

Al Qaeda versus USA: Is it a 'War'?

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Introduction

Since September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden and US President George W. Bush both consider themselves to be at 'war', not only against each other, but against a wider enemy. Bin Laden's main enemy is the 'Crusader-Zionist alliance' led by the USA, but he also fights godless, apostate regimes within the Islamic world itself. The enemy of the Bush administration is not just bin Laden's al Qaeda network, but 'terrorism' in general, and also such 'outlaw states' which harbour terrorists or might provide them with weapons of mass destruction.

This lecture will compare the perceptions of bin Laden and Bush, and ask if scholars of international relations should accept their claim to be waging a 'war'. If the answer is yes, then we must discuss what kind of war.

Al Qaeda's War against the Crusaders

It is important to examine how bin Laden and his network organization al Qaeda describes their enemies, their 'war' and their objectives. A simple reading of available translations of public statements by Osama bin Laden and his closest associates allow us to make six points:

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First, Al Qaeda considers itself to be engaged in a *defensive war*: In 1996, after a large-scale suicide attack against US troops in the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden issued a declaration which commentators interpreted as a 'declaration of war' against the USA. In fact, however, he listed all the aggressions, atrocities and massacres that had been perpetrated against Muslims all over the world by the USA and its allies, and said that under the cover of

the 'iniquitous United Nations', the dispossessed people had been prevented from obtaining arms to *defend* themselves. Muslims had fought in Afghanistan and were fighting in Chechnya and other places, but it had proved impossible to persuade the regime in the land of the two holy places [Saudi Arabia] to defend the faith. Now, however, the Muslim youth had taken up the fight there as well: 'For more than a decade, they carried arms on their shoulders in Afghanistan and they have made vows to Allah that as long as they are alive, they will continue to carry arms against you until you are, Allah willing, expelled, defeated and humiliated, they will carry on as long as they live...' ¹ Many of bin Laden's statements use the term 'jihad', but he sometimes also uses the Arab word for 'war' (harb). It has not been possible to check when the available English translations are rendering 'jihad' as war, and when they translate the word 'harb' or other words. 'Jihad', as we have often been told, means 'striving' or 'struggle', not war. There is also in the Islamic tradition a concept of two territories, the internal territory of Islam, and the external territory of war (dar al harb). ² However, in bin Laden's rhetoric, the terms translated into English as 'war' are consistently associated with other violent words, and mixed with tales of bloody heroic events from the age of the Prophet until today. So when bin Laden speaks of 'jihad', it is clear that he means something that legitimates the use of extreme violence. This lecture will therefore accept the use of the term 'war' in the available English translations of bin Laden's statements.

Second, while the war is global and has no apparent geographical limits, its primary objective is *to transform the Muslim world*: The message calling for war against the Americans in 1996 explicitly addressed bin Laden's 'Muslim brethren all over the world generally, and in the Arab Peninsula specifically.' In 1998 he made clear that 'the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa mosque [in Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [in Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.' ³ In March 2002, when the United States was preparing to attack the Muslim country Iraq, bin Laden

¹ 'Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places', August 23, 1998. Appendix 1 A in Yonah Alexander and Michael S. Swetnam. *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida: Profile of a Terrorist Network*, Ardsley NY: Transnational Publishers, 2001, pp. 1-22 (see p. 17).

² Patricia Martinez, 'Deconstructing *jihad*: Southeast Asian contexts', Working Paper no. 49, Institute of Strategic and Defence Studies, Singapore (September 2003). Downloaded 2 March 2004 from <http://www.ntu.edu.sg/idss/WorkingPapers/WP49.pdf>

³ 'Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places', August 23, 1998. Hegghammer, *op.cit.*, p. 143 (another translation of the same document as above).

welcomed the opportunity to open a new battlefield, but did not conceive of Iraq in isolation. It would be part of a larger struggle, aiming for the resurrection of truly Islamic regimes throughout the Muslim world. In his message to his Iraqi brothers, bin Laden announced that 'the most qualified regions for liberation are Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, the land of the two holy mosques [Saudi Arabia], and Yemen'.⁴ He called them 'regions', not countries or nations. Bin Laden and other radical Islamists never use the secular term for 'nation' (*watan* in Arab), but always speak of the 'umma', which is often translated as 'nation' or 'people', although it refers to all Muslims or all the subjects of the Caliph. In a taped statement, broadcast by Al Jazeera television in early January 2004, bin Laden heavily attacked the rulers of Arab countries for having failed to achieve economic development and for having failed to resist the West. He blamed this sorry state of affairs on the abandonment of the Islamic principles of economic, military and political affairs, and called for the establishment of a temporary council of wise men in a safe place away from the shadow of the suppressive regimes. It should fill the vacuum caused by the failure of all existing regimes, and appoint an imam for the whole community of Muslims (umma).⁵

Third, bin Laden understands the war *as asymmetric*. He stated in his so-called Declaration of War in 1996 that: 'due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces, a suitable means of fighting must be adopted i.e. using fast moving light forces that work under complete secrecy. In other words, to initiate guerrilla warfare, where the sons of the nation [umma], and not the military forces, take part in it.'⁶ When al Qaeda employs terrorist tactics, this is not a matter of principle. Bin Laden would have preferred to use more advanced weapons and tactics, and he enthusiastically praised Pakistan in 1998 when it exploded the first Islamic nuclear device. However, in the position of weakness in which he finds himself, he prefers to use the least costly and most effective method for a clandestine group which is not in control of any territory, and this is terrorist attacks. He also does not require the targets to be military, although military targets have been favoured on several occasions: the Khobar Towers in 1996, the USS Cole in 2000, Pentagon on September 11,

⁴ English translation of 'bin Laden tape: Text', *BBC News* March 12, 2003, 00:56 GMT, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2751019.stm. Reproduced in Brynjar Lia, "Irak og terrortrusselen: Eit oversyn over terrorgrupper med tilknytning til det irakiske regimet [Iraq and the terror threat: An overview of terror groups with connections to the Iraqi regime]", Oslo, Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt [Norwegian Defence Research Establishment] report 00940, 2003, pp. 63-65.

⁵ 'Full text 'bin Laden' tape', *BBC News*, January 5, 2004, 12:28 GMT, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3368957.stm

⁶ 'Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places', August 23, 1996. Hegghammer, *op.cit.*, p. 133.

2001, and US armed units in Iraq since May 2003. Bin Laden has argued strongly that it is legitimate to kill enemy civilians since the democratic system practised in the West makes civilian populations responsible for their leaders' criminal acts against Islam.⁷ Although bin Laden's rhetoric is difficult to take seriously by secular Westerners, he is not an irrational actor. Based on his worldview, with the Muslim nation being brutally oppressed by the Western crusaders, and being betrayed by their own leaders, it seems rational to use the only tactics that is readily available: Terrorism.

Fourth, bin Laden conceives of his war *as religious*: According to him, 'two *lashkars* [the forces of the West and of Islam] have been pitted against one another. One *lashkar* is endowed with the teaching of Prophet Muhammad and is imbued with a desire to be martyrs, while the second *lashkar* is manned and directed by a worn-out, aged infidel leadership. A confrontation is now bound to take place and the war clouds have truly engulfed both the *lashkars*.'⁸ Bin Laden's language is almost always religious. While he on some rare occasions has made references to injustices committed by the West against non-Muslim countries, notably Vietnam, he never claims to represent the true interests of oppressed people in the West, such as the Communists used to do. His struggle is a clash between religions, and to the extent that bin Laden succeeds in getting Muslims to share his vision of the world, he will fulfill Samuel Huntington's prediction from 1993 that the 21st century will be characterized by a 'clash of civilizations'. Since the Palestinian cause has strong support throughout the Muslim world, bin Laden often pinpoints the Zionists or Jews as enemies along with the United States. Shortly after 9/11, while waiting for the US counter-attack, bin Laden stated: 'The new Jewish crusader campaign is led by the biggest crusader, Bush, under the banner of the cross. This battle is considered one of the battles of Islam'.⁹ In another statement, in November 2001, he affirmed that 'this war is fundamentally religious ... the enmity is based on creed ... It is a question of faith, not a war against terrorism, as Bush and Blair try to depict it'.¹⁰ In a long statement read out by bin Laden on Al Jazeera television on 4 January 2004, however, he

⁷ 'Letter to the American People' from Osama bin Laden, translation published in *The Observer*, November 24, 2002. Cited in full in Hegghammer, *op.cit.*, pp. 189-197 (see in particular p. 192).

⁸ Statement by bin Laden during the wedding of his son, January 12, 2001. Hegghammer, *op.cit.*, p. 146.

⁹ Call from bin Laden for resistance in Pakistan, *al-Jazeera*, September 24, 2001. Hegghammer, *op.cit.*, p. 149.

¹⁰ 'Bin Laden fordømmer FN' [Bin Laden condemns the UN], *al-Jazeera*, November 3, 2001. Hegghammer, *op.cit.*, p. 156.

spoke not only of a religious war, but of a 'religious-economic war', citing the importance of Middle East oil reserves.¹¹

Fifth, bin Laden's war is *open-ended*; there is no end in sight: 'I stand for a jihad against *kufr* [infidels] today, and shall so do till eternity', bin Laden declared in the beginning of 2001.¹² 'We fight those who fight us and chop off their heads with our swords. There will be no peace until infidelity is defeated', he assured his listeners on a taped statement, broadcast in October 2003.¹³ His objectives are so wide-ranging that it is difficult to conceive of any compromise or end to the struggle, and he sees no such possibility himself. In January 2004, he even claimed that the confrontation, which had begun centuries ago, would continue 'until Judgment Day'. 'There can be no dialogue with occupiers except through arms', he asserted.¹⁴ This leaves his enemies, of course, with no other option than to seek the destruction of his movement.

And sixth, Iraq is merely a new *battlefront within the wider war*, and for bin Laden it must have caused a tremendous source of relief when this front was opened by President Bush. After the defeat in Afghanistan, al Qaeda was deprived of its training camps, headquarters, its sanctuary (*hijra* in the Islamic tradition). The organization also suffered widespread arrests and killings. Bin Laden himself had a hard time surviving the US onslaught on his headquarters in the Tora Bora Mountains. After he had managed to break out and escape, he sought to transform this survival of the struggle into a heroic victory, but it cannot have gone unnoticed that al Qaeda was deprived of its sanctuaries, was unable to carry out new large-scale actions against the enemy, except in peripheral locations, and was in danger of being eradicated by the security forces of many states, not least Muslim states, who now cooperated far more efficiently than previously. In 2003, the Saudi security forces started major operations against al Qaeda cells and sympathizers within 'the land of the two holy places'.

In this situation, what al Qaeda's leaders must have hoped for, was a new battlefront, preferably one that could draw American attention away from the hunt for remaining al Qaeda cadre. The British-American invasion of Iraq fulfilled bin Laden's dreams. Not only did it

¹¹ 'Full text 'bin Laden' tape', BBC News, January 5, 2004, 12:28 GMT, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3368957.stm

¹² Statement by bin Laden during the wedding of his son, January 12, 2001. Hegghammer, *op.cit.*, p. 147.

¹³ BBC translation of message from bin Laden, broadcast on *al-Jazeera*. news.bbc.co.uk/og/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/3204230.stm, October 18, 2003.

¹⁴ 'Full text 'bin Laden' tape', BBC News, January 5, 2004, 12:28 GMT, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3368957.stm

remove a godless socialist leader, who had violently repressed Islamist groups for several decades, but it also helped al Qaeda get access to Iraqi territory. The opportunity was clearly perceived by Osama bin Laden, who on February 11, 2003 issued a message to 'our Muslim brothers in Iraq'. He said he was following with utmost concern 'the Crusaders' preparations for war to occupy a former capital of Islam.' He was of course indifferent to the fate of the godless Baath party and its leader Saddam Hussein, but insisted that 'regardless of the removal or survival of the socialist party or Saddam, Muslims in general and Iraqis in particular must brace themselves for jihad...' They should fight for God, not under non-Islamic banners, but there would be no harm 'if the interests of Muslims converge with the interests of the socialists in the fight against the crusaders, despite our belief in the infidelity of socialists. ... Socialists are infidels wherever they are, in Baghdad or Aden.' Bin Laden also made recommendations to the Iraqis about how to fight the British-American invaders: 'We ... recommend luring the enemy forces into a protracted, close, and exhausting fight, using the camouflaged defensive positions in plains, farms, mountains, and cities. The enemy fears city and street wars most, a war in which the enemy expects grave human losses.'¹⁵ A journalist in Baghdad reported in early April 2003 that a considerable number of voluntary, long haired and bearded mujahideen fighters had been arriving from abroad to take part in the defence of the ancient capital of the Caliphate. These fighters were by no means supporters of Saddam Hussein. Many of them were Islamists who had spent years in Iraqi jails or in exile. She quoted an Iraqi intellectual as exclaiming: 'Look what Bush has accomplished ... He has sent us hundreds of Osama bin Ladens. If the regime was not connected to al Qaeda before, it will be now.'¹⁶ Then Saddam's regime fell, and the occupying forces were subjected to a guerrilla struggle organized partly by the most adamant supporters of the fallen tyrant, and partly by Islamists inspired by al Qaeda. The main problem for these guerrillas was that they had very little support from the Kurdish and Shia populations of Iraq. By the end of 2003, what could benefit bin Laden's cause the most, and open further opportunities, would be a conflict between the USA and Iran, and an open confrontation between the US occupation forces in

¹⁵ English translation of 'bin Laden tape: Text', *BBC News*, March 12, 2003, 00:56 GMT, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2751019.stm. Reproduced in Brynjar Lia, "Irak og terrortrusselen: Eit oversyn over terrorgrupper med tilknytning til det irakiske regimet [Iraq and the terror threat: An overview of terror groups with connections to the Iraqi regime]", Oslo, Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt [Norwegian Defence Research Establishment] report 00940, 2003, pp. 63-65.

¹⁶ Åsne Seierstad, 'Hellige krigere til kamp', *Aftenposten*, April 3, 2003, p. 8. August Hanning, head of the German Federal Intelligence Service, said in November 2003 that al Qaeda has been 'regenerated' by the Iraq war. Iraq 'risks becoming a crystallization point' for the radical Islamic cause, Hanning said. 'Much depends on how things develop in Iraq'. Associated Press bulletin cited in *International Herald Tribune*, November 21, 2003, p. 5.

Iraq and the most radical Shia groups in Iraq. In a statement broadcast in October 2003, bin Laden expressed his main hope for the future, a new Islamic 'Vietnam' in Iraq: 'America has fallen into the quagmires of the Tigris and Euphrates ... this war is a new crusader campaign against the Muslim world, and it is a war that is crucial to the entire [Muslim] nation. ... He [Bush] thought that the matter would be easy spoils and a short trip that would not end in failure. However, God had those lions waiting for him in Baghdad, the home of the Islamic caliphate, the lions of the desert who believe that the taste of death in their mouths is better than honey.'¹⁷

Bush's War on Terror

In January 2001, George W. Bush, son of the president who had sent troops to the land of the two holy mosques, became the new president of the United States. He gave key positions within his administration to a group of foreign policy hawks, with background in the Reagan administration's successful 'defeat' of the Soviet Union. They had failed to truly radicalize the presidency of George Bush Sr. During the Clinton presidency, in reaction to ideas that the 'American' 20th century would be followed by an 'Asian' or 'Pacific' 21st century, some of them had formed a 'Project for a New American century' and devised plans for a more assertive US foreign policy. It would consist in a radical increase of military spending, military reforms to build greater capacity for rapid interventions anywhere in the world, a national missile defence, closer cooperation with Israel, and regime change in Iraq. The two most prominent members of this hawkish network were Dick Cheney, who became Vice-President, and Donald Rumsfeld, who became Secretary of Defence. During their first eight months in power, they were not really able to carry out their radical programmes. Secretary of State Colin Powell was invigorating the State Department, which had suffered from lack of funding because Congress was dominated by Republicans during the Clinton Presidency. In the first half of 2001, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice also continued to perceive of US policies in realist balance-of-power terms rather than a radical crusade. Much attention was given to problems with China. Moreover, domestic support for President Bush was rather low. Al Qaeda's attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 completely changed the domestic political scene in the United States. It provided the assertive right-wing radicals with an unexpected opportunity to assert themselves.

¹⁷ BBC translation of message from bin Laden, broadcast on al-Jazeera. news.bbc.co.uk/og/pr/fr/-

After September 11, 2001, the more realist and moderate elements of the Bush administration tried in vain to restrain the radicals by adopting much of their programmes and channelling them through the multilateral framework of the United Nations. At first, they managed to secure broad international support for US policies, but not when the USA followed up its success in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan by proceeding to invade Iraq. This deprived the USA of much international support, and since late 2003, it seems that the moderates within the Bush administration have regained some of their clout. The main reason is that the occupation of Iraq has proved more difficult and costly than expected.

During the period when Cheney, Rumsfeld and other radicals dominated US foreign policy—a period that has not yet reached its end when these lines are written—the global scene was characterised by the concept of a ‘global war on terror’. This concept was very much favoured by President Bush himself. Let us have a look at some of President Bush’s public speeches since 9/11. His statements about the global war give ground for making almost the same six points that were made about bin Laden above. To an astounding degree, the Bush administration’s world view mirrors that of bin Laden.

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First, Bush means seriously that *the US is engaged in a global war*, comparable to the two world wars and the Cold War, although of a different kind, requiring offensive attacks. He used the term ‘war against terrorism’ already in his address to the nation in the evening of September 11, 2001: ‘America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism’.¹⁸ On September 19, he characterized it as ‘a new type of struggle. It’s really the first series of battles in the 21st century’. It was not a war against a specific individual or against solely one organization, but ‘against terrorist activities’.¹⁹ None of the US presidents during the 1960s-70s seem to have thought of declaring a general war on guerrilla activities, although such activities characterized the times. Their wars targeted armed groups or states, not activities or tactics. But then they had the communist threat to rally Americans against. In President Bush’s

/2/hi/middle_east/3204230.stm, October 18, 2003.

¹⁸ ‘Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation’, September 11, 2001, 8:30 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

¹⁹ ‘President Building Worldwide Campaign Against Terrorism’, September 19, 2001, 11:22 A.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

State of the Union address in January 2002—in which Iraq, Iran and North Korea were said to constitute an ‘axis of evil’—he stated that the war on terror had two great objectives. The first was to shut down terrorist camps, disrupt terrorist plans and bring terrorists to justice. The second was to prevent the terrorists and regimes who seek chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from threatening the United States and the world.’²⁰ Thus Bush linked the war on terrorism to the struggle to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons both to sub-state groups *and regimes*, and subsumed both as objectives of *an ongoing global war*. In his State of the Union address on 30 January 2004, he reaffirmed that ‘America is on the offensive against the terrorists who started this war’, and that ‘as part of the offensive against terror, we are also confronting the regimes that harbour and support terrorists, and could supply them with nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.’²¹

Second, while the war on terror is global in scope, it aims to ‘root out terrorist activities’ *primarily in the Middle East*. Here as well there is a basic similarity between the priorities of bin Laden and Bush. They both aim to transform the Muslim world, and primarily the Middle East. During the run up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the United Kingdom and the United States emphasized the need to prevent Saddam Hussein from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, but they could not hide their more radical aim of ousting Saddam Hussein from power and instituting a democratic regime. Bush even mentioned this aim in the speech he gave to the United Nations General Assembly on September 12, 2002, just after having marked the first anniversary of 9/11: ‘The people of Iraq can shake off their captivity. They can one day join a democratic Afghanistan and a democratic Palestine, inspiring reforms throughout the Muslim world. These nations can show by their example that honest government, and respect for women, and the great Islamic tradition of learning can triumph in the Middle East and beyond.’²² The vision of a changing Middle East was also accentuated in the statement that President Bush issued together with UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar at the Azores in March 2003, three days before their coalition launched the attack against Iraq: ‘We envisage a unified Iraq with its territorial integrity respected. All the Iraqi people—its rich mix of Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Kurds,

²⁰ ‘Bush State of the Union Address’, January 29, 2001, cnn.allpolitics.com/printthis/clickability.com...

²¹ Bush ‘The State of the Union’, January 20, 2004, www.whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/2004/print/index.html

²² ‘Text of Bush’s address to United Nations’, September 12, 2002, 12:52 P.M., cited after the *Toronto Star* website: www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs...

Turkomen, Assyrians, Chaldean, and all others—should enjoy freedom, prosperity, and equality in a united country.’²³

In November 2003, while on a state visit to London, Bush went further in pronouncing his vision of a transformed Middle East: ‘If the greater Middle East joins the democratic revolution that has reached much of the world, the lives of millions in that region will be bettered, and a trend of conflict and fear will be ended at its source.’ He admitted that the Middle East countries had ‘some distance to travel’, but still saw reasons for optimism: ‘In an arc of reform from Morocco to Jordan to Qatar, we are seeing elections and new protections for women and the stirring of political pluralism. ... We’re told that Islam is somehow inconsistent with a democratic culture. Yet more than half of the world’s Muslims are today contributing citizens in democratic societies.’ Bush felt that Britain and the USA had been mistaken when tolerating autocracies in the past: ‘... Now we’re pursuing a different course, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.’²⁴

Third, the war is asymmetric, and in asymmetric warfare the stronger power must be on the offensive *to prevent (or pre-empt)* attacks by the weaker party. Bush recognized the basic asymmetry of the war early on. ‘The American people are used to a conflict where there was a beachhead or a desert to cross or known military targets,’ he claimed a week after 9/11: ‘That may occur. But right now we’re facing people who hit and run. They hide in caves. We’ll get them out.’ The next day, he defined the war as ‘different’ since it was against ‘an enemy that likes to hide and burrow in’. There are ‘no rules’, he claimed, ‘...we’re adjusting our thinking to the new type of enemy. These are terrorists who have no borders.’ A year later, he returned to his oft-repeated statement that this was ‘a different kind of war’, and added: ‘You might think about it as an international manhunt’.²⁵ When Bush later linked the threat from terrorists to the threat from outlaw regimes, he emphasized that the asymmetrical distribution of power might not protect the United States since new technologies could provide ‘even weak states and small groups’ with ‘catastrophic power to strike great nations’. This argument provided the main rationale for the new doctrine of preventive interventions (falsely called ‘pre-

²³ ‘Text: Azores summit statement’, March 16, 2003, 20:26 GMT, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2855567.stm

²⁴ ‘President Bush Discusses Iraq Policy at Whitehall Palace in London’, November 19, 2003, 1:24 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

²⁵ ‘Remarks by the President Upon Arrival, the South Lawn’, September 16, 2001, 3:23 P.M., ‘Guard and Reserves “Define Spirit of America”, remarks by the President to Employees at the Pentagon, September 17, 2001, 11:45 A.M., ‘Remarks by the President at Tennessee Welcome’, October 8, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

emptive' in Washington). This doctrine was first pronounced in a speech Bush made at West Point in June 2002: '...the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.'²⁶ This is a doctrine of offensive warfare by the stronger party in an asymmetric relationship.

Fourth, if not a religious crusade, President Bush's war is conceived of in *universalist and idealist terms*: It aims at creating a world of freedom, in America's own image. In his first speeches after 9/11, Bush tended to interpret the war in religious terms. On the evening of 9/11 he quoted Psalm 23 in the Old Testament, which Jews and Christians have in common: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.'²⁷ On the other hand, he declared on 15 September that 'Americans of every faith and background' were committed to the goal of eradicating the evil of terrorism.²⁸ Then, on the following day, he made the big mistake of pronouncing the word 'crusade': This is 'a new kind of evil', he said. 'And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. *This crusade*, [emphasis added] this war on terrorism is going to take a while. And the American people must be patient. I'm going to be patient.'²⁹ By likening the war on terrorism to a 'crusade' he unwittingly confirmed bin Laden's image of the US president as a 'crusader'.³⁰ Bush corrected himself on September 17 by stating at the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. that 'the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace', and by emphasizing that America 'counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens'.³¹ Bush repeated two days later, at a photo opportunity with President Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia, that 'the war against terrorism is not a war against Muslims, nor is it a war against Arabs. It's a war against evil people...'³² Bush never again used the term 'crusade'. Instead he emphasized that the United States would reject attempts to

²⁶ 'President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point', June 1, 2002, 9:13 A.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

²⁷ 'Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation', September 11, 2001, 8:30 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

²⁸ Radio Address of the President to the Nation, September 15, 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

²⁹ 'Remarks by the President Upon Arrival, the South Lawn', September 16, 2001, 3:23 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

³⁰ Bin Laden himself would take up this in November, stating: 'Bush ... openly and clearly said that this war is a crusader war. He said this before the whole world to emphasize this fact.' 'Bin Ladin fordømmer FN' [Bin Laden condemns the UN], *al-Jazeera*, November 3, 2001. Heghammer, *op.cit.*, p. 156.

³¹ "'Islam is Peace' Says President", September 17, 3:12 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

³² 'President Building Worldwide Campaign Against Terrorism', September 19, 2001, 11:22 A.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

pit religion against religion: 'We're going to lead the world to fight for freedom, and we'll have Muslim and Jew and Christian side-by-side with us.'³³

President Bush's universalistic creed was clearly expressed in a speech he made on September 20, 2001: 'Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists ... what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.' Towards the end of his speech, he added a religious flavour all the same: 'Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.'

Fifth, just like bin Laden's, Bush's war is *open-ended*: It is unlikely that it will ever be possible to declare victory, unless the objectives are redefined. On the one hand, Bush has repeatedly promised to win the war. On the other, he has never defined what the criterion for victory shall be. He said on the day after 9/11: 'the battle will take time and resolve. But make no mistake about it: we will win,' but then he defined victory in terms of good prevailing over evil: 'This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail.' The following day, he declared that it was a US 'responsibility to history ... to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil'.³⁴ Notice the similarity with bin Laden's promise that there will be no peace until infidelity is defeated. Bush added that while the conflict had begun on the timing and terms of others, it would end 'in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing', and 'the course to victory may be long'.³⁵ On September 17, 2001, when Bush was asked by a reporter if he could see an end to the war, at all, he just replied: 'I think that this is a long-term battle, war. There will be battles. But this is long-term. After all, our mission is not just Osama bin Laden, the al Qaeda organization. Our mission is to battle terrorism and to join with freedom loving people.'³⁶ Bush gave a somewhat more precise answer three days later: 'Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every

³³ 'Remarks by the President At Photo Opportunity with House and Senate Leadership', September 19, 2001, 4:39 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

³⁴ Remarks by the President in Photo Opportunity with the National Security Team, September 12, 2001, 10:53 A.M., and President's Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, September 14, 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

³⁵ *Ibid*, and Radio Address of the President to the Nation, September 15, 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

³⁶ 'Guard and Reserves "Define Spirit of America"', remarks by the President to Employees at the Pentagon, September 17, 2001, 11:45 A.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.’³⁷ The question then is how to define ‘global reach’, ‘stopped’ and ‘defeated’. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld admitted in an internal memo, leaked to the press in October 2003, that it was difficult to define victory: ‘Are we winning or losing the Global War on Terror?’ he asked. He wanted ‘metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas [Islamic schools] and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?’ Rumsfeld also added: ‘It is pretty clear that the coalition can win in Afghanistan and Iraq in one way or another, but it will be a long, hard slog.’³⁸

And sixth, Iraq is seen as *a battlefield within the larger war*: Here again, bin Laden and Bush share the same view. In his State of the Union address in January 2003, at a time when it was still uncertain if the United States would get a UN mandate for invading Iraq, Bush first spoke of his ‘global war against a scattered network of killers’, which ‘goes on, and we are winning’. However, the gravest danger in the war on terror was no longer these killers, who were ‘on the run’, but ‘outlaw regimes that seek and possess nuclear, chemical and biological weapons’. In a key statement, he claimed that the next 9/11 was likely to be ordered by Saddam Hussein, and be even worse than the first: ‘Imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans, this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known. We will do everything in our power to make sure that that day never comes.’³⁹

The concept of ‘two fronts’ in the war against terror was introduced by Bush at a press conference on March 7, 2003. On one front, the US was hunting down and capturing the masterminds of the September 11 attacks. On the other, the US had arrived at an important movement in confronting the threat posed by Saddam Hussein ‘and his weapons of terror’.⁴⁰ Two weeks later, when Bush announced the start of what most news media called ‘the war in Iraq’, he did not use the term ‘war’, but ‘military operations’. The United States was already at war against terror, and Iraq was a campaign within that wider war: ‘These are opening stages

³⁷ ‘Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People’, September 20, 2001, 9:00 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

³⁸ ‘Rumsfeld’s war-on-terror memo’, October 16, 2003, cited after the *USA Today* website: usatoday.printthis.clickability.com...

³⁹ ‘Bush’s State of the Union speech’, January 28, 2003, cited after the CNN website: cnn.allpolitics.printthis.clickability.com...

⁴⁰ ‘Text of Bush press conference remarks’, cited after the *Toronto Star* website: www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs...

of what will be a broad and concerted campaign', he declared.⁴¹ On May 1, 2003, after US forces had taken Baghdad and all of Iraq's major towns, Bush also did not announce an end to the 'war', but to 'major combat operations in Iraq'. And in a major address to the Nation on September 7, 2003, when it had become clear that the end of 'major combat operations' had not brought peace to Iraq, he reported on America's actions in the 'war on terror': Nearly two years ago, he reminded his listeners, 'we began a systematic campaign against terrorism ... America and a broad coalition acted first in Afghanistan ... In a series of raids and actions around the world, nearly two-thirds of al Qaeda's known leaders have been captured or killed ... And we acted in Iraq ... [with] ... one of the swiftest and most humane military campaigns in history ... five months after we liberated Iraq, a collection of killers is desperately trying to undermine Iraq's progress and throw the country into chaos.' The fact that no end to the war on terror was in sight should not come as a surprise, he said: 'Two years ago, I told the Congress and the country that the war on terror would be a lengthy war, a different kind of war, fought on many fronts in many places. Iraq is now the central front. Enemies of freedom are making a desperate stand there—and there they must be defeated.'⁴² So Bush is still at 'war' and has no doubts about it.

War? What Kind of War?

[Slide 4]

The way we see the al Qaeda–US confrontation depends on how we define 'war'. If we start with a general definition of the term as an 'armed struggle between two human groups', then wars between states, wars within states, and wars between a state and a non-state human group may all be included under the term. The non-state human group could be a faction within the same state it is engaged in war with (civil war), within another state (war of intervention), or it could be a trans-nationally organised group. The general definition of 'war' may furthermore be based either directly on the *actual use* of arms or on a *condition of hostility* leaving no doubt as to the parties' preparedness to use force. If the definition is built on actual combat, the Cold War was not a war since Soviet and US forces never confronted each other in battle. A definition based on actual combat also needs to require a certain magnitude of armed action, to exclude mere skirmishes. The much used PRIO-Uppsala database limits the term 'war' to

⁴¹ 'Bush speech in full', March 20, 2003, newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk...

armed conflicts with a minimum of 1,000 casualties – or ‘battle deaths’ – in one year. Conflicts below that threshold are called ‘armed conflicts’ (‘minor’ or ‘intermediate’ depending on the number of battle deaths). The term ‘battle deaths’ includes both soldiers and civilians. The Department of Peace and Conflict at Uppsala University has thus categorised the more than 2,700 civilians killed on September 11, 2001 as battle deaths, and has included the conflict between al Qaeda and the United States in its database as ‘war’ in the year 2001.⁴³ If instead we use a definition based on condition of hostility,⁴⁴ then the Cold War would qualify as war, with actual combat being avoided only through deterrence. The state of hostility between al Qaeda and the United States is even more acute than the Cold War was. Al Qaeda and US forces have been involved in direct armed combat, notably in Afghanistan, but probably also in Iraq. And both bin Laden and President Bush have made statements amounting to declarations of war against each other (although not in a legal sense). There opinions should probably also count. Does it not seem a little strange if we, as researchers, should refuse to accept the perception of both sides in the conflict, and say: ‘No’, you are not at war although you think so. To sum up, it does seem difficult to deprive the conflict between these two belligerents of the status they both claim as ‘war’.

[Slide 5]

The only way of narrowing down the definition of ‘war’ sufficiently to exclude the al Qaeda–US conflict, would be to say that a non-state human group using only terrorist tactics are mere criminals and hence do not qualify as party to a war. Terrorist tactics would be defined as attacks that are not intended to destroy the enemy’s armed forces or take control of any territory, but only instil fear in the enemy or destroy symbols of power. On this basis one would not consider 9/11 as an act of war, but a criminal, terrorist act. Then, no matter what Bush claims, he did not actually respond with a ‘war against terror’, but with what should properly be called an international police action and, in addition, wars of intervention against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq.⁴⁵ These would be

⁴² ‘President Addresses the Nation’, September 7, 2003, 8:31 P.M., www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases...

⁴³ Mikael Eriksson, Peter Wallensteen & Margareta Sollenberg. ‘Armed Conflict, 1989-2002’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 40 (5): 593-607 (see p. 606).

⁴⁴ ‘War consisteth not in battle only, nor in the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known.’ Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*, p. 1651.

⁴⁵ Many commentators advised the United States to see it this way. One example: ‘Al Qaeda is the most virulent terrorist virus the world has ever known. Yet ... There is no reason why a combination of sophisticated politics and clever policing cannot make a lot of progress in defeating it.’ Jonathan Power in *International Herald Tribune*, November 27, 2003.

considered as separate wars, not parts of a global war. What we would have then, is a combination of a trans-national terrorist campaign, provoking an internationally co-ordinated police action, and two international wars, one between a US-led coalition and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and one between a US-led coalition and the Baathist regime in Iraq. We would then have to add internal armed conflicts inside Afghanistan and Iraq. Terrorist attacks that can clearly be attributed to al Qaeda, and police actions targeting the leaders and agents of al Qaeda, should then be treated as events within a trans-national confrontation between a terrorist network and agents of the international state system, not as 'war'. Clashes between the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, the post-Taliban Afghan coalition government led by Hameed Karzai, and the international coalition forces in Afghanistan, would then be seen as parts of either the war between the US-led coalition and the Taliban regime, or as a continuation of a long sequence of internal armed conflicts in Afghanistan. The same would apply to Iraq.

This vocabulary would probably have dominated the international media if it had not been for the fact that the Bush administration saw it differently. However, since the Bush administration chose to consistently view the conflict as a general 'war on terror', frequently compare it to World War II, subsume the 'campaigns' in Afghanistan and Iraq within this larger war, give the US military a leading role not only in these campaigns, but also in hunting down bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, and even in November 2003 create a combined commando unit to hunt for both these men and their closest collaborators,⁴⁶ then it again seems difficult to avoid awarding war status to the al Qaeda-US conflict. On the other hand, this has the worrisome consequence that almost any armed action the US might launch against any so-called 'outlaw' or 'rogue' state while the 'war on terror' is on, could be portrayed and legitimized as a campaign within this larger war.

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It is indeed difficult to categorise the al Qaeda-US conflict, but this is not an unimportant semantic exercise. It has big political as well as scholarly consequences since it will inform the kind of questions we ask when conducting our research. The way historians are going to see the clash between al Qaeda and the US in the decade from the first attempt to tear down the

⁴⁶ *International Herald Tribune* November 8-9, 2003, p. 5.

twin towers in 1993 to the battle for Iraq in 2003 will no doubt depend on future events. If al Qaeda survives as a fighting force, or if other similarly trans-national networks emerge to take its place, and they are again able to launch large-scale attacks on American targets, then this will reinforce the concept of the 'war on terror', perhaps even elevate the wars between states and trans-national insurgent groups to a status as paradigmatic '21st century wars'.⁴⁷ If, on the other hand, the al Qaeda leaders are caught or killed, or are only able to mount relatively small-scale attacks of the kind that were carried out in the first two years after 9/11, then the rhetoric of a global war on terror is likely to run out of steam. We could then see more of a general appreciation of the fact that the beginning of the 21st century was characterized by *peace among all major powers*, cooperation among them in repressing terrorist groups, and also cooperation through the efforts of the United Nations and various regional organisations, in dissuading armed groups and state armies in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, the D.R. Congo, Sri Lanka and Colombia from engaging in civil warfare.

[slide 7]

If we are forced to see the al Qaeda–US conflict as a war, then what kind of war would it be? Is it a new kind of war, linked to the process of globalisation? It may seem so since it does not fit into our two normal categories: international and internal (civil) war. It is neither a war between states nor a war within a particular nation. Instead it is a conflict between a trans-national group without access to state power and the dominant powers of the global state system. The latter could perhaps be seen as representing the global state system as such. In its basically asymmetric structure, the conflict resembles an insurgency or civil war, but does not take place within any particular nation, and is not primarily about controlling any particular state. What bin Laden is really after, some would say, is to topple the Saudi kingdom and seize power in the 'land of the two holy places', but this is only a small part of his objective. The goal of al Qaeda is to rid the whole Muslim world of infidels, destroy Israel, and re-establish the Caliphate. As already mentioned, bin Laden praised Pakistan in 1998 for having developed Islam's first nuclear weapon. Bin Laden's movement represents a radical global challenge to the influence of Christian powers in the oil-producing Middle East, as well as other parts of the Muslim world, and to the whole US-dominated international economic, political and cultural system.

⁴⁷ Herfried Münkler. *Die Neuen Kriege*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002. (French translation as *Les*

The present author has previously suggested that the al Qaeda–US conflict might be considered the world’s first ‘global civil war’.⁴⁸ The conflict would then be an expression of an ongoing globalisation not only in the economic and cultural spheres, but also in the military field. In response to technological change, the increasing porousness of borders, and the formation of a global state and civil society, asymmetric warfare increasingly transcends the nation as a military theatre. ‘Global civil war’ is, however, a problematic term since the use of the term ‘civil’ presupposes the existence of a global society, and since such an assumption could easily be utilised by the United States to legitimate its global hegemony. ‘Trans-national war’ is perhaps a better term, although it may be difficult for those of us who are used to distinguish between states and non-state actors, to conceive of the USA, which is a state, as acting on the same arena as a trans-national actor. This conceptual difficulty needs to be overcome. The globalisation process does not only consist in transferring power from states to non-state trans-national actors, but also in transforming the role of states themselves, ‘globalizing states’.⁴⁹ Governments find it increasingly difficult to separate internal from external policies, and focus their ‘foreign’ policies on relations with other states. In order to promote their national interests in the global market place, governments increasingly interact with non-state actors worldwide. This is certainly the case in the economic and cultural fields, and the confrontation with trans-national terrorist networks has boosted this tendency also in the military sector. Let me therefore end by suggesting to adopt, at least on a trial basis, the term ‘trans-national war’ in our studies of armed conflict, as a separate category in addition to ‘international’ and ‘internal’ wars.⁵⁰

guerres Nouvelles. Paris: Alvik, 2003.)

⁴⁸ Stein Tønnesson.

⁴⁹ Stein Tønnesson. ‘Globalising national states.’ *Nations and Nationalism*, forthcoming. See also Philip Bobbitt. *The Shield of Achilles, War, Peace and the Course of History*. London: Allen Lane, 2002. Bobbitt claims that states have recently been undergoing a transformation from nation states to market states.

⁵⁰ The Uppsala database has two other categories as well: ‘extra-systemic wars’ for the wars of national liberation in the European colonial empires up to 1975, and ‘internationalised civil wars’ for wars that are not confined to one particular nation, but involve the armies also of neighbouring states or expeditionary forces of intervention. Neither of these categories seems to fit the al Qaeda–US conflict, although it might be possible to reintroduce the term ‘extra-systemic’ for wars that tend to challenge the existing state system.