Who is Winning the 'War on Terror'?
Written by Henna Chauhan

Who is Winning the 'War on Terror'?

The 'war on terror' is a discourse constructed by President George W. Bush and his political aides after the 2001 9/11 attacks to securitize terrorism as a threat to the US, and hence legitimise military action.[1] Bush's 'war on terror' has been consistently criticised for being 'unwinnable', because its actors were ill-defined and elusive.[2] Since 2008, however, President Barack Obama has reframed the discourse and redefined its primary actors.[3] This essay determines whether Obama's adapted 'war on terror' discourse solves the problems of Bush's and constructs a war in which victory can be both achieved and measured. It concludes, however, that Obama's 'war' remains unwinnable. The actors in the new 'war' are constructed on two levels. In the first, Obama constructs *material* actors such as people, organisations and states. If the discourse is deconstructed, however, a binary identity is revealed in which the values of Western civilisation are set against the ideology of Islamic extremism – the actors in the 'war' hence become ideologies and values. The discourse therefore necessitates that America and its allies fight *both* an ideological and a physical war. In terms of ideological warfare, it is clear that the US is not winning, as their attempt to fight Jihadism with Western values proves incompetent. Furthermore, the binary identity constructed by Obama both dehumanises and depoliticises the terrorists; in terms of physical warfare, this not only necessitates military violence, but also ignores the effect this violence has on reproducing terrorism and spreading its ideology. Thus, the more America 'wins' the war (by militarily destroying its opposition), the more it is simultaneously losing (by reproducing the conditions that create its enemy in the first place). No one, therefore, is winning the war on terror. Not only is the war *not* being won, but it is also *impossible* to win. Therefore, Bush's 'war on terror' was constructed in 2001 as unwinnable and never-ending, and Obama has not successfully proposed a counter-hegemonic discourse with the strength to oppose it. After first defining the 'war on terror' and the methodology used, the essay then defines the actors as constructed in the discourse; it then determines who is winning the ideological war, and finally who is winning the physical war.

What is the 'war on terror'?

The primary importance of the 'war on terror' is as a discourse. According to Buzan and Waever's securitization theory, for states to legitimise and hence realise military action and war, its political elites must discursively construct a particular problem as a security threat, thereby justifying the state to go beyond normal political practice to eliminate such threat.[4] The 'war on terror' is understood in this way. It is a discourse constructed after the 9/11 attacks by Bush and his political aides; it constructed terrorism as an 'existential threat' to America and Americans, thereby legitimising military action.[5] Furthermore, this essay takes a constructivist approach by suggesting that language and social reality are interdependent and inseparable; it is language, meanings and identities that shape and constrain social reality.[6] In this case, it is the language employed in the 'war on terror' discourse that determines the reality of war by defining and restricting policy options.[7] Therefore, the 'war on terror' is defined as a discourse that not only discusses but also legitimises and shapes US counterterrorism strategy. It is primarily a US-propagated discourse; as Baker-Beall suggests, counterterrorism strategies elsewhere are framed in different discursive structures, for instance the 'fight against terrorism' in Europe.[8] This essay therefore focuses primarily on the 'war' as an American discourse.

In 2008, President Obama vowed to end the 'war on terror', and has not described subsequent military counterterrorism strategies as such.[9] It has hence been argued, for instance by Nordenman, that the 'war on terror' is over.[10] However, this claim ignores the substantial rhetorical continuities in Obama's 'war'. Recent research has

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demonstrated that Obama's discourse is in fact a continuation of Bush's 'war'; his alterations are simply 'minor rhetorical variations' that sustain the 'central narratives' and core philosophy constitutive of the 'war' discourse.[11] Obama simply adapted the discourse to maintain the war's legitimacy in changing contexts – for instance, by championing international cooperation over unilateralism after widespread condemnation of the Iraq war – while never abandoning the original framework.[12] Therefore, the 'war on terror' is vibrant and secure in American discourse; as Tsui argues, it is a hegemonic discourse or 'regime of truth' so embedded in American political life that any substantial deviation is both unlikely and 'extremely difficult'.[13] This essay analyses Obama's rhetoric (and that of his political aides) to determine whether this adapted 'war on terror' solves the problematics of the original discourse: that of the unwinnable war. Obama's rhetoric is not static nor uniform, but this essay will focus on its dominant and recurrent themes.

Defining the actors

First, it is necessary to determine who the discourse constructs as actors in the 'war', as only then can one measure who is winning. Bush's 'war on terror' has consistently been criticised for being 'unwinnable', predominantly because its actors were characteristically undefined.[14] Whether his war was against terror*ists*, terror*ism*, an ideology, or terror itself was never clarified, though his rhetoric persistently stressed the last.[15] This is problematic as 'terror' as a vague concept or emotional condition is an impossible enemy to completely destroy or to measure its defeat.[16] Also, as Bentley argues, this ambiguity allowed terrorists, organisations, rogue states, and their dictators to be targeted whenever it suited US interests, as 'anything and everything could be "terror" if Bush desired it to be'.[17] Bush's 'war' was therefore unwinnable, as an elusive and fluidly defined enemy is impossible to defeat.

Do Obama's adaptations solve this issue? Obama openly addresses the problems of Bush's narrative and stresses the need for clarity; for instance, he asserts the necessity to 'define the nature and scope of the strategic struggle' or risk a 'boundless' and unending conflict.[18] He does, therefore, redefine the enemy in the discourse, to create a clearer and definable opposition. Therefore, as Bentley argues, Obama redefined the war as against al Qaeda and its affiliates, hence 'a clearly defined enemy'.[19] While Bush consistently used ambiguous language, Obama clearly asserts that America is 'at war with al Qaeda' and 'their associated forces'.[20] The war is hence not 'boundless' but targets only 'specific networks', that is al Qaeda and its affiliates.[21]

These 'affiliates' include associated organisations, such as the 'Islamic State' (or ISIS).[22] In 2014, Obama and his team began securitizing ISIS as a major terrorist threat within the 'war' discourse.[23] ISIS are 'al Qaeda affiliates', and are constructed as the primary enemy; Obama consistently speaks of the war's 'core objective' as being to 'destroy ISIL' (ISIS), as they are the 'greatest threat'.[24] Furthermore, 'affiliates' are also the individual terrorists these organisations generate; Obama discusses them as 'radicalised *individuals'* or 'alienated *individuals'* – they are real and definable people, not an emotional state.[25] The enemy, therefore, is no longer terror, but al Qaeda and its affiliates, specifically ISIS and individual terrorists. While there is a margin of subjectivity and fluidity inherent in the terms 'terrorists' and 'al Qaeda affiliates', it is clear that Obama's discourse marks a change from Bush's, by labelling perhaps not discrete, but existing and discernible actors, instead of an elusive concept.

As for the self, Obama defines it as an American-led 'international coalition of some 60 nations'.[26] This contributes to Obama's distinct definition, by defining the self according to an existing coalition of *states*, and hence definitive actors. Therefore, Obama reframed the 'war on terror' discourse by constructing clear actors that reflect real and material people, organisations and states. This supposedly alleviates the problem in Bush's discourse that determines the war as unwinnable – it is now seemingly possible to *measure* who is winning the war, as the actors are clearly defined.

However, this redefinition is partial. There are two distinguishable yet interdependent levels to Obama's discourse. The first is the *material* level as described above. This allows Obama to give the impression of a pragmatic post-Bush conflict, thereby allowing the war more legitimacy at a time when Bush's war is considered irresponsible and boundless.[27] The second level, however, consists of the *meanings* and identities given to these material actors. This level is revealed if a deconstruction of Obama's rhetoric is undertaken. Baker-Beall argues that 'actorness' is not reducible solely to 'objective material elements'; instead, it consists of the values and meanings that are

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discursively constructed to produce a binary 'self'/'other' identity.[28] As Campbell argues, foreign policy can never be detached from such a binary construction, in which the self and other reflect mutually exclusive identities.[29] The second level of the 'war on terror' discourse is composed in such a way. In Obama's binary identity, the actors no longer reflect material people or states, but are instead defined by the opposing values they represent – the 'war on terror' becomes a war between the ideology of terrorism and the values of Western liberalism.

Firstly, the 'self' is constructed as representative of those values in Western liberal thought that are associated with modern civilisation: for instance, freedom, equality, democracy, and human progress. America and its coalition allies are presented as epitomising freedom; Obama states that 'we stand for freedom', while Secretary of State John Kerry states that 'free expression and a free press are core values' that constitute the enemies of terrorism.[30] Furthermore, Obama speaks about how 'our values' define 'us', such as a belief in equality where everyone is 'equal in the eyes of God'.[31] Additionally, in Obama's last foreign policy speech as a serving president, he stated that 'our democracy' is the 'nature of who we are' – it is democracy and its 'civil liberties that define us'.[32] Finally, in Obama's speech addressing the November 2015 Paris attacks, he suggests that the self 'represents the timeless value of human progress'.[33] Therefore, the 'self' is not only a material international coalition, but by epitomising the values of Western liberal thought, it takes 'on all the historic qualities of Western civilisation', as Fermor argues.[34]

The 'other' is constructed in opposition to this; it is illiberal, genocidal, barbaric and backward. Firstly, the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in 2015 were constructed by Kerry as 'vicious acts of violence' by terrorists who are ideologically opposed to freedom and seek to destroy it.[35] Furthermore, terrorists' beliefs necessitate the 'execut[ion] of Christians solely because of their faith'; they are 'genocidal…by ideology' and are guilty of 'ethnic cleansing'.[36] In addition, the barbarity of terrorist ideology is demonstrated, as the killing of innocents is a key theme in the discourse; Obama consistently asserts that ISIS are 'unique in their brutality', and that they massacre, enslave, rape, and starve innocent women and children.[37] Obama also repeatedly suggests that this barbarism is a product of terrorists' twisted ideology, which 'inspires people to violence'.[38] Kerry also stressed in 2016, that ISIS conduct a 'systematic effort to destroy the cultural heritage' of ancient civilisations – they are thus presented as opposed to civilisation itself.[39] Therefore, the material actors of the terrorists are discursively constructed as driven by a barbaric, illiberal and backward ideology. This 'hateful ideology', therefore, becomes the fundamental threat – the material actor is merely a manifestation of the *real* enemy.[40]

It must also be acknowledged that this ideology is presented as inherently Islamic. Obama's superficial attempt to detach terrorism from Islam is unsuccessful; he consistently asserts that ISIS 'distort Islam', that they practice a 'perversion of Islam'.[41] This does not separate the two but in fact suggests that the root of terrorism is found in Islam – terrorism is still a (albeit distorted) creation of the Islamic faith. Therefore, if the discourse is deconstructed to assess the meanings and values given to the actors, a barbaric Islamic extremist ideology becomes the enemy in the 'war on terror'.

Therefore, a binary identity is constructed, consisting of Western liberalism as the self, and a barbaric extremist ideology as the other. This demonstrates a significant continuity with Bush's 'war on terror', in which the 'civilisation versus barbarism' dichotomy was fundamental.[42] Obama's adapted discourse hence constructs two kinds of actors: material actors *and* ideological actors. This has implications on the social reality of warfare; it shapes US policy options by necessitating both physical *and* ideological warfare to defeat the enemy. As Ryan argues, there is a distinction between the 'close battle' of fighting terror networks and the 'deep battle' of fighting its ideological message.[43] It therefore must be assessed who is winning both the ideological and physical wars, to determine whether Obama's adapted discursive actors allow for a winnable conflict.

Ideological warfare

Firstly, it is asserted that the 'other' is not winning the ideological war. It is widely accepted that Islamic extremist ideology does not pose a substantial threat to Western civilisation; the values upheld by the latter are too embedded in the international system to be dislodged by an ideology practiced by a small minority.[44] The question remains, therefore, as to whether the West and its values can defeat Islamic extremist ideology.

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This is not a simple question to answer. While in the discourse, the ideological enemy is constructed as a distinct and defined actor, the reality is different. Firstly, what do we determine as Islamic extremist ideology? The discourse presents it as an ideology that all terrorists subscribe to, and explicitly refers to Jihadism as the same thing.[45] In reality, this is not the case. Jihadism is a complex collection of religious and political beliefs that is not always synonymous with the beliefs of individual terrorists.[46] Omar Mateen, for instance, the Orlando nightclub shooter, was said by Obama to have been 'radicalised' by this ideology, however the only explicit evidence of this is his declaration in support of ISIS, not any evidence of subscription to Jihadist beliefs.[47] Secondly, how do we determine if an ideology is being defeated? One can measure whether the number of people who subscribe to such beliefs are diminishing; although this poses the question of how to determine *who* is subscribed to a particular belief, the difficulty of which is evidenced in Mateen's case. Therefore, the discursive construct of 'Islamic extremist ideology' is not easily translated into social reality.

To allow measurement to take place this essay must neutralise some of these problems. Thus, 'Islamic extremist ideology' is taken as referring to not only Jihadism but also any interpretation of Islam used to legitimise terrorist acts. The extent of its defeat is measured by whether those that practice such ideology (such as ISIS and al Qaeda) are successfully *spreading* their message.

America and its coalition allies, particularly Western nations, label home-grown radicalisation as a real threat; many employ online counterterrorism strategies, including investigating and isolating ISIS propaganda and promoting a 'counternarrative', to defeat the ideology and prevent its spread in Western nations.[48] This, however, is not achieved. Terrorist attacks by European and American citizens, who have either been radicalised remotely or trained by ISIS directly, are seemingly occurring more frequently; since 2015, major terrorist attacks have been orchestrated in Paris (the Charlie Hebdo and the November 2015 attacks), San Bernadino, Brussels, Orlando, Nice, and Berlin.[49] Furthermore, there are approximately 6,000 European citizens fighting with ISIS in Syria, and according to one report roughly 250 Americans have attempted the same.[50] ISIS therefore have spread their ideology to 'poison' Western citizens.[51] This has been an *increasing* trend in recent years. In Europe, almost 1,600 people were arrested in 'jihadism-related investigations' between 2011 and 2015; this was an increase of 70 per cent in comparison with the previous period.[52] Also, since June 2014 the number of Western Europeans traveling to Syria to fight with ISIS has more than doubled.[53] This demonstrates therefore an increase in European citizens who are 'radicalised' by ISIS's ideology. This not to exaggerate the threat posed by radicalisation in the West, but to demonstrate that because this ideology is spreading to *more* people, the ideological warfare is not being won – America and the West are not successfully defeating its opposing ideology.

The ideological war is also being fought in the Middle East, with America and its allies attempting to impose a 'counternarrative' to stop the spread of Islamic extremism in the Muslim world.[54] As Etzioni demonstrates, this counternarrative takes three forms: rational secularism, free market capitalism, and liberal democracy – all of which are core components of Western liberalism.[55] These values are promoted through US state agencies, non-governmental organisations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and even American movies and television.[56] However, these strategies are again ineffective. While the vast majority of Muslims reject ISIS, there are a significant minority in the Muslim world that seem to support them.[57] In 2015, a Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that 12 per cent of Malaysian Muslims, 20 per cent of Nigerian Muslims, and 9 percent of Pakistani Muslims had 'favourable' attitudes towards ISIS.[58] Despite being a small minority, this demonstrates that millions of Muslims support ISIS in some way.[59] Furthermore, a 2016 report by the African Centre for Strategic Studies stated that 'radical Islamist ideology has been spreading throughout East African communities', partly because of the influence of organisations such as al Qaeda and ISIS.[60] The West is clearly failing to defeat Islamic extremist ideology in the Muslim world.

The reason for this is found within the 'war on terror' discourse itself. The binary identity that is constructed in the 'war on terror' creates only two mutually exclusive identities: the Western liberal self and the Islamic extremist other. In this construction, the only logical way to defeat the other is to expand the self (that is, Western liberal values); as mentioned above, this forms America's counternarrative in the Muslim world.[61] However, Etzioni argues that it is this promotion of liberal values that is the reason for America's failure.[62] Ideological counterterrorism strategies should be focused not at Jihadist or non-violent Muslims, but at 'moderate Islamists' – those who *could* be swayed by

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Jihadism, the 'swing vote'.[63] For most of these Muslims, Western liberal values are fundamentally incompatible; Etzioni demonstrates that many of these 'moderate Islamists' support shari'a law and reject secularism, they reject the 'hedonist materialism' of capitalism, and many are unfavourable towards homosexuality, women's rights, and free speech.[64] Therefore, promoting Western liberalism is severely unlikely to gain traction among the 'swing vote'; instead America needs to promote the non-violent teachings of Islam to adhere to these 'moderate Islamists'.[65] However, these 'moderate Islamists' do not fit into the binary identity constructed in the discourse, in fact their rejection of liberal values posits them in opposition to the self; hence, promoting ideas that may reject the liberal values of secularism and individualism (and hence rejecting the *self*) is incomprehensible and illogical. Therefore, the binary identity construction restricts policy options by necessitating the expansion of liberal values to defeat the other, and rejecting more effective policies such as promoting non-violent Islamic beliefs. It is the discourse itself that does not allow for victory in the ideological war.

In summary, no one is winning the ideological war; while Islamic extremist ideology cannot defeat Western liberalism, the strategies of America and its allies in defeating this ideology both at home and abroad prove incompetent. In fact, it is the discourse itself that prevents victory; it could hence be argued that the 'war on terror', as discursively constructed in this way, cannot be won.

Physical warfare

Finally, it is necessary to determine who is winning the physical war. Again, it is argued that terrorists and terrorist networks cannot win. They constitute a small minority with limited capability to attack the West, and the vast military superiority of America alone amounts to an unbeatable enemy for terrorist networks, let alone the entire military and territorial might of the international coalition committed to fighting such networks.[66] It remains to be determined, however, whether America and its coalition allies are winning the physical war.

According to Celso's 2016 study on 'Never-Ending Warfare', America and the international coalition are not winning the war.[67] He states that despite military involvement, terror networks remain 'remarkably resilient'.[68] ISIS present an 'unprecedented security challenge to regional and global stability'; the Islamist insurgencies in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Iraq and Syria in recent years have killed half a million people; and al Qaeda affiliates have grown in Yemen and Syria.[69] Celso therefore concludes that 'modern terror shows no sign of dissipating'; America and its allies are not winning.[70] Lia further argues that international military counterterrorism strategies have proven in the past few years to be a 'colossal failure'.[71] The relative rise in terrorist attacks in Western cities and ISIS recruitment is also demonstrative of this. However, it is clear that ISIS are losing territory in Syria, Iraq and Libya, and are supposedly 'on the run'.[72] Obama, furthermore, stated in his final presidential foreign policy speech that al Qaeda 'is a shadow of its former self'.[73] The argument can be made, therefore, that despite the recurring threat from terrorists, the *relative losses* of al Qaeda and ISIS, albeit gradual and hesitant, can be indications that the international effort is moving precariously towards victory.

However, this essay refutes this claim, and claims instead that the 'war on terror' cannot be won. Again, this is demonstrated by referring back to the binary identity construction. Tsui's recent study has demonstrated that in both Bush's and President Bill Clinton's 'war on terror' discourses, the terrorist enemy was dehumanised and depoliticised through the construction of a binary identity.[74] Obama's rhetoric continues with this trend. It does so by perpetuating the 'civilisation versus barbarism' dichotomy.

Terrorists are discursively constructed as barbaric and savage. This has already been demonstrated through the recurring 'killing of innocents' narrative. Terrorists are also consistently discursively separated from humanity; for instance, they repeatedly commit 'crimes against humanity', and their terror 'attack[s] of all humanity'.[75] This barbaric identity is perpetuated by the Orientalist narratives it draws upon, and the opposing representation of the West as epitomising 'human progress' and modern civilisation.[76] The terrorists are hence consistently dehumanised, and this leads to a 'discursive closure and blocking of political options'.[77] Through this dehumanisation, the discourse constructs an enemy with which it is impossible negotiate – 'savages should be controlled and suppressed', they cannot engage in rational political dialogue or indeed do anything but practice brutality.[78] Therefore, any option to solve the conflict through diplomacy or non-military tactics is discursively

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rejected. Instead, the discourse *necessitates* the use of lethal force; an enemy that cannot be negotiated with, can only be destroyed.[79] American and allied military intervention, whether through drone strikes or combat forces, becomes not only legitimate, but essential.

This dichotomy also depoliticises the war. By presenting terrorists as inherently barbaric, incapable of reason, and driven by a perverted religious ideology, the discourse removes terrorism from any political objective, motivation, or root cause.[80] Furthermore, the exploitation of Orientalist language presents the war as against two worlds that are inherently opposed to one another – modernity and barbarity have been at war for millennia.[81] Consequently, fighting terrorism is discursively separated from any political relevance, and instead becomes a moral struggle for human progress itself.

This depoliticisation is problematic, as it not only further encourages military action, but also denies the political relevance of Islamic terrorism. As Tsui argues, for instance, discourses not only produce but also *constrain* knowledge.[82] Importantly, the 'war' discourse constrains knowledge by denying that Western military intervention is a primary causal factor for the growth of terrorist networks. This is not a widely accepted claim. Military interventionism is commonly proclaimed as the only solution to end terrorism; while President Donald Trump states the necessity to 'bomb the hell out of ISIS', academics such as Johnson urge the deployment of US ground troops as the only solution.[83] This, however, ignores two inevitable consequences of Western intervention that provoke terrorist violence: first is the creation of a political vacuum and intensified sectarian hostilities, and second is the growth in anti-West sentiment.

Firstly, as Mann demonstrates, Western military involvement in the Middle East always creates significant political disorder.[84] Particularly, if a regime is deposed by foreign intervention, a political vacuum is created that terrorist networks can easily exploit. Gerges, for instance, demonstrates that America's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the resultant destruction of Iraqi institutions, created a power vacuum that facilitated the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the organisation from which ISIS emerged.[85] Furthermore, Mann argues that military intervention in countries rich in sectarian strife inevitably intensifies such divisions.[86] Again, in Iraq, after deposing the previous Sunni regime, America assisted the implementation of a Shi'a-dominated government; thus, by 'exploiting ethnic and religious divides' the resultant sectarian hostilities caused a Sunni backlash, which saw many Sunni areas in Iraq pledging support to current ISIS militants.[87] To oppose one organisation or regime, the West must support its enemies, many of which represent opposing ethnic group interests; Western intervention has therefore *always*, as Mann argues, resulted in intensified sectarian hostilities, which facilitate the growth of Jihadism.[88] The emergence of ISIS is hence exemplary of how Western intervention *reproduces* terrorism by facilitating the rise of terrorist networks through the creation of political vacuums and sectarian hostilities. Obama, however, acknowledges this 'mistake' of the Iraq war, and repeatedly assures that the current situation is different.[89] Nevertheless, as Mann argues, Western intervention in the Syrian War threatens to produce the same circumstances; therefore, 'even if ISIS fell, anti-Western and anti-Shi'a terrorism would certainly reappear elsewhere'.[90] This is an inevitable consequence of Western violence in the Middle East; this is not to deny the internal causes of political instability, but does demonstrate that 'our violence greatly increased' and is increasing the terrorist threat.[91]

Secondly, Western military intervention intensifies anti-West and anti-American sentiment, which aids terrorist recruitment. Particularly relevant now is the West's use of drone strikes. According to Byman, drone strikes and terrorist recruitment are not linked, as drones ensure 'fewer civilian casualties' than conventional warfare and hence prevent a political backlash.[92] In addition, he argues that not only are drones a 'necessary instrument of counterterrorism', but they are supposedly remarkably effective in reducing the terrorist threat.[93] This logic, however, overlooks the fact that drones do not eliminate civilian casualties; in fact, an October 2016 report by Amnesty International estimated that at least 300 civilians had been killed in coalition airstrikes over the past two years.[94] This, as Giroux argues, has disastrous consequences.[95] He argues that the 'bombing of hospitals, wedding parties, and innocent children' resulting from US drone strikes becomes a 'major selling point for recruitment into ISIS' who are 'committed to pursuing revenge'.[96] This is intensified by the fact that every bomb attack in which civilians are killed, is 'trumpeted across the Middle East', hence spreading this anti-West sentiment.[97] A recent report by the International Institute for Counterterrorism has demonstrated that exploiting anti-West sentiment is a primary (and successful) recruitment tactic for Jihadist terrorist organisations both within Muslim *and* Western

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countries.[98] Therefore, Western military intervention inevitably reproduces the terrorist threat by aiding terrorist recruitment. As Lia argues, the use of 'lethal military force and coercion' has 'laid the groundwork for a Jihadi recruitment bonanza'.[99]

Therefore, while the binary identity construction *necessitates* military violence, it is this violence that serves to reproduce the enemy by facilitating the growth of terrorist networks. By depoliticising the enemy, the discourse allows US policy to overlook such negative consequences. Admittedly, Obama's discourse does acknowledge that military action needs to be responsible and aware of potential backlash, but violent military intervention continues.[100] This is because the political roots of terrorism are relegated to a subordinate focus by the metanarrative of the 'modernity versus barbarism' conflict.[101] Thus, the dehumanisation and depoliticisation of the enemy necessitates military action while denying that this action is actively reproducing the terrorist threat. Therefore, the physical war is also impossible to win; the more the West wins the war (by militarily destroying its enemy), the more it is simultaneously losing (by reproducing the conditions that create its enemy in the first place).

Conclusion

In conclusion, no one is winning the 'war on terror' because the war cannot be won. During his presidency, Obama has adapted Bush's 'war' discourse, especially by defining clear material actors as opposed to a fluid and elusive enemy. However, Obama did not end the war as Nordenman suggests.[102] Instead, his perpetuation of a binary identity predicated on a 'civilisation versus barbarism' narrative demonstrates a clear continuity with the original discourse. It is this binary that determines the war unwinnable.

The 'war on terror' discourse shapes and constrains US policy options. First, by constructing a rigid binary of Western liberalism versus Islamic extremist ideology, the discourse necessitates the ineffective promotion of Western liberal values to defeat the other, while rejecting more effective policies such as promoting non-violent Islamic beliefs. Second, by consistently dehumanising and depoliticising the enemy, the discourse not only necessitates military action and lethal force, but also ignores the fact that this action facilitates the emergence and growth of terrorist organisations. The war hence becomes a perpetual conflict: American intervention becomes inevitable, as does the consequent reproduction of the terrorist threat.

Therefore, neither the enemy nor the self are (or indeed can be) winning the war; the 'war on terror' is unwinnable. Obama has hence failed to reframe the discourse and solve its fundamental problematic. Instead, he fell into the same discursive entrapment of his predecessor. Only if the 'war on terror' is deposed and replaced with a truly counter-hegemonic discourse, that dismantles the current binary and hence drastically repositions US policy options, can the conflict be won. However, with the recent election of Donald Trump as President, and his inflammatory comments that intensify divisions and call for more aggressive lethal action against ISIS, the implementation of a truly counter-hegemonic discourse is unlikely to occur, at least not in the desired way.[103] Instead, Obama's words in his last foreign policy speech as serving President become seemingly prophetic: the war is a 'long struggle' that 'will be with us for years to come'.[104]

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