

The War on Terror and the Rise of Neo-Orientalism in the 21st Century

Written by Ayla Göl

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AYLA GÖL, MAR 18 2010

[1]An imminent critique of the hegemonic discourse on the 'War on Terror' (WOT) is growing rapidly against the grain of an overwhelming silence about the impacts of the global WOT on the non-Western and particularly the Muslim world. The new trend is based on three basic epistemological and ontological assumptions of critical terrorism studies (CTS) that challenge orthodox studies on terrorism (Jackson *et al.* 2009): the dominance of 'state-centric' perspectives; the pre-eminence of 'problem-solving' approaches; and largely ahistorical accounts of terrorism. The value of CTS is embedded in the idea of multi-causality and the complexity of political violence and terrorism from a broad historical and sociological perspective. The new critical approach calls into question asymmetrical power structures of the 21st century by highlighting the 'uneven' distribution of economic, political, and social power between the West and the non-Western countries with the 'combined development' of globalisation.

Portrait of Sultan Selim Mehmet II, Istanbul, 25 November 1480

Following in the footsteps of critical thinkers such as Bhabha (1983), Derrida (1974), Deleuze and Guattari (1977), Foucault (1980), and Said (1978), who warned about the hegemonic power of the West to legitimate and confirm their centrality against 'Others', history proves that the 9/11 attacks were not an entirely unprecedented consequence of the highest stage of political, economic, and cultural imperialism (Amin 1977). Indeed, long before the emergence of the international terrorism of 9/11 and beyond, Abdel-Malek (1981) had already warned about the inference of politics in the discourses of hegemonic imperialism that attempts to dominate the hearts and minds of others:

Contemporary imperialism is, in a real sense, a hegemonic imperialism, exercising to a maximum degree a rationalized violence taken to a higher level than ever before – through fire and sword, but also through the attempt to control *hearts and minds*. For its content is defined by the combined action of the military-industrial complex and the hegemonic cultural centres of the West, all of them founded on the advanced levels of development attained by monopoly and finance capital, and supported by the benefits of both the scientific and technological revolution and the second industrial revolution itself. (pp. 145–146; emphasis added)

Hence, for those who have heeded these warnings and for students of critical and modern social theories, the 'West's road to 9/11' (Carlton 2005) and the following 7/7 (London), Istanbul, and Madrid bombings were not at all surprising. What is surprising is how the rise of neo-Orientalism in the digital revolution of the 21st century continuously continues reproducing distorted images and (mis)representations of the 'East', 'Oriental' or 'Islamic world', which is consigned to the category of 'non-Western' or 'the rest of the world' (Said 1978, 1993, 1997). This 'rest of the world' – the Global South – is a territory peopled by 'Others' that can be labelled as 'uncivilised', 'traditional', 'irrational', and 'violent', much as they were centuries ago.

La Priere au Caire [Prayer in Cairo], 1865

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The main aims of a critical approach to the WOT are threefold:

First, it identifies the repeating discourses and patterns of Western hegemony, which manifest in the revival of neo-Orientalism. This approach neither tries to privilege the perspectives from the 'Orient' or the voices of 'Others' as somehow more authentic, nor does it seek to represent all non-Western, Eastern and Islamic countries as a monolith. Rather, the new trend seeks to open new space for the inclusion of indigenous views and dissident voices, voices that are explicitly critical of ahistorical, apolitical, state-centric, and mono-causal understandings of political violence and terrorism.

Second, a critical approach must contextualise the particular historical, political, social, and ideological power structures that lead an individual or a group to use force and violent tactics in order to challenge the existing status quo. Without engaging with contextual dimensions, any study is bound to fail to understand the complex realities of international terrorism and, particularly, so-called 'Islamic terrorism' (Jackson 2007). It has become fashionable to attribute terrorism to 'religion' or 'religious extremism', in particular, Islam.

Third, a critical approach would question why the burgeoning literature on 'religious terrorism' contains virtually nothing on 'Christian terrorism', 'Jewish terrorism', or 'Hindu terrorism'. By singling out Islam as a violent religion, uncritical studies of terrorism do more harm than good in understanding the new set of challenges of the post-Cold War era. Much of the literature adopts a rather simplistic and stereotypical view of Islam as a violent, irrational, and backward religion that turns ordinary Muslims into potential terrorists. Such a simplistic view impedes the understanding of terrorism by creating a 'false-consciousness' for non-Muslims as rational, non-violent, and peaceful beings; but this view also alienates the dedicated (and diverse) followers of Islam across the world.

The ethnocentric and cultural biases that enter into contemporary discussions of the relationship between Islam and violence have become particularly problematic in the international relations of the 21st century. The age-old discourse of the 'clash of civilisations' between the West and the rest of the world was originally coined by Bernard Lewis in the 1950s but revived by Samuel Huntington, and reinserted into political discourse in the post-Cold War era in the 1990s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Communism, the Western model of liberal state and democracy has been presented as the only option in the search for post-Cold War order. Meanwhile, the use of military and political interventions in order to achieve socio-political change in Muslim countries has failed – as seen in Afghanistan and Iraq – during this search. Explanations for these failures shaped by Western cultural biases have led to the conclusion that Western strategies have been ineffectual because of the rigidity of strongly religious and traditional Muslim societies.

This is a self-fulfilling prophecy on two accounts: on the one hand, orthodox views of terrorism are based on the implicit assumption that Islam – in all its complexities, contradictions, and cultural differences, as well as different political trajectories – is monolithic and homogenous, and that Islam is the primary referent in the theory and praxis of violence. On the other hand, such an uncritical approach refrains from analysing the asymmetry in existing power structures and the wrongdoings of Western – i.e., US and UK – foreign policies towards not only the Muslim world, but also the Global South as a whole. The wrongdoings of the West and its challengers that intend to establish hegemony regionally or globally, need to be critically questioned.

From a critical and historical perspective, attention should be given to the implications and unprecedented consequences of the various foreign policies of Western and regional powers. A careful student of Middle Eastern politics and the rise of 'Islamic terrorism' can easily identify the unprecedented impact of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that, eventually, led to the rise of *mujahideen* and then the *Taliban* in the 1990s. Hence, a critical approach to the study of terrorism and WOT requires to identify the historical, political, and cultural specificity of each case in question. Such contextualisations will draw our attention to the remarkably similar effects of the WOT that result in the (in)security policies of the West, and their impact on 'Others' in implicitly (un)democratic terms. A critical engagement with political discourses and practices of Christian, Islamic, Jewish and Hindu religions can help to identify their similar characteristics with reference to the use of political violence and

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terrorism. The Muslim societies from Afghanistan to Turkey are neither unique due to their religion, nor is there a homogeneous Islamic identity that transcends cultural, national, and regional differences in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, these countries share with the other countries in the developing world similar impacts of the WOT.

A critical, comparative and historical approach to the rise of political violence and terrorism suggests that the WOT is best understood in the following terms:

- i) a mode of interjecting hegemonic discourses (i.e., 9/11 terrorist attacks, 'good versus evil', Islamic terrorism, etc.) into the internal affairs of 'Others';
- ii) a political praxis that legitimises the age-old principals of imperialism; and
- iii) a new discourse that reproduces the representations of neo-Orientalism in the 21st century.

Furthermore, if these discourses and practices are strengthened by the Western monopoly of scientific 'knowledge' and 'media' power, it is almost inevitable that the West's WOT will encounter resistance from the 'Other' (Abdel-Malek 1981, p. 145, Said 1997).

By way of conclusion, I want to draw attention to both the explanatory potential of unorthodox views expressed by CTS scholars, and to their focus on the similarity of political implications for various countries in the context of the hegemony of the WOT. CTS scholars, therefore, have an additional task of contributing towards the establishment of an alternative 'knowledge' and including critical indigenous views that highlight the asymmetrical relations between Western power and global resistance to dominance.

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[1] Note:

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