

9/11 – Five Years Later The Age of Rage

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International surveys offer fascinating reading. They bring us as close as one can get to gauging the mood of the world's citizenry. What are the main strands in the mood of today's world citizen? He feels lost and ill at ease in the complex world that surrounds him. And, secondly, he resents the state of the world as fundamentally lopsided. Global uneasiness leads to polarisation. Global inequity stimulates radicalisation. These are the two keys in understanding why, five years after 9/11, terror attacks in the name of jihad still drag on.

The international terror network al-Qaeda once was, no longer exists. It has been degraded to a point that no mastermind or command structure now directs the worldwide terrorist activity. Today's jihadi terrorism is a cloak patched from different sources of local discontent. It has become a grassroots movement, driven from underneath, no longer directed from above. Local circumstances are now the primary booster of terrorism and they differ significantly from Europe to the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Thailand.

But local circumstances do not explain it all. Something has to stitch them together into the global terrorist phenomenon the world is facing since 9/11. Some still point to a core al-Qaeda, performing this task. This is too easy an explanation. The 'mood' of world public opinion is the inexhaustible source of today's terrorism, enabling a global momentum that encompasses all local root causes.

In a recent New York Times/CBS News poll, just 29 percent of Americans said the country was headed in the right direction (*International Herald Tribune*, 4 September 2006). National gloom is not a exclusive American mood however. If there is one feeling today that unites people on all continents, it is their shared uneasiness about the state of affairs, both in their own countries and in the rest of the world. That was one of the findings of an international Pew survey in 2002. The more than 38,000 people interviewed were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the way things were going in their countries. Solid majorities in nearly every country in every region surveyed said they were unhappy with the state of their nation. Their assessment of the state of the world was even more negative.

The reason for so much global uneasiness is the rapid pace of change, both in world politics and in our daily life. To many, the world is definitely not flat, but rather caught up in a white water rafting race. Today's world is more than usually in transition. When faced with chaos, men grope, just like castaways, for new certainties to hold on to: New Age, cults, spirituality, nationalism and – often – religion. All too often these have proved to be dangerous life buoys, steering people towards a mental wall dividing the world in a protective 'Us' and a threatening 'Them', as Tariq Ramadan recently wrote, leaving no middle ground, no room for nuances or tolerance. Global uneasiness is the common source on which the populist right in Europe as well as the religious fundamentalism in the rest of the world feed. They have the same recipe on offer indeed: nostalgia for times gone, simple certainties, distinct scapegoats and simple solutions. They use the same rhetoric: Us-vs.-Them, offering an apparent order in a chaotic world. Political forces that capitalize on this, stand to score. But as a result, societies discover new forms of polarization, between newcomers and native citizens, between Muslims and non-Muslims. World politics discovered new clashes, between civilizations, between rising and old powers, between have-more's and have-less's.

This global malaise the 2002 Pew survey highlighted has since become intertwined with another mood in world opinion. During his tenure as World Bank chief James Wolfensohn repeatedly warned that global inequity was to become the major theme of the 21st century. In different international surveys, including one commissioned by the German Bertelsmann Stiftung in June 2006, a pervasive sense of global inequity seems to permeate world opinion indeed. Poverty comes off second most important global challenge and poverty reduction is considered the prime objective world powers should pursue.

While respondents do not view the United Nations as a world power now, many clearly hope for a more prominent role in the future. In all continents respondents express the hope that their government will distance itself from the United States. This so-called anti-Americanism is no rejection of the values of democracy and freedom America stands for. It would be rather the opposite. To quote the legendary U.S. Senator William Fulbright, thirty years ago: people resent the arrogance of power. This mood helps to explain why a leftwing momentum is sweeping Latin America. This same rejection of power inequity has propelled Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon to the stature of the new Nasser of an Arab-Islamic national movement – or, for that matter, Osama bin Laden as the new icon of the worldwide t-shirt market. When people resent inequity, they are prone to radicalisation.

Global uneasiness and global inequity, together with their corollaries polarisation and radicalisation, constitute the rage of our era. In this, our era resembles the late 19th century, when the same global mood brought about a similar wave of terrorism. Jihadism has become the religion of resistance – an ideological role once played by Marxist Utopia. Then and now, for each and every militant arrested, a new one steps forward. For each attack foiled, a new one is being planned, giving the feeling of a never-ending threat. But neither Islam nor Evil is the driving force. The state of the world we're living in, is.

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