

INTRODUCTION
THE WAR ON TERRORISM: BETWEEN
WORLD WAR IV AND OPTICAL ILLUSION

On the night of September 11, 2001, with American public opinion whipped up to a frenzy, the United States government had *carte blanche*. It was determined to punish the guilty and prevent a repeat of what was the first attack on home soil since 1812: and people were prepared to pay the price, whatever the human and financial cost. The rest of the world was either supportive or silent, prepared either to join a coalition led by America or to bow to the anger of the superpower which had been wounded and offended, but was at the pinnacle of its power.

Six years on, the failure is patent: none of America's objectives has been achieved. Bin Laden is still alive in 2007, and so is the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. Even their putative deaths would not put an end to the movements they

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control. Terrorist actions have not ceased, and the situation throughout the entire Muslim world has deteriorated. Far worse, it is Washington's bitterest enemy, Iran, that has gained the most from this new situation which is likely to lead to further confrontations. Presented as the precondition for the eradication of the causes of terrorism, the military intervention in Iraq has proved to be a fiasco, which seems to play into the hands of America's designated enemies, i.e. Iran and Al-Qaeda. The American army's intervention capability is now stretched to the limit, while divisions and new alliances are proliferating in the Muslim world. The Taliban are back in Afghanistan, while in Lebanon, Hezbollah makes no secret of its determination to make or break any government in Beirut. The Islamist militia in Somalia could only be defeated by an Ethiopian military intervention, which is tantamount to making the Islamists the defenders of the nation and thus paving the way for their return to the political arena. Those in power in Baghdad are Shia and sympathetic to Iran. Hamas is the dominant political force among the Palestinians. Iran is pursuing a nuclear programme which at best would only be slowed down by an aerial bombardment whose consequences would be burdensome for the United States to manage. And finally, America no longer appears to be the hyperpower in

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a unipolar world, but a power tied up in knots, incapable of policing the world. It must forge new compromises with its allies and with rivals whose credibility is growing steadily—China, and even Russia.

How did it come to this? It is neither the resurgence of the Taliban, nor Al-Qaeda's pugnacity, nor the determination of the Iranians which put the Americans in such a hopeless situation. This failure comes from Washington. The Bush administration's strategy was based on two major errors: firstly, conceiving of the retaliation for 9/11 as a "global war on terrorism", and secondly, making the military intervention in Iraq the linchpin of this new strategy. These two decisions are the result of an ideological vision of international relations developed within the neoconservative group that also includes the more traditional Republicans like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney.¹

But while it is fitting to blame the arrogance and incompetence of the Bush administration, the ideas that drove the American neoconservatives are still part of the current climate, muddying the traditional left/right divide. In effect the neoconservatives claim they have a duty to carry out

1 As I pointed out in *Les Illusions du 11 septembre* (Seuil, 2002), the neo-conservatives should not be confused with their allies on the Christian right.

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a humanitarian intervention. They broke, albeit temporarily, with the old Western policy of support for third-world authoritarian regimes with nepotistic practices, assumed to be pro-Western and guaranteeing enforced secularisation. They spoke of democratisation and freedom. They did not demonise the Islamist movements—at least not at first. They praised civil societies and reform. The neoconservatives pushed to extremes the idea that Western values are universal and must be promoted, through direct intervention if need be; in this sense, they are closer to a left-wing progressivism that rejects cultural relativism of any kind than to a colonialism anxious above all to maintain the prevailing order.

Contrary to expectations, the global controversy over the American intervention in Iraq did not set the European pragmatic realists against the dogmatic American ideologists. In actual fact, everywhere in the world the debate was based on great ideas, prejudices and ideological references. In France, political figures from the left, such as Bernard Kouchner, found themselves in the same camp as the American neoconservatives with a policy that pushes the concept of the “duty to intervene” to its logical conclusion. The term was coined twenty years earlier in condemnation of the major powers’ indifference to the fate

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of peoples whose human rights were being trampled on. The third-worldist, anti-American left, on the other hand, found itself on the defensive, forced to deny there was any validity in the neoconservative line which they claimed spoke of freedom solely to guarantee US oil interests: this left has ended up supporting highly undemocratic movements (from Cuba to the Taliban and even Saddam Hussein) claiming that they represent sovereignty and the fight against imperialism. The third-worldist left stresses the fact that American policy is essentially neoliberal, promoting the privatisation and the globalisation of the economy, but this same left is unable to come up with an alternative other than supporting profoundly authoritarian movements. Champions of sovereignty of all hues (including President Chirac) claimed the humanitarian intervention in Iraq conflicted with international law, in defence not of democracy but of national interest, and more generally, the idea that the world depends on there being a balance of power and not on a utopian concept of international justice and law. Lastly, left and right alike are both deeply divided over their attitude to Islamism. The identity- focused Christian right, just like a left that is more secular than libertarian and more Republican than Democrat, willingly supported

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the concept of fighting against the Islamic threat.² The words “crusade” and “jihad” are brandished, while there is fresh talk of the “free world” confronting the “forces of evil”. Inevitably, examination of the repercussions of 9/11 and the subsequent debate on the line to take on terrorism raise the question of Islam. Social issues are more closely bound up with strategic debate than ever, which probably explains the popularity of “clash of civilisations” theories as well as references to World War IV and “Islamofascism”. But this globalisation of the threat makes any rational strategy impossible and paves the way for a hollow, bombastic rhetoric, which above all serves Western societies’ internal debates. The problem of immigration and Islam in the West is externalised by projecting it onto the Middle East, which obeys a different logic.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to this debate: is it the main cause of the Middle East crises and of Islamic radicalisation, or is it just one conflict among many? Should the priority for diplomatic action be to resolve this conflict, or will it gradually die down as the other tensions are defused? Or does it have a logic of its own that separates it from the other issues, like the tensions between the

2 On the debate in France, see Olivier Roy, *Secularism confronts Islam*, Columbia University Press, 2007.

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Basques and the Spanish? Whatever the answer, it is clear that the mere reference to this conflict makes it possible to articulate more general questions on the Middle East: for example, the question of the relationship between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism and its implications for the way the debate progresses.³ The Middle East becomes the stage for the European debate on “multi-culturalism” where European anxieties are reflected.

Analysis of the evolution of the various Middle East crises cannot be divorced from a discussion of the major concepts of society being bandied about today, from Islamism and terrorism to democracy, civil society, multiculturalism, etc. The aim of this book is to relocate the conflicts of the Middle East in their own context, while attempting to understand how they are related to the major issues facing Western societies. In short it is a matter of demolishing the idea that there is a “geostrategy of Islam” that would explain all the present conflicts, from Palestine to Bin Laden to the riots in the Paris suburbs.

Far from bearing out the prevailing theory that there is a “clash of civilisations” and a confrontation between the Muslim world and the West, the conflicts and the recompo-

3 See Pascal Boniface, *Est-il permis de critiquer Israël ?*, Robert Laffont, 2003.

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sitions affect primarily the Muslim world itself and operate along fault lines that have very little to do with ideology: in contrast to the old refusal front that unites Islamism and Arab nationalism against Israel and the West, there is a growing rift between Shia and Sunni Muslims which puts the conservative Arab regimes in the same camp as Israel and could ultimately redraw the map of the Middle East.

The military intervention in Iraq has indeed resulted in a profound geostrategic transformation of the region, but along lines that go beyond the ambitions of the American decision-makers. Ordinarily, any dominant power tries to maintain the status quo, whereas the Americans destroyed it and overturned the strategic balances of the Middle East. The unipolar world that had been anticipated after the fall of the USSR did not last long: for around a decade, the Americans (including under Clinton) were able to intervene unilaterally, without worrying about their actions being endorsed by Security Council resolutions, and build temporary, bespoke coalitions involving only their allies. And then, in four years, the major power proved incapable not only of reshaping the Middle East, but also of managing local conflicts or even of making their adversaries knuckle under by simply threatening to use force. American credibility is damaged. Having armed forces that no country

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can hope to defeat on the battlefield is no use. The asymmetric war of the weak against the strong, illustrated by the roadside bombs in Iraq and which cause the majority of American losses, has been transplanted into the strategic domain. One can speak of an “asymmetric strategy”, according to which weak states (Syria, Pakistan, North Korea, Iran) put America in a no-win situation by drawing it into an impasse or confronting it with impossible choices. The most spectacular of these is unquestionably the blackmail threat of their own obliteration: nobody wants to topple President Assad in Syria or General Musharraf in Pakistan, whereas it is a known fact that these two countries offer sanctuary or support to terrorist groups and radical movements, simply because their destruction would be worse than their current nuisance capability. “Attack me if you dare” not because I’ll defeat you, but because destroying me will make things worse for you.

The United States finds itself thus paralysed just as China and Russia are seeking to assert themselves as major powers once more, using traditional instruments of domination (control of territories, energy sources and transport), which are perhaps outdated now, but which reflect a world that is once again multipolar.

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Meanwhile, the Al-Qaeda terrorists are deploying in a space that is more deterritorialised and globalised than ever, thus eluding all the traditional instruments of power which have become ineffective.