

US Foreign Policy: Terrorism in Response to Terrorism

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American foreign policy as a [state sponsor of terrorism](#) in response to terrorism operates now with a decidedly genocidal logic. Perhaps that logic has been there all along, but with increased [American use of drone assassinations](#) in tribal areas on two continents, the logic has become inescapably real, albeit not officially acknowledged or, perhaps, consciously accepted.

Americans are used to hearing their leaders demonize whole populations thought to produce terrorists because “they hate our freedoms” (Pres. Bush, Sept 20, 2001) or that they are “fueled by a common ideology,... that violence against Western targets, including civilians, is justified in pursuit of a larger cause” ([Pres. Obama, May 23, 2013](#)). These are formulations rooted in a Cold War mindset that assumes a bipolar world, as it were. The formulations made some sense when applied to historic Communism, a broad-based political philosophy with an [articulated manifesto \(1848\)](#) that served as the basis for political parties and governments around the world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, leaders soon abandoned overt Cold War rhetoric, but the mental pattern of forcing reality to fit Manichean terms of good and evil has maintained its limiting grip on political thinking.

Communism was rooted in political analysis of nineteenth century social conditions in which the few dominated the many, and it offered the many an ideology to help guide their struggle against injustice and exploitation. While Manichean in its own way, the analysis also addressed a degrading reality that remains part of the human condition and sought, in theory at least, to improve it.

Terrorism is in no way similar. Terrorism is only a military tactic that may be used by any ideology, and often is. The tactic is also used by people with no ideology at all, only grievance. To speak as if there were a Terrorist Manifesto that is somehow the equivalent of the Communist Manifesto is to speak of something that is at best obscure, if it exists at all. That’s the fundamental stupidity underlying any effort to fight a global war on terrorism, a rubric that is hopelessly incoherent. So it’s little wonder that more than a decade after September 11, more than two decades after the 1991 Gulf War, the United States cannot explain what it’s doing in the world, or why it’s doing it so badly.

Has the \$4 trillion cost of our Iraq War been worth it to anyone?

The meaninglessness of the terms “Global War on Terror” and “Long War” (both Bush era coinages without substantive definition) was made clear hilariously, if briefly, in March 2009 when the Obama administration dropped those terms in favor of [“Overseas Contingency](#)

[Operation](#)" (a nicely sanitized coinage with Orwellian opacity, but still without any intellectual import). Regardless of the term describing it, American policy remains the same undefined, ad hoc striking out at countries or people we designate (often secretly) as enemies for reasons we don't even try to prove in order to get results we pretend are more rational than they are imaginary.

One explanation for America's miasmic waste of lives and dollars since 2001 is that we have officially chosen as our enemy a chimerical cohort of people who have little in common but their differences, whether geographical, national, or historical. Even their actual commonalities of religion and tribal tradition are more diverse than shared. It's not that the people America attacks "hate our freedoms." There's little evidence that they even know or care much about "our freedoms." What evidence there is suggests that what they hate - and have every right to hate - is our attacks on their freedoms, our assault on their culture and their traditions, our murdering of their friends and families.

Has the war on terror become just another war on tribalism?

This argument is cogently presented in a New York Review article, ["Terror: The Hidden Source"](#) by Malise Ruthven in the October 24 edition, in which he discusses a book published by Brookings in March 2013 - "The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam" - by [Akbar Ahmed](#), the chair of Islamic Studies at American University and a former Pakistani ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland. Ruthven writes:

"Ahmed's book is a radical analysis based on extensive anthropological detail too complex to be easily summarized. A good example of his approach, however, is his analysis of the background of the September 11 hijackers. It is well known that fifteen of the nineteen terrorists were Saudi nationals. Less well known or indeed understood is their tribal background. The official report of the 9/11 Commission, based on information provided by the Saudi authorities, states that four of the thirteen 'muscle hijackers' - the operatives whose job was to storm the cockpits and control the passengers - came from the al-Bahah region, 'an isolated and undeveloped area of Saudi Arabia, and shared the same tribal affiliation.'...

"Apart from the brief reference to 'tribal affiliation,' the September 11 report skates over the fact that all of these 'muscle hijackers' hailed from the contiguous regions of al-Bahah and Asir or from the Wadi Hadhramaut in southern Yemen where Osama bin Laden's own family came from."

Among the ironies of 9/11 is that the United States not only protected Saudi nationals from any contact with the FBI or other investigators, the U.S. went on to base its official story of 9/11 in part upon information from the Saudis who could hardly be expected to be reliable in accusing (or scapegoating) members of tribes the Saudis themselves had been repressing for generations.

The Yemeni tribes of Asir Province in the al-Bahah region of the Arabian Peninsula had achieved significant self-determination in the early twentieth century under a charismatic Sufi scholar king, Sayyed Muhammad al-Idrisi. His reputation for piety and justice, as well as his resistance to the Ottoman Empire, drew increasingly more tribes into his domain. Having sided with the winners in World War I, al-Idrisi expected that Asir's independence would be

recognized and approved. But after al-Isidri's death in 1922, the forces of Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud over-ran the region in his drive to create modern Saudi Arabia. An estimated 400,000 people died in the fighting. Asir has been occupied territory and the Saudis have tried to destroy Yemeni-Asiri culture ever since ever since.

Repressed, shunned, and marginalized, Asiris became international jihadis – fighting the Russians in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Chechnya in the 1990s. The United States, as the patron of the occupying Saudis, was a natural enemy for Asiris like Osama bin Laden, especially after the 1991 Gulf War, when the Saudis allowed American troops to be based on the sacred Arabian Peninsula.

“History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” – Mark Twain

The American war of assassination by drone has attacked mostly tribal areas – in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and presumably elsewhere. Ruthven writes that “Ahmed argues, convincingly enough, that the acts of terror or violence directed at the US or its allies are set off as much by revenge based on values of tribal honor as by extremist ideologies... that the values of honor and revenge inherent in the tribal systems contribute to jihadist extremism, and that by ignoring this all-important factor the US has been courting disaster. “

To paraphrase the man who chooses the victims, assassination by drone is “fueled by a common ideology,... that violence against [tribal] targets, including civilians, is justified in pursuit of a larger cause” Arguably, [assassination by drone is a war crime](#), a crime against humanity, and an impeachable offense. And assassination by drone seems likely to assure that another generation or two of tribal survivors will seek revenge, taken wherever and whenever the opportunity appears.

Ahmed's own assessment is bleaker still:

“It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the United States has been fighting the wrong war, with the wrong tactics, against the wrong enemy, and therefore the results can be nothing but wrong.... It is like a Greek tragedy being played out: the audience knows that ruin awaits the protagonists, and it fears for their fate; but it also knows that nothing can alter the dénouement.”

For Americans, this assessment may be particularly difficult to accept. After all, the United States exists in great part because of its genocidal success in dealing with tribal societies. Why should it be different this time?

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