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The twin legacies of 9/11

By Mahan Abedin
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As the United States and its allies mourn the attacks of 10 years ago, it is worth placing those events and their consequences into a cohesive intellectual and geopolitical perspective.

September 11, 2001, constituted the most audacious and deadly terrorist attacks in modern times. But what amplified the impact of what happened at the twin towers and the Pentagon - and afforded the attacks an undeserved geopolitical meaning and legacy - was their precise timing.

The atrocities came at a moment of profound intellectual confusion about the development of world affairs, indeed the very nature of international relations at the dawn of the new century.

The 1990s had seen a dramatic rise in "globalization" theory, with universities across the Western world pontificating on the perceived decline of the nation-state and the scramble by a wide range of non-state actors, from multi-national corporations to trans-national terrorist groups, to fill the vacuum.

At face value, al-Qaeda's dramatic assault on America appeared to lend credence to these theories, for even the most hard-headed international relations realist couldn't fail to be stunned by the symbolism of a small idiosyncratic terrorist organization humbling history's mightiest power. But beyond its immediate impact, the nature and intensity of the American and broader allied response put paid to overly liberal theories of globalization and once again thrust the major nation-states to the epicenter of international relations.

"9/11" as it has come to be known is likely to have two enduring legacies, both of which will shape major features of international politics in the first half of the 21st century. First is the determined effort by the United States to accumulate as much hegemony as possible with a view to managing America's inevitable decline in the second half of the century by providing a soft landing. Second is the likely evolution of political Islam as a stable factor in regional politics.

A Strategic catharsis

Inevitably, the 9/11 terrorist attacks have been subject to intense and prolonged political point scoring by those in favor and opposed to a decisive American presence on the world stage. Equally inevitably it spurred a flurry of conspiracy theories, most of which centered on the premise that the US government had a secret hand in the attacks with a view to reaping the expected strategic dividends.

While the official narrative on the 9/11 attacks, embodied by the 9/11 commission report, leaves a lot to be desired and is far from a conclusive investigation into all aspects of those events, nonetheless it is probably the closest to the truth.

The so-called jihadis of al-Qaeda who planned and executed the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and at the Pentagon in Washington DC were probably acting on their own political and strategic volition. But there has been much speculation, misreporting and poor analysis on their origins, the nature of their ideology and their precise relationship with more mainstream political movements in the Arab world.

The confusion has been compounded by the astronomical growth of a "terrorism studies" industry in America, and to a lesser extent in western Europe, an industry which purports to produce independent research, but is in reality beholden to either official American policy or to a myriad of private American political and ideological interests, much of which is unabashedly chauvinistic and in some cases Islamophobic.

The determined effort by some private political-intellectual outfits in the US (with deep tentacles inside the government as well as the major corporations) to directly link the terrorist attacks to political Islam and by extension to Islam itself is not only short-sighted and rides roughshod over a broad spectrum of political, historical and theological issues, but is at heart profoundly dishonest and a potent example of intellectual malice.

This is not to fully disassociate the attacks from the ideological, political and strategic perspective of more mainstream Islamists and more specifically the historical experience of Arab Islamists, embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood and its decades-long quest to re-make the entire political and social infrastructure of the Arab world in its own idiosyncratic Islamist vision.

In view of the religious nature of al-Qaeda's ideology and more importantly the movement's framing of its political and strategic goals in religious terms, there are bound to be indirect connections and cross-pollination of ideas and visions with mainstream Islamists. Fully understanding these connections requires forensic research and intellectual honesty of the highest

standard.

The most immediate motivating factor for the attacks was the maturation of a set of deep-seated real or perceived grievances against American policies in the Arab and wider Muslim world. The United States' decades-long support for authoritarian Arab regimes, justified by the pursuit of energy security, rankled deeply with the Arab street, a profound grievance that was eagerly exploited by al-Qaeda, which presents itself as the vanguard of Arab and Muslim public opinion.

The United States' acquiescence of (and in some cases direct support for) Israel's unsettling role in the Middle East, was equally resented and again one which was effortlessly exploited by those who purport to be the cutting edge of the Muslim world's conscience.

Deeper motivating factors reside in the Arab jihadis' direct experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the genuine belief (with accompanying hubris) that their involvement in the so-called Afghan Jihad was the decisive factor in forcing a Soviet retreat from Afghanistan in 1989, and further still precipitating the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union a little over two years later. Some of the al-Qaeda leaders expected that the movement could mete out a similar fate to the more formidable United States.

This stunning delusion goes a long way to explain that while al-Qaeda and its allies may be adept at propaganda and the construction of elaborate grievance-laden narratives, they are incapable of producing genuine and elaborate strategic thought.

In so far as al-Qaeda's terrorism connected with the broader intellectual and ideological streams of the mainstream Arab Islamists, it was the opportunistic exploitation of the Muslim Brotherhood's inability to even minimally deliver on its political objectives. On this point al-Qaeda was responding to the frustration of radical elements on the very margins of the Muslim Brotherhood and associated groups, who while openly disavowing violence nonetheless secretly welcomed the prospect of dealing a body blow to the perceived source of their failures.

The sum of these factors amounted to a tremendous level of stress and expectation that directly and indirectly guided the conception and planning of the attacks, the eventual execution of which was designed to achieve a form of strategic catharsis, and to escalate the conflict with the United States to a new level.

The immediate effect of America's vengeful response played to al-Qaeda's agenda, a knee-jerk response that was reinforced by ideologically-driven intellectual support embodied foremost by the declaration of a "war on terror", a stunningly unimaginative and inappropriate rhetorical counter-attack representative of the more superficial aspects of American political culture.

But it is a mistake to imagine that America's mid to long-term response on the ground, specifically deeper military involvement in the Middle East and South Asia as well as a gradual encroachment into Central Asia (long viewed as Russia's back yard), is directly influenced by the experience of 9/11 and the pursuit of the so-called war on terror, later re-branded by Pentagon strategists as the "long war".

Despite the undoubted blow to national prestige, the 9/11 attacks have worked to America's interests by focusing some of America's best minds across a wide range of professional activities, from the military to academia, on the prospect of national decline and the best ways to delay that eventuality and then to manage it effectively as and when it becomes reality. The policies that the US is currently pursuing in Eurasia, regardless of the declared strategic and political objectives, are geared towards creating an intellectual and strategic environment conducive to the realization of these aims.

The transformation of political Islam

The fact that Muslims were the driving force of the 9/11 attacks inevitably focussed minds on the role of Islam, in particular political Islam, in the contemporary world. Not all the publicity, and the resulting mass interest, has been negative, as evidenced by a dramatic spike in conversions to the Islamic faith across the globe, including the Judeo-Christian realm of Europe, Australia and North America.

Many pundits in the West were quick to point an accusing finger at political Islam, with the more myopic and small-minded among them even attempting to implicate a vastly heterogeneous and diverse phenomenon as Islam in the dark arts of terrorism and political skullduggery.

To be sure, Islam as a world religion is no more and no less violent than any other comparable religion or ideology. By the same token, the vast majority of political actors in the Arab and Muslim world who are either self-described or described by others as "Islamists" have publicly disavowed political violence.

Nevertheless, the ideological proximity between the Jihadis and mainstream Islamists give rise to legitimate (if not exaggerated) doubts about the political vision and more specifically the potential behavior of these political actors should they ever assume positions of power in their respective countries.

It was precisely these fears which the authoritarian Arab regimes and Israel sought to exploit in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in a forlorn attempt to remove the Islamists from the political map once and for all. These security-driven efforts failed to make significant inroads for they did not take sufficient stock of the ideological resilience and social connectivity of the Islamic movements in the Middle East and North Africa.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Islamists recognized the dangers on the horizon but they also identified a wide range of opportunities, chief among them the clear recognition that Islam, and the political actors who identify most closely with it, had been propelled to the top of the global political and media agenda as a result of the terrorist attacks.

The more astute in the Islamists' ranks actively joined the Western counter-terrorism debate, not in an effort to subvert it, but to modify their more unpleasant and questionable conceptual and intellectual frameworks.

Insofar as political and media attention is concerned, 9/11 has worked to the advantage of Islamists not just in the Arab countries but the world over. But it is in the Arab world, the heartland of Islam, where political Islam can decisively show whether it has the political foresight and versatility to deliver on its promises of authentic reform and progress.

If 9/11 created favorable media and propaganda conditions for the Islamist narrative, then the Arab Spring has given rise to tentatively favorable political and socio-economic conditions for the implementation of the Islamist agenda. Ultimately, the extent of success or failure will not be judged by the reaction of states like Egypt to the prospect of Islamists in government, but the outcome of the internal ideological struggles in the Islamic movement.

In so far as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is concerned, the cutting edge of the ideological struggles pits the younger generation of reformers and progressive thinkers who aspire to deep socio-economic reforms against an aging generation of conservative Islamists whose vision doesn't extend beyond a perfunctory implementation of the Islamic *sharia*.

To achieve real success in the political realm, Arab Islamists will have to undergo a transformation, not just in terms of vision but also of the day to day tactics required to incrementally implement that vision.

The two enduring legacies of 9/11 outlined here, namely the struggle by the US to accumulate more and more national power in the first half of the 21st century and the birth pangs of a new generation of political Islamists in the Arab world, are likely to come into close contact sooner or later. Whether they collide or not will depend in part on the extent to which Islamists can transform into a stable factor in regional politics by becoming deeply entrenched in national governing structures.

As long as energy security is not directly threatened, the United States can live with empowered Arab Islamists, just as it has done with the Islamic Republic of Iran for the past three decades. A more lasting and stable understanding can only be achieved if the US modifies its regional policies, in particular its apparently unqualified and unconditional support for Israel.

While it is unrealistic, for the foreseeable future at least, to expect the US to abandon Israel to its fate, a more conditional American support for the Jewish state will go a long way to transforming the underlying geopolitical conditions of the region, with potentially beneficial results for long-term American interests in the Middle East and North Africa.