than anything so grand as a global war against the West. Indeed there was something curious about the endlessly replayed shots, in the American and European press, that attempted to demonstrate Osama bin Laden’s popularity among Muslims by showing his photograph being sold in Pakistani shops. For these images often had as their context pictures of other celebrities, like unveiled and heavily made up starlets from “Lollywood”, as the Punjabi film industry based in Lahore is known. Sold as a commodity

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alongside posters of film stars and boxes of Barbie dolls, the popularity of Bin Laden's photograph surely says nothing about that of the jihad he advocated. His celebrity status, I imagine, has more to do with the fact that Osama bin Laden was dignified by America as her greatest enemy and had thus gained a degree of infamy with little connection to Pakistani concerns. He had become just another iconic commodity to his fans.

Of course Al-Qaeda's spectacular attacks, notably those of 9/11, were impressive enough to win it a certain admiration, sometimes for aesthetic as much as religious or political reasons, but it is not clear how much of this translated into material support. And today even anti-American sentiment among Muslims appears to have abandoned global terrorism as its model and moved in other directions. It is only the US public that continues to be mesmerised by Osama and his gang, which is appropriate enough given that they had always been a factor of America's domestic politics. So the political use to which President Obama put Bin Laden's killing was nothing more than a fulfilment of his predecessor's strategy, which consisted of using fears about security to consolidate his power at the national level. I am not, however, making the extravagant claim that the Bush administration simply used the 9/11 attacks in a cynical exercise to bolster its support, nor that the United States used them as an excuse to remake the world in its own image. On the contrary, I think that the US was and continues to be unable to engage in a global politics after the Cold War.

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 its domestic concerns. Her global victory, in other words, domesticated America's politics, so the nation's greatest enemies could now only be internal ones. Surely the escalating tension between liberals and conservatives in the US, whose mutual hatreds had their origin in the culture wars of the 1980s, demonstrates the truth of this situation. Neoconservative thinkers had recognized the novelty of this withdrawal from geopolitics 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 merely as 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. And it was in such an arena that a phenomenon like Al-Qaeda's non-state militancy could arise and seek to give political substance to an entity like the global Muslim ummah or community, which itself had no historical precedent or institutional life.

An admirer of Huntington's book, Osama bin Laden 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 possessed a sociological reality but no longer a political one. So entities like the human race, which before the Cold War had only been abstractions, suddenly assumed a sinister reality with the possibility of nuclear apocalypse, or indeed the actuality of planetary population control. Modelled on the human race as a new kind of actuality that was supposedly under threat of extinction, the Muslim ummah, too, emerged during this period as a reality lacking political form. And in doing so it came to represent the only political aspiration for a species which had suddenly become depoliticized after the Cold War, one that could now only take 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, in other words, 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 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 and even the human race, however, posed no existential threat to the United States or any other country, including Afghanistan, despite the great violence associated with it. Indeed Al-Qaeda's most important and long-term consequence may well be shaking up the Muslim world's hierarchies and inculcating highly individualistic forms of sacrifice as the basic element of a new politics there. Isn't this the lesson that so many of the current "revolutions" in the Middle East have learnt from Al-Qaeda, lacking as they do any coherent leadership, ideology or political form? Indeed it is perhaps because this lesson has been learnt so well that Al-Qaeda has slipped from view in much of the Muslim world, its historical task accomplished as the result of an internal dynamic rather than because of any victory won in the War on Terror. Unlike Al-Qaeda's militants, of course, today's revolutionaries have forsaken the species or Muslim ummah to lend global ideas of pan-Arabism a certain reality by their media-driven imitations of one another, though without trying to formalize it in any ideological, let alone institutional sense, as if to suggest that this reality can only be an unspoken and non-statist one.

By launching the Global War on Terror, the US was, among other things, trying to reclaim a planetary politics for itself. But given that Al-Qaeda was unable to present it any kind of military challenge, becoming instead a factor of America's domestic politics in the aftermath of 9/11, this was an effort doomed to failure. Despite the exotic appearance and terminology of its militants, moreover, Al-Qaeda operated not as an external enemy but rather internally, by turning the logic and instruments of the West against itself. This viral form of attack was in full evidence with the 9/11 attacks, whose perpetrators trained at American flight schools and used American aircraft to strike their targets. And this lack of externality was only augmented by the militants' exaltation of martyrdom, which did nothing more than rob Al-Qaeda of its very ontology as a foe whom death might defeat. So the great transformation that the War on Terror wrought the world over had as much to do with electoral machinations and security concerns in the US as it did with a global politics that was suddenly inaccessible to the planet's remaining superpower. For even this war's economic and other spoils were reserved primarily for the US,

whose allies had to fall in line for crumbs that might enrich individuals but had little bearing for an international system that had merely been subordinated to American designs. In waging what it considered a global war, in other words, the United States did nothing more than hollow out if not quite demolish an international system that had already been weakened by the Soviet collapse and was in the process of becoming politically irrelevant in the new global arena within which Al-Qaeda operated. This arena was therefore recognized and even supported by an America that dismissed the legal and other formulae of the international order to occupy it.

America's great power, in other words, 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. As a consequence the United States can only operate internationally by seeing and reproducing itself everywhere in an impossible gesture of narcissism. And this means that the more it acts in the world the more America actually withdraws from the latter's reality. Osama bin Laden's assassination and disposal at sea is a good example of this, representing as it does a squandered opportunity for the procedures of international ethics as much as justice, sacrificed as both of these were in favour of a purely domestic politics. But the risk of such behaviour is very high indeed, since more than a loss of reality, what it entails is the turning inward of all conflict. So quite apart from the mutual recriminations of Republicans and Democrats, there is the increasing use of War on Terror procedures within the US 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 coreligionists abroad still free to become clients and allies of the US. 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 US only after years of uninterrupted security and the absence of terrorist attacks.

Like these domestic concerns, 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. For with the decline of Al-Qaeda's smoke and mirror politics, 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 allowed Al-Qaeda to emerge in the first place.

The meaningless revolution

What role do the “revolutions” of the Middle East play in this context? While commentary on this extraordinary season of revolts constantly refers to their radically unforeseen character, the analyses propounded don’t cease gesturing towards precedents and models that might make them historically comprehensible. If it isn’t a regional history of Arab rebellion against authority that is invoked, then we are offered an international one having to do with anti-monarchism, anti-colonialism or anti-capitalism. And in all this our initial surprise at these extraordinary events is shunted aside as indicating nothing more than a deficit of knowledge about the societies and peoples involved in such uprisings. At most the previously unimaginable and therefore incalculable element in the Middle Eastern revolutions is reduced to a “spark” that, in the acts of a Tunisian suicide or his Egyptian and other mimics, ended up setting the region on fire.

However accurate the genealogies proffered by analysts to make sense of these revolts, surely their surprise was due not to a lack of knowledge as to its irrelevance. For the events still unfolding before us 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. Indeed those most surprised by this revolutionary wave appear to have been the very people who made it possible. So if there is one sentiment that these men and women voice over and over again, it is wonder at their own transformation. Most revolutionary about these events, in other words, might be the sudden fearlessness that took the Middle East’s protestors aback. And such fearlessness, I want to suggest, may have something to do with the absence there of a revolutionary politics in its traditional sense.

Of course it is true that revolutions in other times and places have also been marked by a sense of wonder, but the meaning and possibilities of its surprise have rarely been examined. Instead commentary on the Left as much as the Right is dominated by the “logic” of history,

whose narrative of precedents and genealogies makes events calculable after the fact. And yet this appeal to history often ends up denying the change that is its essence. For instance demonstrations throughout the region have been marked by efforts to take back the state and re-appropriate its symbols. This was particularly the case in Egypt, with flags, anthems and slogans abundantly deployed by the protestors. But in the process these symbols of nation and state were also evacuated of their political content and joined up with explicitly civilian forms of celebration. Thus the sloganeering and revelry in Tahrir Square borrowed freely from the chants and other practices of football fans, including dancing and face painting. And indeed what could the old-fashioned words “people” or “revolution” mean in a post-Cold War global arena? The relatively superficial use made of such terms in the protests, then, might well suggest their attenuation as political categories. Such an interpretation becomes more convincing when we consider the remarkable forms of self-organization and indeed self-rule that suddenly emerged in the square after decades of centralized and oppressive government, none of which bore any similarity to traditional political forms.

By taking them over, the revolutions have in some ways given the old categories of Middle Eastern politics a new reality. So, for instance, the revolts imitating each other across the region have made Pan-Arabism into a popular reality for the first time, but only in a negative way, without any ideology to match. Even the solicitude for the nation displayed by Egyptians eager to do things like clean the streets of Cairo, absorbs such categories of the state into everyday practices and non-political forms. Similar are the creation of new relations between rich and poor, Christians and Muslims, even the people and the army—which was after all being seduced from its duty and in fact from the state by the protestors in Tahrir Square. Of course none of these extraordinary phenomena may survive what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, but even so they illustrate both the power and the possibilities of action beyond the limits of our inherited politics.

The interruption of conventional historical narratives that defines so many of the struggles in the Middle East today have the effect of destabilizing the logic of Western “intervention” as well. For however violent, the action of coalition forces in Libya has been marked by caution and uncertainty, betraying its lack of a clearly stated goal in an improbable and unpredictable situation. Rather than being characterized by mere deception regarding the

control of Libyan politics or oil, therefore, the intervention has been forced by the dissonance of the revolts themselves into an experiment that is open to popular opinion and motivated by a desire to be on the right side of an unknown history. If nothing else the coalition has to demonstrate the continuing relevance of an “international community” that seems to have been left out of the new politics emerging from the Middle East.

The historical logic that drew previous NATO-led interventions belonged either to the superpower politics of the Cold War, or to the resolution of conflicts that had emerged in its wake. Vietnam, Korea and the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan are examples of intervention of the first kind, while Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo provide illustrations of the second. With Iraq and Afghanistan during the War on Terror, of course, and even Libya today, outdated Cold War regimes are still being toppled, but now intervention has lost whatever real politik it once possessed. For if interventions in the past had sought to secure allies and markets for the West, without much concern for the democratic nature of the regime to be instituted, those in the present are dominated by grandiose visions like remaking the Middle East.

The abject failure of such impossible visions in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in a Libyan adventure that lacks both a grand vision and real politik. Characterized by uncertainty and experiment, intervention has become nothing more than a bad habit that is driven increasingly by non-political concerns like “humanitarianism” at a time when international politics is itself in crisis. The same was true of intervention in the Balkans, of course, but there received ideas about religious and national states allowed for the making of dysfunctional new countries as wards of the international community. The difference with the revolts in Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East is that they possess no conventional utopia or historical logic, serving instead as interruptions that are transformative of politics both in the region and internationally.

The opinions in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of Conflicts Forum.

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