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‘The war on terror’ and continued Western failure

The anti-terror policies put in place by Bush after 9/11 have changed the world for the worse. Still, politicians cling to them

There’s something familiar about Western reactions to the Hamas attacks of 7 October. Commentators comparing the event to what the Americans experienced on 11 September are right, but perhaps the comparison isn’t exactly where they think it is. The two events have indeed created a climate in which rationality has completely disappeared from public debate, replaced at best by emotion and at worst by hysteria and witch-hunting.

Many observers have, of course, blamed Benjamin Netanyahu and his government for the events of 7 October. But these criticisms were made following a security paradigm first and foremost, pointing, for example, to the fact that Israeli troops were stationed in the West Bank to protect the settlers instead of guarding the border with Gaza. But this narrative misses many essential points. What happened on 7 October was more than a security failure; it was the intellectual collapse of an entire doctrine of anti-terrorism that goes back a long way and that Netanyahu has consistently defended throughout his career.

A decades-long obsession with the fight against terrorism

In a book published in 1986 entitled *Terrorism. How the West can win*, Netanyahu, along with several others (ranging from Israeli generals to orientalist Bernard Lewis), detailed his method for understanding ‘terrorism’ and how to defeat it. The book was reportedly well received by then US President Ronald Reagan, who ‘recommended it to every senior official in his administration and cited it as an influence in his illegal funding of the Nicaraguan contras’. Nearly 40 years later, ‘victory against terrorism’ is still elusive.

Netanyahu followed up on his first publication in 1995 with a book bearing almost the same title: *Fighting Terrorism: How Democracies Can Defeat Domestic and International Terrorists*, in which he developed exactly the same vision. In the conclusion of his first book, the Israeli prime minister wrote this particularly significant paragraph:

'The root cause of terror is bridled violence. This can be traced to a world view that asserts that certain ideological and religious goals justify, indeed demand, the shedding of all moral inhibitions. In this context, the observation that the root cause of terrorism is terrorists is more than a tautology.'

Edward Said points to the essential aspect of the book's focus on Arab and Muslim populations, which legitimised the indiscriminate use of violence against them.

'Terrorism' in this definition is an essence in itself. It cannot be understood, it exists as such. Certain people are violent because they are simply violent, and there is no explanation for that. There's no point in contextualising it, reflecting on it or nuancing it. And the only appropriate response can be derived from a security and military point of view. The underlying idea of such an interpretation is to treat all armed groups in the same way, even if they fundamentally differ. Groups as distinct as Hamas, Hezbollah, Daesh, Al Qaeda, the Colombian FARC and the Kurdish PKK can thus all be lumped together.

In a scathing review of the book, Edward Said wrote that 'the whole book is unfortunately staked on the premise that the Western democracies and their leaders are gullible, soft and stupid, a condition whose only remedy is that they abandon their "Western" essence and turn violent, hard and ruthless.'

Said also pointed to the essential aspect of the book's focus on Arab and Muslim populations, which legitimised the indiscriminate use of violence against them: 'If you can demonstrate that Libyans, Muslims, Palestinians and Arabs, in general, have no reality other than that which tautologically confirms their terrorist essence as Libyans, Muslims, Palestinians and Arabs, you can continue to attack them, and their "terrorist" states in general, and not question your own behaviour.' Said's words remain highly relevant seeing today's situation in Gaza.

9/11: a turning point

September 11 allowed for Netanyahu's vision to triumph ideologically. Now was the time for the 'clash of civilisations' between the West (or the 'free world') on the one side and the 'barbarians' on the other, for war against the 'axis of evil', for freedom-restricting anti-terrorist laws, for the illegal war against Iraq without a UN mandate and for the marginalisation of the Palestinian people's demands.

In a hearing he held before the US Congress in September 2002, Netanyahu listed a group of countries he suggested should be bombed and their regimes toppled: Iraq, Iran and Libya. Two of them (Iraq and Libya) were bombed — the consequences of which are still being felt today. Even if he wasn't able to add Iran to the hit list, Netanyahu managed to derail the nuclear deal thanks to Donald Trump. On Iraq, Netanyahu promised: 'If you eliminate Saddam, Saddam's regime, I guarantee you that this will have enormous positive repercussions on the region'. Given the consequences of the Iraq War, this is objectively one of the most embarrassing statements ever made by a political leader in history.

The policies put in place by George W. Bush and the neoconservatives after 11 September 2001 have profoundly changed the world. For the worse. The wars of invasion against Afghanistan and Iraq were a political, military, strategic and human disaster. The war against Iraq gave birth to Daesh and its atrocities, both in the Arab world and in Europe. And 'terrorism' has still not been defeated — quite the contrary. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, any political solution has been ruled out, with the Americans aligning themselves exclusively with the Israeli government. The Palestinians paid a high price for this during the second intifada and its harsh repression.

A new test and a new failure

Netanyahu has governed Israel almost without interruption since 2009. His doctrine has not changed, and he has had ample time to implement it methodically. And yet, the attacks of 7 October took place. It didn't matter that he locked up two million people in an open-air prison, and built walls and barriers with the most advanced technology — it all collapsed like a house of cards in a matter of hours.

This obvious failure, however, still doesn't seem to provoke the appropriate questioning of the 'war against terror'. Bush and the neoconservatives are widely criticised and disqualified in the dominant Western discourse. But their legacy remains, and many political actors

continue to adopt their reflexes, even when they are liberals or progressives. US President Joe Biden warned Israel not to 'repeat the same mistakes the United States made after September 11'. But at the same time, he described the Hamas attack as 'sheer evil', an interpretation that is a continuation of Bush's 'fight of good against evil'.

While we can understand realpolitik and its cynicism, it is difficult to explain why so many leaders in the West persist in aligning themselves with Netanyahu, who has shown for over 40 years that he is systematically wrong.

The leader of the British Labour Party, Keir Starmer, said that Israel had the right to cut off water and electricity to Gaza. Such a statement coming from a human rights lawyer speaks volumes about the extent to which we have become accustomed to using military force since 2001 and about the collapse of the principles of international law. Between their inability to go beyond mere regret for the civilian deaths (without any real political reading of the situation), their indifference to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza or their outright alignment with the Israeli government, most progressive forces in the West seem unable to come up with a clear political response that differs from the use of force advocated by the right.

Everything Netanyahu advocated for has been applied for the past 40 years: a security-based approach, a lack of vision and political reflection, the indiscriminate use of force, and the suspension of fundamental rights and freedoms. Yet, the 'victory' he has promised since 1986 (which he doesn't even properly define) is still pending. The same person is now waging a war of new-found violence in Gaza, which, according to the ICJ, even raises fears of genocide for the Palestinian population. The logic of genocide is by no means only a frightening hypothesis, but a perfectly plausible endpoint of Netanyahu's thinking. When you believe that force alone is enough and that if force doesn't work out, you need even more force, then you enter a spiral where the only way out is the pure and simple suppression of the opposing group.

The world's reaction clearly does not match the human stakes in Gaza, even though the word 'genocide' has now been uttered and should fundamentally change the parameters of the debate. While we can understand realpolitik and its cynicism, it is difficult to understand and explain why so many leaders in the West persist in aligning themselves with a man, Netanyahu, who has shown for over 40 years that he is systematically wrong.

In a *Washington Post* article reviewing the 20 years since 11 September, Carlos Lozada's headline reads: '9/11 was a test. The books of the last two decades show how America failed'. Seven October was also a test. And so far, the whole of the West is failing again.



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