



## BOOKS

# Terrorism As War

By PARAG KHANNA

WALTER LAQUEUR. *No End to War. Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century.* CONTINUUM BOOKS. 288 PAGES. \$24.95

IN THE COURSE of CNN's commercial-free week of coverage following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the network's dramatic banner changed from "America Under Attack" to "America's New War" to "War Against Terror." As it happens, former secretary of state Madeleine Albright had already declared a "war against terrorism" in 1998. But only after 9-11 did terrorism graduate — permanently — from its status as an historical nuisance to that of one of the gravest dangers facing mankind. The all-encompassing transformation presently underway is underscored by post-September 11 rhetoric evoking comparisons to both the invisible, decades-old "war on drugs" and the massive national mobilization in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. Terrorism,

---

*Parag Khanna is TK.*

previously considered at most the continuation of war by other means, has become war itself.

Global wars of the past have been characterized by a restructuring of both the ordering among and the alliances between great powers; thus it is too early to tell if the current war on terror will meet these essential criteria to earn the "World War III" label already bestowed on it by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, or even "World War IV," as suggested by Eliot Cohen and James Woolsey. Yet it is beyond dispute that terrorism has acquired strategic dimensions to complement its established tactical logic. The specter of terrorist attacks with weapons of mass destruction has prompted the Bush administration to adopt a retribution principle that equates any such attack with a declaration of war, automatically provoking American military retaliation against even suspected terrorist groups and their state sponsors. Interestingly, substituting Iraq for "terrorist group" and preemption for "retribution" in the previous sentence gives us the administration's justification for the March invasion of Iraq; this highlights how technological empowerment has given terrorism a geopolitical status rivaling that of traditional inter-state warfare. Terrorism has even encroached on the realm of civil wars, which were thought to have displaced great power rivalry after the Cold War. The legitimization of the ongoing persecution and military aggression against Chechens by Russia and Uighurs by China as "wars against terrorism," for example, has obscured the political line between terrorism and internal conflict.

## Books

AS HIS TITLE *No End to War* suggests, Walter Laqueur recognizes that terrorism's rise has further blurred its differentiation from war. The subtitle, "Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century," alludes to his claim that even as traditional wars fade into normative obsolescence, terrorism will be with us "for as long as anyone can envision." The octogenarian Laqueur's capstone book should therefore serve as a valuable resource for scholars and policymakers seeking to understand terrorism's definitions, history, pivotal players, and psychology for years to come. Furthermore, in refining the arguments of his pre-September 11 book *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (Oxford University Press, 1999), *No End to War* cements Laqueur's status as the preeminent scholar of terrorism, both old and new.

State sponsorship of terrorism no longer serves as the most logical point of entry into an exploration of the terrorism-war dynamic. For Syria and Iran, financial support and military patronage of Hezbollah were the most effective means to fight a proxy war against Israel, forcing the Jewish state's withdrawal from the "security zone" in southern Lebanon. Accompanying the end of the Cold War, however, the globalization forces that have opened borders, societies, and access to information technology have also allowed "local conflicts to turn into a worldwide campaign," according to Laqueur; terrorism has gone truly global, shedding its traditional dependency on state sponsors. Indeed, in an age of instant communications and illicit

financing, groups like al Qaeda appear capable of carrying out their operations despite the loss of a home base such as Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Not only are there other failed states where rent is cheap, but advanced technology also permits terrorist groups to function as multinationals would during periodic disruptions. The current war on terrorism will determine to what extent threatening terrorist host countries with military retaliation will curb terrorist activity. As Jessica Stern recently argued in *Foreign Affairs*, "al Qaeda's already decentralized organization has become more decentralized still," making it potentially more unpredictable and dangerous than ever before. Operationally, these organizations are loose networks, outmaneuvering traditional governmental hierarchies. It seems that the governments of Western nations seeking to eliminate the terrorist threat require far more cooperation from other states and regimes, particularly in the Middle East.

Terrorists' newfound power to assert themselves globally demands a more sophisticated understanding of terrorism itself. By and large, policymakers and opinion leaders continue to conflate Islamic fundamentalism with nihilistic radicalism, a tenuous equation on both the empirical and intellectual levels — especially considering that the only cult terrorist incident in recent memory was the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway in 1995, in which only 11 people were killed. In contrast, Laqueur has dared to ask what few in the American policy community seem to think is necessary: "How do terrorists view themselves?" This question opens the door to a long

## Books

overdue and far more revealing analysis of the means-ends logic of groups like al Qaeda. After the American-led coalition defeated Iraq in 1991, advocates of *jihad* gained strength from condemning the American “occupation” of the Arabian Peninsula, home to Islam’s holiest sites. Al Qaeda’s operations since that time — in particular the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia; the suicide attack on the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen in 2000; and the explosions in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia this May — appear commensurate with the jihadists’ stated goal of ousting the “American crusader forces,” as Osama bin Laden called them in his 1996 declaration of war. As former CIA director James Woolsey has written, “Al Qaeda has been at war with us for the better part of a decade. What’s new is that we finally noticed.”

Historically, declarations of war are meant to articulate the political purposes of the war, guide military operations, and set the boundaries for justified conduct. Even as such formal declarations have become a lost art in the West (the U.S. formally declared war on neither Serbia nor Iraq), bin Laden’s declaration contains clear statements of motivation and strategy. Furthermore, al Qaeda’s *Encyclopedia of Jihad* is as comprehensive as any military manual in its attention to battle organization, intelligence gathering, and other aspects of war fighting. To view the struggle against al Qaeda’s global activities as a war in which “the frontiers of national security are everywhere,” as Philip Zelikow has put it, is important if for no other reason than to avoid falling into the “clash of civilizations” trap. Those who conflate bin Laden’s inflammatory, religious rhetoric with al

Qaeda’s true objectives succumb to the same fallacy as those who believe that “ancient ethnic hatreds,” not the quest for political domination, drove Slobodan Milosevic’s ruthless aggression in the former Yugoslavia. Against the backdrop of a supportive Arab media and inept or absent U.S. public diplomacy, bin Laden has opportunisti-

cally played to emotionally resonant themes such as “historical humiliation” by the crusaders and the plight of the Palestinians to acquire legitimacy and win recruits. But there is nothing otherworldly about al Qaeda, which uses Western technology to attack high-profile targets in order to fulfill its stated anti-American aims. And with the United Nations resolution in May conferring the status of “occupying powers” upon the United States and Britain in Iraq, al Qaeda is given further impetus to plot future strikes to evict the “colonial invaders.”

## Books

**I**N TWO VERY useful historical chapters, Laqueur explains the origins of Islamic terrorism and *jihad* through the lens of a genealogy of sects such as Saudi Wahhabism and groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter was inspired by Sayyid Qutb, one of a number of disenfranchised religious scholars who formed an extremist diaspora during Egypt's Nasserite era. The story is fascinating particularly because it places the now-familiar names Abdel Rahman, mastermind of 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and Al Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's personal doctor and advisor, in the restless days of the formation of the Gama'a Islamiya through the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. During and after the Afghan war, hundreds of these so-called "Arab Afghans" — now also members of al Qaeda — spread to Algeria, Yemen, Egypt, and Pakistan to continue the global *jihad*. Laqueur reminds us, however, that for these groups the main enemy has always been what they view as the infidel: puppet regimes in Egypt and now also Saudi Arabia.

Laqueur is at his best when debunking numerous unfortunately widespread myths about the causes and consequences of terrorism. Stagnation in the Arab world, for example, is not a sufficient explanation for Islamic terrorism in Chechnya, India, China, or Indonesia. Armed with illustrative cases from Switzerland to Sri Lanka, he also dispels the notion that only Islam glorifies suicide and martyrdom. For true Islamic radicals, moreover, the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have no bearing whatsoever on

their continuation of terrorism. In most cases, these fundamentalists have a strategy rooted territorially and politically outside the Palestine conflict, even if a resolution there would remove some support for continued Islamic extremism. Most importantly, citing mounting examples of terrorists — even suicide bombers — being drawn from the middle and wealthy classes, Laqueur opens the door to the realization that the "war of ideas" has not been won. Terrorism can just as well be seen as the political tactic of the motivated bourgeois, pursuing their interests as and when they can afford to. Laqueur also shows no hesitation in skewering the media — which has turned terrorism into an "ism," yet in Europe in particular has now acquiesced to the terrorists' discomfort with the label — and indicting academia: "With all the calls for a peaceful solution of the present conflicts, there should have been the readiness to have a new and harder look at the beliefs and aims of those who had prepared and carried out the attacks." Few academics have demonstrated the willingness to confront the logic or validity of terrorists' motives, and hence none have gotten inside their heads as Laqueur has.

But for all his sagacious commentary, Laqueur has for almost three decades remained reluctant to confront the issue of defining terrorism, cautioning that contention over a definition can hinder the proper study of political violence and that terrorists, as if by definition, aim to violate international norms. But as terrorism shifts from a "weapon of the weak" to an excuse for the powerful, the strategic error of allowing America's preferred definition

## Books

to be corrupted must be confronted. We have already entered a phase where self-satisfying definitions are useless, particularly as Islamic scholars have recently defined terrorism in such a way as to include American actions: “All acts of aggression committed by individuals, groups or states against human beings, including attacks on their religion, life, intellect or property.” The lowering of the bar on defining terrorism opens a Pandora’s box of rhetorical combat and normative chaos — precisely the opposite of the consensus America needs to gain international legitimacy for its actions as the war on terrorism continues in the years ahead.

For terrorism on the scale of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, defining terrorism as war is the only way to justify the spectrum of responses undertaken. After September 11, a congressional resolution authorized “all necessary and appropriate force” against those who had perpetrated the attacks, but did not issue a declaration of war. In prosecuting “Operation Infinite Justice,” the administration refused to bow to domestic and international pressure to grant its captives status as prisoners of war. Whatever the legal merits, this ad hoc response is not a tenable long-term solution. There need not be hesitation in formally prosecuting terrorism by non-state groups as crimes against humanity, as this in fact provides the necessary legal basis for their unfettered prosecution, obliging international compliance and cooperation. Such concerted international legal action has already been the basis for ending piracy. If the price of having undeniable legal justification for the pursuit of terrorists worldwide is treating them

according to the Geneva Conventions, it is worth it.

It is a well-known fact that during the 1990s, noncombatant deaths in warfare far outnumbered military casualties, meaning the laws of war have been systematically violated by both state and non-state actors. A 1973 United Nations resolution stated that

the struggle for self-determination was in full accordance with the principles of international law, thus legitimizing a great deal of terrorism worldwide. Terrorists, resenting the label, welcome any recognition as freedom fighters. Their hopes for “just terrorism,” however, are betrayed by the disproportionate means they now wield. No matter how legitimate the ends, weapons of war and mass casualties cannot be viewed as serving the elevation of mankind.

The shift from a terrorism to a war paradigm is clearly more than a semantic distinction. Looking forward, the

## Books

legal implications are being hotly debated. Looking backward, the policy consequences of an outdated view of terrorism become clear as analysts attempt to explain the intelligence failures surrounding September 11. Paul Pillar, a senior CIA counterterrorism analyst, contends in *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2001) that terrorism “is not accurately represented by the metaphor of war.” In the late 1990s, the United States continued to conceive of and prosecute terrorism as a crime rather than a clear and present danger, underfunding counterterrorism efforts despite the dire warnings of the Hart-Rudman and Gilmore commissions.

But a shift in the understanding of *warfare* has now brought war closer to terrorism in a manner policymakers should have confronted long ago. In contrast to the traditional definition of war as “open, armed hostility between armies of states,” two Chinese colonels authored a military treatise in 1999 on *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House), which “transcends all boundaries and limits . . . using all means, including armed force and non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.” The military analyst Martin van Creveld has written that “as war between states exits through one side of history’s revolving door, low intensity conflict among different organizations will enter through the other.” The historian John Keegan also responds to this updating of the traditional definition of war: “[T]he great work of disarming tribes, sects, warlords and criminals — a principal achievement of monarchs in the 17th

century and empires in the 19th — threatens to need doing all over again. Not many military establishments possess the skills, equipment and cultural ruthlessness necessary for the task.” What if a chance to take out a Saddam Hussein or an Osama bin Laden comes at the price of suicidal risk on the part of those who undertake the task?

**A**FTER READING *No End to War*, no one will be surprised by either recurring terrorist attacks or high threat assessments. It is no coincidence that the scope of international terrorism has expanded with the increasing number of military interventions, themselves often described as postmodern warfare. In chapters on the “battlefields of the future,” Laqueur points to a long list of potentially violent conflicts with terrorist elements from Algeria to Syria to Indonesia. Just as other scholars, notably Andrew Bacevich of Boston University, are asking if a globally deployed military continues to serve America’s interests or if it is in fact counterproductive, Laqueur’s crisis predictions for numerous regions beg the question as to whether terrorist incidents will again serve as the *casus belli* for further interventions. The perils of both America’s experience with and responses to terrorism in the twenty-first century are thus best captured by an aphorism from Leon Trotsky a century ago: “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”