

The al-Qaeda–US conflict: a ‘global civil war’?

By Stein Tønnesson¹

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Introduction

The armed conflict between al-Qaeda and the USA is a highly asymmetric conflict, resembling the early stages of a civil war between an insurgency movement and a government engaged in anti-insurgency warfare. It may therefore represent a tendency towards globalisation of political violence. Such violence has normally been linked to the national level, with armed movements targeting national governments and their foreign helpers. The al-Qaeda seems to represent something different. Its main goals are to liberate Islam’s holy places from the presence of infidel American troops, disassociate Islamic states from collaboration with the USA, and disrupt the whole state system created in the aftermath of the First World War. Ironically, the US response to al-Qaeda’s attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, have tended to promote the same goals. By launching a ‘war on terrorism’, the USA recognized by implication the al-Qaeda as a ‘war enemy’. By targeting Afghanistan, the USA lifted the conflict onto a level of direct military warfare. Later, by threatening to attack Iraq, it provoked serious tension between itself and its main allies in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, thus tending to fulfil some of al-Qaeda’s primary goals. At the same time, the USA pursued a unilateralist foreign policy, refusing to participate in or abide by international treaties. This caused serious friction both with European governments and with the US neighbour states in North America, and seemed to undermine the role of the United Nations in the ongoing process of political globalisation. It became common to speak of a US global

¹ This paper builds on a paper presented at a seminar organised by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm, 10 April 2002, a lecture at the University of Tromsø, 24 April 2002, a paper presented at the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) conference in Suwon, South Korea, 5

hegemony, undermining the prospects of establishing an enlightened global regime. Today there seems to be room for more forceful, independent European initiatives, in cooperation with small and medium states around the world, to re-establish faith in multilateral solutions, make clear to the USA that it cannot go alone, and redefine al-Qaeda as a criminal organization that all responsible governments must seek to bring to justice. If these efforts fail, then there is a danger that the al-Qaeda—US conflict may be the first instance of a new kind of warfare, a ‘global civil warfare’ between anti-American movements seeking to disrupt the existing state system, and a USA that seeks to establish itself as an unconstrained global sheriff. Then we would now have entered the violent phase of globalisation.

Our inadequate typologies

As a group of researchers focussing on terrorism noted already in 1998, ‘the threat of catastrophic terrorism spans the globe, defying ready classification as solely foreign or domestic.’² Like other foreign policy analysts, peace researchers normally distinguish between international and civil wars. While the former are waged between states, the latter are fought between rival armies within one state. Since the wars of liberation in the colonies during the 1946-75 period do not fit into any of the two categories, they have been categorised in the PRIO/Uppsala dataset as ‘extra-systemic’.³ They made up a substantial part of the wars registered in the 1946-75 period, but since 1976 all wars have been categorised as international, civil or ‘internationalised intrastate’.⁴ The number of civil wars has generally been higher than the international wars, since 1960 considerably higher.⁵

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² Ashton Carter, John Deutch, and Philip Zelikow, ‘Catastrophic Terrorism: Tackling the New Danger.’ *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 6, November/December 1998, pp. 80-94 (p. 82).

³ Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg & Håvard Strand, 2001. *Armed Conflict 1946-2000: A New Dataset*. Paper presented at the Conflict data conference at Uppsala University, 8-9 June. A revised version may be found at www.pcr.uu.se.

⁴ According to the SIPRI Yearbook, as many as 11 of the 15 most deadly conflicts in 2001 spilled over international borders. *SIPRI Yearbook 2002: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, as summarised on <http://editors.sipri.se/pubs/yb02/ch01.html>.

⁵ The ‘democratic peace’ theory was derived from the study of international wars. The finding is that democratic states have rarely if ever fought wars against each other. In the 1990s, peace research has concentrated on the study of civil wars, and how democratic institutions affect the frequency of civil war.

The war between al-Qaeda and the United States does not seem to fit into either of the two normal categories, and also does not seem to be covered by the 'internationalised intrastate' label since it did not have its origin in any particular intrastate war.

Although the US 'war on terror' includes an international war between the USA, its allies and the former Taliban government of Afghanistan, and although this war combined with an ongoing civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, the war between the USA and al-Qaeda cannot be reduced to a combination of an international war and the civil war in Afghanistan, and did not simply represent an internationalisation of that civil war. It was not Afghanistan who initiated the attack against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, which cost the lives of almost 3000 people, although Afghanistan did provide sanctuary and training camps for al-Qaeda. The initiator of the attack was not a state, but a trans-national organisation with cells in a long range of countries, and with goals that cannot be confined to any particular state. Moreover, the United States did not limit its reaction to the attacks of 11 September to either a campaign of law enforcement or a war against Afghanistan. The US Bush administration instead launched a global war against a vaguely defined phenomenon called 'terrorism'. It included not only al-Qaeda, but a number of both nationally and trans-nationally organised groups, as well as some states who were said to assist terrorist groups and possess or seek to develop Weapons of Mass Destruction.

It may be that the al-Qaeda—US war could be termed 'extra-systemic' and thus be placed in the same category as the national liberation wars in the European colonies up to 1975. Al-Qaeda's war is in some ways a delayed reaction against the Islamic World's dependence on the West, and the state system created by Western powers in the period of decolonisation. Politically it might also be tempting to see al-Qaeda's war as 'extra-systemic', since this would make it an aberration and not an indication of a new trend. Al-Qaeda would then be decoupled from the ongoing trend of globalisation. This article, however, wants to explore the possibility that al-Qaeda is linked to the globalisation process, that it is not 'extra-systemic', but an expression of ongoing changes in the world system as such. If this should prove to be the case (no matter how much we dislike it), then the war between al-Qaeda and the United States represents a 'globalisation of political violence' that may open an era of 'global civil

wars'. It could be the first of a series of wars in a process of establishing a US global hegemony. In that case we are going to need a new category, such as 'global civil war'.

'Global civil war'?

The term 'global civil war' may seem a contradiction in terms. If a war goes beyond the borders of nation-states, then it is international and not civil. However, the war between al-Qaeda and the United States is trans-national rather than international, and its features in many ways resemble those of internal wars. Just as in most internal insurgency wars, the armies of al-Qaeda and the US do not operate on an equal level. Their power is extremely asymmetric. On one side is an almost global system of states, led by a superpower, on the other a clandestine group using surprise attacks against symbolic targets, and mass killings, to scare up and provoke its adversary. Thus the war seems essentially civil, and must be analysed with the methods used for understanding asymmetric civil wars, although it is trans-national and global in character. Intuitively, the term 'global civil war' thus seems appropriate. It does, however, presuppose the existence of a global society, or at least a process leading towards a global society. A 'civil war' can only exist within a 'society'. Hence, the term 'global civil war' is only appropriate if mankind already constitutes one shared human society, or is on its way to becoming one.⁶ This article does not build on the assumption that there already is a 'world society', but it builds on the assumption that the world *may be moving* towards one shared society, with the existing state system forming the basis for a global structure of governance that may either be hegemonic, with the US as a global self-appointed sheriff, or multilateral, with the United Nations as a vehicle for global cooperation. The process towards one or the other may either consist in peaceful multilateral negotiations, perhaps inspired by the formation of the European Union, or a violent state-building process characterised by warfare between one or several dominant states and a number of trans-nationally organised rebel armies in alliance with some 'rogue' or dissident states.

⁶ For an interesting discussion of whether 1989 led to the creation of a 'world society', see Jarle Simensen, 1999. 'Democracy and Globalization: Nineteen Eighty-nine and the "Third Wave"', *Journal of World History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 391-411.

This article will first probe into the main reasons for suggesting that the armed conflict between al-Qaeda and the USA is a new kind of global war, and then discuss some possible counter-arguments.

Al-Qaeda's trans-national character

Al-Qaeda (the word means 'base' or 'principle') grew out of a trans-national community of radical Islamists who took part in the US- and Saudi-supported *jihad* against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, with sanctuaries in Pakistan. The recruits came from a number of countries in the Middle East and Asia, and also from immigrant Muslim communities in Western Europe. The top leader, Osama bin Laden, grew up in the Arabian peninsula within the borders of the state known as 'Saudi Arabia', although his wealthy family had its roots in neighbouring Yemen. Other key leaders of al-Qaeda, and also the main organizer of the 11 September attacks, came from Egypt. As an organisation, al-Qaeda seems to have been formed in the late 1980s as a loose trans-national network, managed by a small group of people around bin Laden.⁷ Their power within the network was built partly on a claim to represent the true will of the Prophet, partly on a considerable wealth derived from heritage, shady business and support from wealthy sympathizers in Saudi Arabia. When the Taliban took control of most of Afghanistan in 1995-96, training camps were established for the organization in that country. Here young Islamists would come from all over the world to study the Koran, clandestine organizational techniques, and warfare. The training camps were lost when the US-supported Northern Alliance crushed the Taliban in late 2001. In May 2002 it was reported that among the 384 captives from the war in Afghanistan, held by the US at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, there were citizens of more than 30 countries.⁸ Of the 19 hijackers who flew the four attacking airplanes on 11 September 2001, the majority were citizens of Saudi Arabia, but the leadership group (the Hamburg cell) consisted of one from Egypt, one from the Emirates, one from Yemen, and one from Lebanon. All were Arabs, but from five different Arab states.⁹

⁷ A list of known members, an organisation chronology and English translations of statements and interviews with Osama bin Laden may be found in Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida: Profile of a Terrorist Network*. Ardsley NY. Transnational Publishers, 2001.

⁸ Tony Allen-Mills in *The Sunday Times*, May 26, 2002.

Not only the recruitment, but also the organizational structure and armed operations of al-Qaeda have had a global reach. Despite severe repression, the group remained able, in the second half of the 1990s, to operate inside some Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and they also probably had access to wealthy and powerful circles. Al-Qaeda seems to have been behind two attacks against US targets in Saudi Arabia in 1995-96. Then it sought out its targets in other countries: Suicide bombings against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, a daring attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000, and then 11 September. All al-Qaeda's known targets so far have been American, but in several parts of the world. The perpetrators consider themselves as engaged in a global war against US hegemony.

What about al-Qaeda's goals? Are they also global? It may not be pertinent to point out that the long term goal of al-Qaeda is to Islamise all of humanity since this, at least in principle, would constitute the final goal of any missionary religion. Short to medium term goals are more relevant in defining the movement's character. Al-Qaeda is not a nationalist organization. Its aim is not to liberate any particular state, such as 'Saudi Arabia', and also not the Arab nation as a whole, although most al-Qaeda operatives are Arabs. Its first goal is to liberate Islam's holy places Mecca and Medina by forcing the withdrawal of all US occupation forces from the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁰ The shame of bearing witness to how the armies of the infidels garrison the core region of the Prophet seems to have been the main motivating force for Osama bin Laden's rupture with the Saudi regime in the early 1990s. Al-Qaeda aims not only at driving out the Americans, but also at liberating the peninsula from the moribund Saudi regime, who is guilty of collaboration with the infidels. Al-Qaeda's leaders must have watched with pleasure how the US plan to attack Iraq has caused friction in US relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. After the Arabian peninsula, the radical Islamists of al-Qaeda will no doubt want to liberate other holy places, such as Baghdad and Jerusalem, in order to revive the Caliphate. It is clear from al-Qaeda's propaganda that its leaders refute the legitimacy of all such states that have been formed in the Middle East since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 and the abolition of the office of Caliph in 1924 (The Ottomans had succeeded the Abbasid

⁹ Jane Corbin, *The Base. In Search of Al-Qaeda – the Terror Network that Shook the World*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

Caliphs of Baghdad in their function as protectors of the faith after the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258). Osama bin Laden's followers refute the existing state system in the Middle East and intend to resurrect a multi-national society – or empire, with an obligation to protect Islam. If not entirely global, al-Qaeda's goals go far beyond the national level. The immediate goal of its actions is probably to polarise the Islamic world between the truly faithful (the *umma*) and the regimes who recognise Israel and collaborate with the United States. Al-Qaeda wants to strengthen the forces of radical Islam in the Muslim world in general, and the Arab lands in particular. In the words of Michael Scott Doran, bin Laden is engaged in 'a profoundly serious civil war over Arab and Muslim identity in the modern world.'¹¹

Thus al-Qaeda's recruitment, organization and goals are all trans-national, and the target of their operations is the leading global power.

The globalisation of US 'home' and 'national security'

From the US perspective, the war against al-Qaeda is also global. The fact that a trans-national 'terrorist' group was able, during the Clinton administration, to hit a series of American targets abroad led to anxiety, committee work and planning, and the creation of some new anti-terrorist institutions, but not to any fundamental change in US national security policy. Home security and anti-terrorist measures continued to receive far less attention from politicians, government officials and analysts than concerns for more traditional security matters like the relationship to Russia, China, and to 'rogue states' like Libya, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Sudan and North Korea. Clinton's aim was to promote economic and financial globalisation, in the belief that US companies were sufficiently strong and aggressive to profit from increased global competition. He did not want to spend too much resources on expanding the US global military role, and therefore preferred quick actions and cooperation with likeminded governments. When George W. Bush took over, this changed completely. During the first eight months of the Bush administration, the main security-related goal of the White House was to build a National Missile Defence (NMD) that could shield the home territory from attacks by other states and thus ensure the USA a

¹⁰ Bernhard Lewis, 1998. 'License to Kill. Usama bin Ladin's Declaration of Jihad.' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 6, November-December, pp. 14-19.

global military predominance and ability to impose its will on perceived enemies. However, when al-Qaeda launched its devastating attack against the symbols of US economic and military power on 11 September 2001, Washington rapidly redefined its national security, building on the many proposals that anti-terrorist specialists had been putting forward for several years. While 11 September did not interrupt the NMD programme, Bush now launched a vigorous 'war on terrorism', including increased intelligence cooperation with other countries, measures to prevent the financing of terrorist groups,¹² threats against states who provided support to terrorist groups, and a sustained bombing campaign in Afghanistan, combined with logistical and other support to the Northern Alliance and the establishment of new bases in Central Asia. The 'war on terrorism' did not just target al-Qaeda, but a range of insurrectionary movements, most of which operate predominantly within one nation (such as FARC in Colombia). Rhetorical castigation of such movements was linked to attacks on three of the so-called rogue states, Iraq, Iran and North Korea, who were accused of developing Weapons of Mass Destruction, providing support to terrorists and constituting an 'axis of evil'.

A particularly interesting part of the redefinition of US national security is the blurring of the traditional division between 'home security' and 'national security', and the internationalisation of US law enforcement.¹³ There was general agreement that the FBI and the CIA would have to cooperate more closely than in the past, since an 'internal' security threat like the hijacking of an aircraft could easily be planned and operated from abroad. The CIA also seems to have preferred bringing suspects captured abroad to prisons in third states, since those taken to the United States would receive the protection of US laws.

In May 2002, President Bush also proposed to merge a number of institutions, such as the border police and the coast guard, under a new Department of Home Security. Part

¹¹ Michael Scott Doran, 'Somebody Else's Civil War.' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 1, January/February 2002, pp. 22-42 (pp. 23, 40).

¹² Thomas Biersteker, 'Targeting Terrorist Finances: The New Challenges of Financial Market Globalization'. Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (eds), *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 74-84.

¹³ Stephen E. Flynn, 'Beyond Border Control.' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 6, November/December 2000, pp. 56-68. See also William Wechsler, 'Law in Order. Reconstructing U.S. National Security,' *The National Interest*, Spring 2002, pp. 17-28. Wechsler urges Bush to overcome 'the lack of integration between the law enforcement and the foreign policy communities.'

of the rationale for this reform was that it was impractical of preventing unwanted visitors from entering US territory merely through tighter border controls. It would be more effective to cooperate with other states in collecting intelligence about possible visitors, and in creating a globally standardised system of smart passports that would rapidly distinguish trustworthy travellers from those with a criminal or otherwise doubtful record. It was also seen as impractical to inspect all the containers that arrive in American ports every day, with their loads of products from all over the world. Such measures would slow down international trade and make the US less competitive. Instead it was preferable to establish a US presence in all major ports of origin, and cooperate with local port authorities in making sure that only well certified companies could load containers on ships bound for the USA. The US government also asked the governments of the world's main shipping nations to allow US agents to inspect their ships on the high seas.

All of this represents steps in the globalisation of US *home security*. All since the Second World War, US *national security* had been conceived within a global framework, but the enemy then was first an axis of states and then a Soviet-led camp, consisting primarily of states and national liberation movements. The Cold War was a quasi-war between two state-based camps, separated in Europe by an 'iron curtain', and supporting opposite factions in Asian, African and Latin American civil wars. After the Cold War, the US government emphasised the creation of a free and truly global market of trade and investments, while at the same time demonstrating its military superiority in campaigns against states that were breaking international law (notably Iraq and Yugoslavia).

The redefinition of US national security after 11 September was quite radical because the enemy changed from unreliable or potentially hostile states to a loosely defined trans-national phenomenon. The USA needed to protect itself not only against a defined enemy, but against the risk of terrorist attacks from any possible direction. Thus the concepts of both national and home security were globalised. The US territory could no longer be defended at home. Law enforcement became a prominent part of US foreign policy. This meant that Washington considered the internal security of other states as part of its own security, and requested other states to integrate their anti-terrorist measures with the work of US agencies. This also meant that the US

could no longer accept national sovereignty as a basic tenet of international law.¹⁴ The defence of US security could require military intervention in other states even if those states had not violated international law, if they did not cooperate effectively in the repression of trans-national terrorism.

The position of the United Nations was also seriously affected. This global organization of states is built on the principle of equality for its member states, although five great powers have veto power in the Security Council. The United Nations represents the cumbersome multilateral road to global governance, which requires negotiations, treaties and agreements among the member states. The dominant politicians in the US Republican Party have long been sceptical to the United Nations organisation, which they consider to be ineffective and heavily bureaucratized. They also fear that it may restrain America's freedom of action, and even interfere in internal US affairs. However, after 11 September, the United Nations Secretary General as well as all the members of the UN Security Council (including Russia and China) went out of their way to support the US 'war on terror'. The UN sanctioned the American approach to the problem, including the bombing of Afghanistan, and assumed the burden of overseeing the set-up of a new coalition government in the country. The reason for this support was not just that everyone agreed, but also that no one wanted to alienate a wounded giant. In order not to alienate the world's only superpower, and thus be politically marginalized, the United Nations Security Council as well as the General Secretary willingly provided global legitimacy to the new US concept of global security. This brought some benefits in increasing US willingness to pay its membership dues to the organisation, but it did induce the US to follow a more multilateralist course or to make military action abroad contingent on UN Security Council approval.

Not only the UN, but also the individual members of the Security Council went out of their way, for a long time, to support the United States. President Putin's Russia reoriented his general foreign policy to align it with the United States, allowing US planes to overfly Russian territory, the US Army to establish a permanent presence in

¹⁴ An excellent exposition of how the most basic principles in international law are being affected by the US 'war on terrorism' can be found in Michael Byers, 'Terror and the Future of International Law'.

the Central Asian republics, and the US to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missiles (ABM) treaty so it could proceed with its plans for a National Missile Defence. China, while being engaged in a process of leadership succession internally, also opted for bandwagoning, and mostly left it to Europeans to voice criticism of US unilateralism.

There can be no doubt that the US 'war on terror' is global in its reach, both rhetorically and practically. Thus both from al-Qaeda's and the US perspective their war is conceived as trans-national and global. While one side refutes the existing state system and seeks to disrupt it and resurrect a historically defunct religious empire, the other wants to play an exceptional and dominating role within the existing state system and assign all other states a subordinate or participatory role in its efforts to enforce global security. From this perspective there is a 'global civil war' going on between a trans-national insurrectionary movement and a hegemonic state who sees the security of the rest of the world as an extension of its own security.

All the above seems to indicate that the term 'global civil war' makes sense, but some valid counter-arguments exist.

Is it really 'war'?

A first main objection to using the term 'global civil war' is that the US—al-Qaeda conflict may not be a 'war' at all. While the antagonists describe their struggle as 'war', this may not be true in an analytical sense. Terrorists are trans-national criminals, not soldiers or even guerrilla fighters, and when President Bush speaks about 'war on terror', the term 'war' should perhaps be understood metaphorically as in the expression 'war on drugs'. This was suggested shortly after 11 September by several commentators, including the military historian Michael Howard who recommended that the US government disrupt al-Qaeda through sustained, discreet and silent police work rather than trying to hit a fly with a hammer.¹⁵ Another analyst has suggested that the US campaign to repress terrorist groups and prevent further

Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (eds), *Worlds in Collision. Terror and the Future of Global Order*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 118-127.

¹⁵ Michael Howard, 'What's In A Name?: How to Fight Terrorism', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 1, January/February 2002, pp. 8-13.

terrorist actions should be seen as 'risk management' rather than war.¹⁶ As UN commissioner for human rights, Mary Robinson, also forcefully argued that al-Qaeda's leaders should be brought to justice under international law for their crimes against humanity, rather than being honoured with a status as enemies in war.

While these are sound political propositions, they say more about what Bush ought to have done than what he actually did. Before 11 September, Bush lacked a clearly defined enemy. After 11 September he could focus US national security on the image of the dangerous terrorist, and gather his nation as well as most of the rest of the world, around his anti-terrorist campaign. He did it loudly, and he did it as 'war', but then he also ran the risk of transforming Osama bin Laden into a hero for future generations of anti-Americans, a symbol that global rebels can seek inspiration from during many years to come.

When both sides in a conflict perceive what they are doing as 'war', use arms against each other, and cause the death of thousands, it seems difficult to categorise their interaction as anything else than 'war', although one would have wished that Washington had acted differently. The US—al-Qaeda conflict must be registered as a war in the relevant databases. It also seems reasonable to conceive of the 11 September attacks and the bombing of Afghanistan as parts of the same war. Thus the war was not located in only the USA or only Afghanistan *but globally*. The many arrests and incidents that subsequently took place in many parts of the world were also parts of that war. The first counter-argument is therefore not convincing. The next is more difficult to refute.

Is trans-national terrorism 'new'?

Both al-Qaeda itself and its US enemy have tended to see it as something new, a precursor of a phenomenon that is likely to characterize our new century. It comes natural for al-Qaeda's supporters to see it this way. Any political movement will want to have a bright future, since this increases the participants' motivation and makes it easier to recruit new members. It is perhaps more surprising that the US government

¹⁶ Yee-Kuang Heng, 'Unravelling the 'War' on Terrorism', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 33, No. 2, June 2002, pp. 227-242.

also emphasises the newness of al-Qaeda, and ties it so strongly to the danger that terrorists may acquire weapons of mass destruction. 11 September did not of course rely on any sophisticated technology. What made the spectacular attack possible was the dedication of a group of 19 militants to accept death in a daring action. The tools used to hijack the civilian planes that crashed into the twin towers and the Pentagon were the simplest imaginable: box openers and razor blades. Thus 11 September did not build on any new technology.

It is also not new that politically motivated violence is carried out by a trans-national movement. This happened also in the late 19th century when anarchists killed the French President in 1894, the Austrian Empress in 1897, the Spanish Prime Minister in 1897, the Italian King in 1900 and the US President in 1901.¹⁷ These killings, and the violent rhetoric of the anti-state anarchists, led to the adoption of draconian anti-anarchist laws in several countries, an international congress in 1898 and a multilateral treaty in 1904, aiming to establish cooperation among states in repressing international anarchism. Many expected the wave of anarchist terror to characterise the 20th century. However, when the King of Serbia was assassinated in 1903, the King of Portugal in 1908, and Austrian archduke Ferdinand in 1914, the perpetrators were not anarchists, but disgruntled officers or nationalists. The formative event for the 20th century in Europe was not anarchist terrorism, but the inter-state First World War.

Out of the First World War grew a new movement with the aim of overcoming national borders, defeating imperialism and establishing a just society worldwide. This movement was organized in the Communist International (Comintern), which was established with headquarters in Moscow in 1919. After some failed city-based insurrections in Europe and China in the aftermath of the First World War, agents of the Comintern waged a drawn-out struggle against the police forces of the European imperial powers, who cooperated in repressing communist movements both at home and in the colonies. This was a trans-national struggle, with a range of insurrectionary movements receiving training and sanctuary in the Soviet Union, just as al-Qaeda would do later in Afghanistan. However, the Comintern was never really successful as a trans-national movement, since political power at the time was increasingly being

concentrated at the level of the nation state. The Comintern therefore soon found it preferable to form independent communist parties for each nation, both in Europe and the colonies, and the communist movement only really triumphed in those countries where it managed to graft communist ideology onto nationalism. China and Vietnam (where communist parties remain in power today) are prime examples of how communism could triumph through nationalism. During the Second World War, the Comintern was dissolved, and international communism became a state-based block in world affairs rather than a trans-national insurrectionary movement. The Cold War 1947-89 took the form of a global conflict between blocks of states, not a global civil war. The civil wars that were part of the Cold War were also closely associated with the nation building processes in post-colonial states such as Korea, Vietnam and Angola. It was the dissolution of the socialist block and the US triumph in the Cold War that provided the US with a chance to become a global hegemon, and thus at the same time made it the prime target of movements fighting against the existing state system or the process of globalisation as such.

Although there is nothing new in having trans-national insurrectionary movements, the First, Second and Cold international wars were far more characteristic of the 20th century than any trans-national movement. The question is now if al-Qaeda is going to survive as a trans-national movement, if it survives at all, and if other similar movements will emerge. Perhaps the US—al-Qaeda war is just an episode. Although both al-Qaeda itself and the Bush administration in Washington consider themselves to be engaged in a long war, they could both be wrong. Al-Qaeda may not after all be the beginning of a new phenomenon, but could just as well be the last desperate attempt of some failed and marginalized Islamists to join forces and display a force they do not have. This is the perspective of Gilles Kepel in an interesting book that was first published in French and later translated into English.¹⁸ He analyses the failures of radical Islamism in Egypt, Pakistan and Algeria, the decline of Islamist fervour in Iran, the impossibility of escaping repression in Saudi-Arabia, and the

¹⁷ Walter Laqueur, 'Postmodern Terrorism.' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 5, September/October 1996, pp. 24-36 (p. 24).

¹⁸ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. Michael Scott Doran makes the same point in 'Somebody Else's Civil War,' *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81, No. 1, January/February 2002, p. 33: '... the attacks were a response to the failure of extremist movements in the Muslim world in recent years...'

frustration that Islamists from all these countries felt when only the peripheral states of Sudan and Afghanistan are willing to give them sanctuary. The marginalized elements who joined up in al-Qaeda do not represent the future, he claims, but the past.

Also ideologically, al-Qaeda is attached to the past rather than the future. As mentioned, it wants to revive the Caliphate, and its hopes seem unrealistically based on the assumption that a sudden Islamic revival could occur in today's world in the same way that the faith spread from the Arabian peninsula to North Africa, Southeast Europe, Central, South and Southeast Asia in centuries long past. Today, however, the state system is probably too well entrenched to give way to the onslaught of a loosely organized army of Jihadis. However, it is also possible that the Bush administration's reactions after 11 September, notably the plan to attack Iraq, may undermine the existing state system in the Middle East, break up Iraq, undermine the Saudi regime, perhaps even Egypt's, and thus provide new opportunities for radical Islamist movements. This would constitute a triumph for al-Qaeda, since there were precisely its goals.

The final classification of the US—al-Qaeda conflict will depend on what happens next. If al-Qaeda has been, or is being, so badly beaten by military operations, police work and financial controls that it fails to launch further attacks, if other insurgent groups who use terrorist methods remain mainly confined to national frameworks, and if terrorism again fades from its role as America's foremost enemy, then the al-Qaeda—US war will probably be remembered mainly as an episode, like the wave of assassinations around 1900. If, however, al-Qaeda is able to sustain itself and launch series of new attacks, if other trans-national groups of a similar kind emerge, or if the US is able to sustain the fear of international terrorism by playing on the memory of 9/11 and dramatising new dangers, then we are likely to enter a dark period of 'global civil wars'.