

The crisis of universalism: America and radical Islam after 9/11

By Fred Halliday,
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Three years after the most spectacular guerrilla action of modern history, the coordinated events [1] of 11 September 2001 in the United States, the world appears further away than ever from addressing the fundamental issues confronting it, and to be moving ever more deeply into a phase of confrontation, violence and exaggerated cultural difference.

The response to 9/11 on both sides has been, in essence, a rejection of universalism: of the belief, gradually built up over the 20th century, in shared moral and legal principles and in the ability of states and international bodies successfully to resolve conflicts through multilateral action.

On the militant Islamic side, the worldwide military challenge to US power is framed in particularist, religious, nationalist and historical language; it rejects any sense of *global* solidarity against oppression. On the western side, state policies have equally fallen back on particularist rhetoric and practice – whether in the appeals of the US president after 9/11 to “American values”, the Russian invocation of a right to a worldwide attack on its enemies after the Chechen infanticide of September 2004 [1], or the instinctive appeal to “European values” by European Union states in the aftermath of the 11 March 2004 bombings in Madrid [2].

All this has struck a serious blow at what had been a growing world consensus prior to 11 September 2001, namely the belief in international institutions, international norms, and international law (not least with regard to human rights [2] and the conduct of armed conflict).

Also by Fred Halliday on openDemocracy:

- “Looking back on Saddam Hussein” (January 2004 [2])
- “Terrorism in historical perspective” (April 2004 [2])
- “America and Arabia after Saddam” (May 2004 [2])

The regression is apparent on *both* sides. The United States under George W Bush has openly rejected the claims of international law, for example those of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 [3] on the treatment of prisoners-of-war. The rhetoric of al-Qaida is even more anti-universalist; it is laced with Arab nationalist motifs, virulent attacks on fellow Muslims who are *Shi’a*, and a total contempt – celebrated in bloodthirsty proclamations and macabre videos – for general principles in relation to the conduct of armed conflict in the modern age [4].

This rejection of universalism has been supported by a widespread growth in nationalism, in both the developed and underdeveloped worlds. Anatol Lieven’s **openDemocracy** essay [4] (and book) *America Right or Wrong* acutely analyses this trend in the context of the United

States, where the current presidential election campaign is marked by affirmations of national greatness and the glorification of past imperial wars.

But it is not just American nationalism. Around the world, the constraints of law and general moral decency that once restrained nationalism seem to have been eroded. In Israel, the public mood has shifted further towards aggressive action; across Europe, advocates of immigration and multiculturalism [4] are under attack; in many former Soviet republics and in eastern Europe, nationalist demagogues hold sway; in Japan [4], a revived rhetoric of national assertiveness is taking hold.

A record of failure

This ideological shift was underway before 9/11. It was given intellectual support by the spread of a vapid relativism, sometimes termed "postmodernism" [5], that had – in response to the collapse of forms of rigid political rationalism – gained considerable influence across the developed world in the 1980s and 1990s.

But 9/11 compounded this process – in the generalised and pervasive fear that those events caused, and in the superficial and ranting responses it occasioned in much of the west. There is another reaction not to be underestimated among many people in America and Europe: a retreat from engagement with the political world and of international events – even if this lacked a clear public expression by dint of its very private and socially atomised character.

A crucial part of these responses to 9/11 is the fact that this armed conflict especially – one between established states and a hidden but global insurrectionary movement – still leaves the great mass of the people feeling there is nothing they can do. The huge worldwide demonstrations of 15 February 2003 [5] leave the majority of citizens in the position of reluctant spectators in the conflict itself, deprived even of that form of minimally meaningful participation that the "war effort" of, for example, 1939-45 in Europe permitted.

The other side of post-9/11 confusion is a worldwide crisis of the state. In one sense, the state system of three years ago has held: only in Afghanistan [5] has there been significant regime change.

Numerous other elites, what may be termed the "crackdown states", have taken advantage of US appeals for solidarity in the fight against terrorism, to impose more authoritarian control over their own societies, and particularly over those calling for great recognition of minority rights: Uzbekistan [5], Russia, China, Egypt, Israel. Two important US allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, are themselves the sites of significant anti-western and pro-al-Qaida feeling. The US has for its part openly vaunted its military power and increased its defence budget [6] to \$400 billion.

Yet this enhancement of state military power has been offset by an even greater demonstration of state weakness. The United States's military power has not eliminated al-Qaida in any state, despite the despatch of marines, intelligence operatives and much more; it has failed to crush opposition in either of the two states it has invaded, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The use of the US military, and the blustering and arrogant words that accompanies it, have instead provoked a new level of anti-American and by extension anti-western feeling across the Muslim world and beyond. This process was taken to new heights [7] by the revelations of torture and sadistic abuse of Iraq prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. In Europe, the American response to 9/11 has provoked such anger that transatlantic relations and public attitudes on both sides of the divide are now more distant and antagonistic than ever.

openDemocracy writers Isabel Hilton, Douglas Murray, Maï Ghoussoub, and Laila Kazmi assess and debate the Abu Ghraib tortures [7]

The US has, in effect, no diplomatic policy left – a fact exemplified by the indefatigable ignorance of the US president and the timidly inadequate conduct of his secretary of state. They, and the wider US political elite, are bereft of understanding of the crisis the world confronts, and of the need for a response that combines military with political and cultural initiatives. The United States is dragging the western world, and all who are opposed to fundamentalist violence and its accompanying social programme, towards a global abyss [8].

This weakness of the state is evident even within the US itself. Three years after 11 September 2001, not a single successful prosecution for al-Qaida activity within the US has occurred; nor has a single person been arrested, let alone convicted, of the anthrax attacks that followed the plane hijackings.

The now lengthily investigated intelligence failures prior to 9/11 [9] could probably not have been avoided, given the multiplicity of data involved. The record of the intelligence services after the attacks is more striking: of more than 590 people detained at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, not one it seems is a significant member of al-Qaida or has been the source of any valuable information on that group.

The financial controls established to check the financing of fundamentalism after 9/11 seem to have been ineffective. Some guerrilla attacks may have been prevented, notably in Britain, but al-Qaida [9] and its allies have still been able to conduct their worldwide campaign with a large measure of impunity; political targets over the last three years include Indonesia, Yemen, Spain, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Al-Qaida, not the US administration, took and has so far retained the global military and political initiative [9].

A world on the abyss

The crisis of universalism, the weakness of the traditional nation-states, and the militarised character of world politics today, together mean that the major issues already confronting the world before 9/11, none of which have become easier since then, are being increasingly neglected. The existence of specific transnational problems like the spread of HIV/Aids and narco-trafficking is sufficient evidence of this. Moreover, none of the interethnic conflicts that fuel public support for Osama bin Laden have been resolved, most notably the Palestine question [9].

The most important of all these issues is the profound inequality in global conditions of wealth and life between the rich elites of the OECD states and the rest of the world. This polarisation lies at the heart of the pressure to migrate to the richer states of the world, of the corrupt character of many states, and of the rising world resentment of the west, and especially of the United States.

It is this issue, not some exaggerated or invented “clash of civilisations” or conflict between Islam and the west that have created sympathy for Osama bin Laden [10] in the middle east. The western response to 9/11, based on the vaunting of American power and interests and a reliance on the use of force, has only made this worse. The efficiency of the United States as a bureaucratic, logistic and military administration, combined with the utter inability of the US government to comprehend – let alone adequately respond to – the attacks of 11 September 2001, makes vividly clear the “failed” character of the US state.

The events of 9/11 would in any circumstances have been a great challenge – political, intellectual, cultural – to all thinking people in the United States, Europe, the middle east, and beyond. They dramatically highlighted a conflict that had been already developing for some years and which promises to dominate at least the first part of the 21st century.

But the response of the United States of America to the attack on its territory has made any serious, effective and considered course of action even more difficult. The world is being dragged towards disaster by two arrogant, militarised, leaderships. We must do all we can to persuade people [10] to shift the world in the other direction, the better to address the issues that predated 9/11 – issues that remain very much alive and pressing, and which, if left unresolved, will lead to more spectacular and ghastly confrontations.

Is the United States friend or enemy of globalisation? Is it an empire, and if so what kind? Where do the neo-conservatives come from? Does their arrogance threaten the world? **openDemocracy** writers ask the big questions:

- Tom Nairn, “America versus globalisation” (January-February 2003 [10])
- Stephen Howe, “American Empire: the history and future of an idea” (June 2003 [10])
- Danny Postel, “Noble lies and perpetual war: Leo Strauss, the neo-cons, and Iraq” (October 2003 [10])
- Godfrey Hodgson, “Can America go modest?” (October 2001 [10])

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