The Impact of Islamic Politics on the 2003 Iraq War

https://www.e-ir.info/2014/03/31/the-impact-of-islamic-politics-on-the-2003-iraq-war/

NICK NEWSOM, MAR 31 2014

Introduction

On 19 March 2003, the US invaded Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power. This marked the evolution of the 'war on terrorism' into the 'war on terror', creating a rhetorical link between the threat of political violence from neo-fundamental jihadis and Saddam Hussein's recalcitrant anti-Americanism (Ehteshami 2013: 215). In doing so, President George W. Bush was able to project Iraq as being terrorism's "base of operation" and "at the heart of its power" (Bush in Adib-Moghaddam 2011: 209).

This essay follows a genealogical approach to trace the development of Al-Qaeda's neo-fundamental ideology. How the maturation of this transnational movement created a set of tensions within Islamic politics that destabilised inter-state relations in West Asia will first be explored. It will be revealed how Saddam Hussein sought to capitalise on this instability but, in doing so, ended up implicating his secular Ba'athist-Iraqi state with the neo-fundamental jihadis. The final section discusses how this placed Iraq at the locus of a supposed clash between 'Islam' and 'the West', a thesis associated with neo-conservative political thought in the US. The concluding remarks elaborate how the clash thesis became the organising principle driving the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Theoretical Orientation: Between Instrumentalism and Orientalism

Neo-realist and orientalist approaches to international relations (IR) offer two polarised accounts of the role of Islamic politics in causing the 2003 Iraq war. On the one hand, neo-realists insist that inter-state relations are driven primarily by a concern about relative material capabilities, and that norms and identity play a secondary role in determining the foreign policy of states (Jepperson 1996). With threats and opportunities, allies and enemies are defined by a state's geopolitical position, and so a state's relative resources, size, population, and strategic importance determine its foreign policy goals (Hinnebusch 2003). In this account, the war was a means of securing "the free flow of Persian Gulf oil, protecting America's Gulf allies and reducing Israel's vulnerability to aggression" (Ehteshami 2013: 21). Iraq's alleged links to Al-Qaeda were emphasised only because this would legitimise the war in a post-9/11 discursive environment that valorised 'tackling Islam'.

At the other end of the spectrum, orientalist explanations have brought culture back in to IR, but have ended up essentialising both the 'West' and Islam. Theoreticians such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington assert that global society is bifurcated along various civilisational fault lines. Islam, says Lewis, is engaged in a "struggle against two enemies, secularism and modernism" (1990). Huntington puts this down to the "Muslim propensity toward violent conflict" (1996: 258), which is fuelled by their alleged division of the world into*Dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam) and *Dar al-harb* (the House of War). They claim that all Muslims are, therefore, engaged in an existential battle against 'the West' (Trumbour 2003). In this account, the US invaded Iraq as an act of pre-emptive self-defence against the 'Islamic threat'.

These opposing accounts both proffer a 'seething Islamic ferment' within a monolithic global Islam (Esposito 1999: 222). The role of political actors within the Persian Gulf is also marginalised, along with the ideational persuasion of US policy-makers and the way that these actors and ideologies have shaped each other.

A middle ground is offered by constructivist approaches to IR. Constructivists contend that a state's threats and opportunities are a function of its identity. Identity is constructed discursively by state and non-state actors and is expressed through the norms of social practices and political, cultural, and economic institutions. It is identity that determines whether states take on a revisionist or status quo role toward the international system, as well as their orientation toward neighbours and great powers (Hinnebusch 2003: 93).

We are compelled, therefore, to determine how political actors in the US and West Asia appeal to 'American values' and Islamic norms, respectively, to construct their identity and pursue normative agendas (Mandaville 2007). To understand how threats are constructed, we must also examine the "relationality of Muslim political contexts", that is, explore tensions and debates *within* Islamic politics (ibid: 22). This necessarily entails extending the level of analysis to non-state actors—an important departure from neo-realist methodologies. To do this properly requires the notion of sovereignty to be deconstructed. Given that sovereignty "is predicated upon an ongoing process that determines the nature of its 'inside' and 'outside' through arbitrary practices of exclusion" (Martin 2002: 55), it stands to reason that there will always be those within the nation-state whose centre of loyalty lies beyond its territorial boundaries. It may be seen as a requirement, therefore, to "avoid treating the national contexts of Muslim politics as self-contained units of analysis" and to accompany an analysis of the international with one of the transnational (Mandaville 2007: 22).

This acknowledges that Islamic politics is formed and performed dialectically. Political actors within West Asia are engaged in a discursive exchange among themselves, and with political actors in the 'West'. The identity of these actors is a reflection of the political culture within which they are situated, and thus political actors in West Asia may appeal more to Muslim norms, whilst politicians in the US may emphasise 'American' values (Esposito 1999). The rest of this essay will, therefore, explore the conditions that heightened the salience of appealing to/countering Islamic politics before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The Greater West Asia Crisis

The conditions for the 2003 Iraq War and Bush's wider 'war on terror' were set in place during the Cold War, when the US supported the *mujahidin* against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Gregory 2004: 48). During this period, fighters travelled to Afghanistan from across the Arab and Muslim world and became inculcated with a doctrine of jihad that had been developed by the likes of Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam. They took advantage of a liberal interpretation *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) that had been developed by Muhammad Abduh (1845-1905), but rejected his emphasis on reinterpreting Islam in synthesis with the advances of modernity (Esposito 1999). Rather, they denounced modernity and western influence, advocating instead the obligation of Muslims to carry out violent jihad against the 'near enemy' – unbelievers occupying Muslims territories, and 'hypocrite' Muslim leaders who cooperated with the West (Mandaville 2007: 242). Within this environment, the Arab-Afghan jihadis "internalised the ethics of war" and gave themselves to a life of political violence and martyrdom (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 117).

For many, the radical imperative of this ideology was vindicated by the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, which proved that Islam could defeat a world power (Mandaville 2013:178). This gave transnational jihadis further encouragement to continue their struggle at home. Saudi Arabia had regarded the war in Afghanistan as an opportunity to spread its Wahhabi message (Mandaville 2007). Having sent many fighters to Afghanistan, the Saudi government's plan turned on its head as the returning neo-fundamentalists focused their attention on Saudi state behaviour, which was "widely synonymous with corruption, insincerity and licentious, un-Islamic conduct" (Piscatori 1991: 12). There was also a perception that the regime indirectly undermined Arab and Islamic interests by subsidising the US, which provided Israel with significant diplomatic and material support (ibid: 13). The Saudi government's decision to invite US troops to base themselves in Saudi Arabia during the Second Gulf War exposed the regime to further criticism from Islamists, who challenged their credentials to act as custodians over Islam's two holiest cities (Adib-Moghaddam 2006). From this point on, the Gulf monarchies would rely on the presence of large numbers of US troops being based in friendly countries in the region to guarantee their security. The GCC states, in turn, would assure the unfettered flow of cheap Persian Gulf oil (Halliday 2005: 134). The issue of security for the GCC states and the US had thus been linked through this security transaction, which heightened the US's sensitivity and vulnerability to sources of instability in the Persian Gulf (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 89).

Whereas a realist approach to IR would postulate that suspicion and fear drive foreign policy in a naturally anarchic international environment, constructivist accounts note that the institution of sovereignty is the key instrument through which states construct their identity (Jepperson 2006). Having been made "more receptive to events in the Gulf and beyond" by its security transaction with the GCC states, it was the institution of sovereignty that the US fought to defend in the Second Gulf War (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 106). In this manner, the US projected that in the post-Cold War international system, *it* was to define the parameters of good and evil, civilisation and barbarism, and that *it* was to police the boundary between anarchy and sovereignty (ibid).

But what did these parameters look like? What evil lay beyond the boundaries of sovereignty? With the 'Red Menace' vanquished after the fall off the USSR in 1991, this was, indeed, a pertinent question. It was within this debate about the US's changing role and identity in a newly unipolar world that the idea of a 'clash of civilisations' between 'Islam' and 'the West' gained prominence (Adib-Moghaddam 2002). Accordingly, the 'Green Menace' emerged as the object against which the US reaffirmed the virtuousness and universality of 'American' values. Hindsight reveals that Saddam Hussein's testing of the norm of sovereignty was an exceptionally dangerous move to make during this period of identity recalibration in the US – questioning the sovereignty of the US's allies implied hostility to 'American' values. The road had thus been paved for the Ba'athist Iraqi state to find itself lumped together with the neo-fundamental jihadis on the wrong side of the civilisation/barbarism divide.

What other factors reinforced this unlikely link between secular Ba'athist Iraq and the neo-fundamental jihadis? After all, one deployed Islamic symbolism only as a rhetorical gesture to advance state interests (Halliday 2005: 156), whilst the other totally rejected modernity and the notion of sovereignty (Adib-Moghaddam 2006). To understand how an (un)imaginatively monolithic Islam became the common denominator between the two, we must explore how appealing to Islamic norms gained greater salience among political actors and brought Islamic politics into focus.

In the 1980s, "the US co-optation of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and its defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War, destroyed the remnants of Arab cohesion" (Hinnebusch 2013: 165). When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990, he dissolved pan-Arabism's last vestiges of credibility by defying a core principle of inter-Arab relations—sovereignty (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 66). With this, the "central axis toward which Arabs had traditionally gravitated" shifted away from Iraq and faded (Ehteshami 2013:39). The UN sanctions regime, enforced by France, Britain, and the US, further isolated Ba'athist Iraq, signalling the demise of the "eastern gateway of the Arab world" (ibid: 115).

Whilst state policymakers abandoned Arabism after 1991, it retained its salience at the level of civil society, where it formed a synthesis with Islamic politics (Hinnebusch 2013). Ideals of resistance and independence had long been at the core of political culture in West Asia (Khalidi 2004). Nationalist histories frequently drew upon memories of imperial rule, the West's opposition to pan-Arabism and Islamic revivalism, and its bias towards Israel (Piscatori 1991). As a result, civil society actors across the Muslim and Arab world started viewing Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine as interlocked Arab and Muslim 'causes'—a phenomenon that Halliday has termed the 'Greater West Asia Crisis' (2005: 131). This created further space for neo-fundamental trans-nationalist movements to spread their ideology. The decline of Arabism at the state level also "removed the ideological straightjacket that had restricted the Arab states' foreign policy manoeuvres" (Ehteshami 2013: 10). Although still motivated by pan-Arab ideology, which had always subsumed Islam within its ideational sphere (Adib-Moghaddam 2006), Saddam Hussein sought to capitalise on the popular tide of neo-fundamentalist dissent toward Western-allied GCC states by casting his adventure into Kuwait as a jihad against infidels and 'hypocrites' (Piscatori 1991). Accordingly, he enjoyed widespread support from many Muslims, who saw him as "the spirit of resistance against the west and Israel" (ibid: 14).

Saddam Hussein's invocation of Islamic symbolism to justify his invasion of Kuwait, and its corresponding legitimation by Muslim civil society, put in place discursive markers that would later flare and locate Iraq at the heart of a notional clash between 'Islam and the West'. In the US, and in neo-conservative circles in particular, Islam was increasingly perceived to be the inverse of 'American' values; therefore, threats to US interests and the sovereignty of its allies in the Persian Gulf were increasingly considered to be motivated by a uniformly militant and totalitarian Islam. By the late 1990s, the neo-fundamental doctrine of jihad had mutated to place a new emphasis on tackling the 'far enemy'—the US, the 'West', and their 'Zionist allies' (Mandaville 2007). Jihadis who adhered to this doctrine

believed they were obliged to transpose their fight onto 'Western' soil, since these nations had degraded the world into a state of *jahiliyya* (ignorance) (ibid). When Al-Qaeda militants struck the US on home soil on 11 September 2001, they added momentum to the rate at which these discursive foundations solidified. The hardening of attitudes toward the 'other' was reinforced as the salience of such dichotomous world-views increased, both within West Asia and the US (Adib-Moghaddam 2006).

From the 'War on Terrorism' to the 'War on Terror'

The tragic events of 9/11 challenged the norm of sovereignty once again, shaking the borders upon which the US constructs its identity. Given that states only acquire the semblance of unity through the everyday validation of their sovereignty (Martin 2002: 58), the presence of a radically non-territorial force operating within the US undermined the distinction between anarchy/sovereignty (Adib-Moghaddam 2002). Al-Qaeda posed an ontological threat to the US's identity by challenging its sovereignty and collapsing the dichotomy between barbarism/civilisation.

With this artificial distinction threatened, it was necessary to reaffirm the US's unity and identity by superposing that 'evil' force onto an external, sovereign entity. In 2001, the neoconservative current within US political culture had been sufficiently institutionalised such that their proclamations of an active and threatening 'Islamic menace' fell on receptive ears in Washington (Adib-Moghaddam 2002: 208). That is, within US political culture, there was a widespread belief in the clash thesis. To the orientalist analyst situated within this belligerently ignorant political culture, Saddam Hussein's anti-American posturing and challenges to US national interests were perceived as an attempt to undermine the US's supposedly universal values and were, hence, attributable to Islam.

The discursive link that had been formed between the Ba'athist Iraqi state and the neo-fundamental jihadis in the early 1990s fed directly into the neo-conservative project to effect regime change in Iraq. Clearly unwilling to relinquish the image he had cultivated as the "vanguard of Islamic resistance against imperialism" (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 117), Saddam Hussein was the only Arab leader not to denounce the attacks of 9/11 (Tripp 2007: 271). Instead, he singled out US foreign policy in the region as the cause (ibid). In November 2001, he then repeated his refusal to allow the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission to look for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (ibid).

That neoconservative policymakers believed Ba'athist Iraq was party to this wider civilisational clash is further corroborated by then US Undersecretary of Defence Douglas Feith's September 2002 assertion that there was a 'symbiotic' and 'mature' relationship between Iraq and Al-Qaeda (Adib-Moghaddam 2011: 216). This laid the ground for Bush's 2002 'forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East', which advocated unilateralism, pre-emptive war and regime change in Iraq to replace neo-fundamentalism with democracy (Tripp 2007). Of the eight states targeted in Bush's 'forward strategy', seven were in Islamic world (Ehteshami 2013: 216). Furthermore, in US academic circles after 9/11, the objects of the 'war on terror' were "almost exclusively taken to be the peoples of the Islamic worlds" (Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 100). It was at this point that the 'war on terrorism' morphed into the 'war on terror', in which the US made "no distinction between the terrorists who committed [terrorist] acts and those who harbour them" (Bush in Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 121). Thus, a series of "reductive manoeuvres set in motion a metonymic relationship between territorialisation and terrorism, [whereby] terrorism is made to mean these territories and these territories are made to mean terrorism" (Gregory 2004: 60). It may be seen as no surprise, therefore, that when the US moved on Iraq in 2003, neo-conservative politicians widely cast a theocratic image of American troops "cloaked in righteousness" whilst defeating the barbaric, demonic 'other' (ibid: 48).

Conclusion

Assessing the role of Islamic politics in causing the 2003 Iraq war involves tracing the genealogy of Islamic neo-fundamentalism and its interactions with the 'West'. By sponsoring the *mujahidin* in the Afghan civil war, the US and Pakistan empowered an ideology and movement that encouraged tensions to brew within the Muslim political communities of the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia had based its legitimacy on acting according to the strictures of Wahhabi Islam. Neo-fundamental transnationalists, who criticised the regime's geopolitical alignment and 'un-Islamic' behaviour, rejected this claim. Cognisant of this current of neo-fundamentalist opposition, Saddam Hussein

used Islamic symbolism to legitimise his invasion of Kuwait. The US, who had entered into a security transaction with the Gulf oil-monarchies to shore-up their regimes against popular dissent, had been made more sensitive to regional instability. This compelled the US to act to affirm the primacy of sovereignty as the principle upon which international relations are conducted.

By stepping in to act as the guarantor of sovereignty, the US was presented with an opportunity to re-specify the nature of the demon against which sovereignty and state-identity are constructed. Saddam's invocation of Islamic symbolism and the popular Muslim support for his invasion of Kuwait contributed to this recalibration, in which Islam's 'bloody borders' became the frontier between anarchy and sovereignty. It also created a discursive link between Ba'athist Iraq and Al-Qaeda's neo-fundamental ideology, which became more pronounced after the threat posed to US sovereignty and identity after 9/11. A well-institutionalised neo-conservative political culture in Washington became convinced that Saddam Hussein's anti-American recalcitrance was a manifestation of Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'. So it was that the neo-conservative juggernaut of war set upon Iraq to liquidate the 'Islamic threat'. In this sense, the orientalism of the neo-conservatives aligned itself with the neo-realist view that anarchy lies beyond sovereignty. Like the neo-realist view, it also fails to account for the role of non-state actors, hence the need to territorialise Al-Qaeda and tie it to the Ba'athist Iraqi state. However, this essay shows that by demonising Islamic politics to reinforce the dichotomy between civilised sovereignty and barbaric anarchy, the US ended up creating the very conditions described and treated as essential by neo-realists.

Bibliography

Adib-Moghaddam, A. "Global Intifadah? September 11th and the Struggle within Islam". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15/2 (2002: 203-216)

Adib-Moghaddam, A, The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A cultural genealogy (Routledge, 2006)

Adib-Moghaddam, A. *Beyond Us and Them: A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations*. (C Hurst & Co., 2011)

Ehteshami, A. *Dynamics of Change in the Persian Gulf: Political Economy, War and Revolution*. (Routledge, 2013)

Esposito, John L., *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford UP, 1999)

Gregory, D. *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Blackwell, 2004)

Halliday, F. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge UP, 2005)

Huntington, S."The Clash of Civilisations?' *ForeignAffairs* 72/3 (1993), pp. 22-49.

Hinnebusch, R: *The international politics of the Middle East* (Manchester UP, 2003)

Hinnebusch, R 'The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relations' in Fawcett, L *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford UP, 2013)

Jepperson, R., Alexander Wendt and Peter Katzenstein (eds.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics.* (Columbia UP)

Khalidi, R.*Resurrecting Empire* (Beacon Press,2004)

Lewis, B. 'The Roots of Muslim Rage' in *The Atlantic Monthly* 266/3 (1990) pp. 47-60.

Mandaville, P. *Global Political Islam.* (Routledge,2007)

Mandaville, P. "Islam and International Relations in the Middle East: From *Umma* to Nations State" in Fawcett, L

(edt) *International Relations of the Middle East: Third Edition (*Oxford UP, 2013)

Martin, J "The state and sovereign subjectivity" in Finlayson, A and Valentine, V (etd) *Politics and post-structuralism: an introduction*(Edinburgh University Press, 2002) pp. 52-65.

Piscatori, J, "Religion and Realpolitik: Islamic Responses to the Gulf War", in Piscatori, J (ed.), *Islamic Fundamentalism and the Gulf Crisis,* (The Fundamentalism Project, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991), pp. 1-27.

Tripp, C. *A History of Iraq: Third Edition.* (Cambridge UP, 2003)

Trumpbour, John, "The Clash of Civilisations: Samuel P. Huntington, Bernard Lewis, and the Remaking of the Post-Cold War World Order", in Qureshi, E and Sells, M (eds.), *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (Columbia UP, 2003), pp. 88- 130.

—

Written by: Nick Newsom
Written at: University of London
Written for: Dr. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam
Date written: February 2014