Reinhard Möller (Ed.)

Islamism and Terroristic Violence

Ergon

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Introduction

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The end of the East-West conflict, the confrontation between two secular ideologies, marked the political conclusion of a global political era. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the USA was the only remaining superpower, and not just a military one. The liberal-democratic model of the West had proved to be stronger than the communist system. It seemed as if the "superior" Western model could become the model of a free, peaceful and democratic world in the long term. It also seemed as if the "New World Order" proclaimed by American President George Bush in 1991 would be based predominantly on co-operation between the states belonging to the United Nations, i.e. on a multilateral basis. International law, rather than national power politics, would determine international relations in the future. Subsequently, there were also interventions carried out jointly by some states under a UN mandate, as, for example, in the Second Gulf War, through which the anti-Iraq alliance liberated Kuwait, or the action in Somalia at the end of 1992, which was essentially humanitarian in nature.

However, the high hopes for long-term co-operative international relations were soon disappointed. The "international community" and the UN proved to be helpless in more than a few cases when it came to preventing or resolving conflicts of various kinds. Corresponding examples: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda or Sierra Leone. In 1999, NATO then intervened militarily in Kosovo under US leadership without a UN Security Council mandate.

From an economic point of view, globalisation emanating from the West produced not only winners but also many losers, including entire countries, regions and industries. The exaggerated expectations of general prosperity remained unfulfilled in many countries. The division of the world into rich and poor continued to grow. Uncertainty and scepticism also spread in Western countries. Added to this were the intensifying ethnic conflicts, for example in the Balkans, the accelerated growth of the world's population, rapid urbanisation and large-scale refugee flows.

In these crisis-ridden times, it was no surprise that religions could once again become the driving force behind opposition and protest movements, as, after all, "violence was a constant companion of most religions"[1]. Religiously motivated or disguised terrorist violence, often based on fundamentalist currents, was already evident in almost all world religions in the 1980s. And since the 1990s, politicised Islam in particular has taken on a strikingly violent form. This Islamist variant of terrorism was (and is) based on a political ideology whose

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[1] Peter Waldmann: *Provokation der Macht*, Munich 1998, p. 98.

most important goal is to enforce religiously based social systems, conceived as God-ordained and therefore best orders.

Acts of violence in the "name of God" are carried out by Islamic terrorists with extraordinary determination and radicalism. As privileged "martyrs" (see Ḥamās) in the longed-for paradise, they use their lives as weapons and accept the death of countless innocent victims in the process.

Islamist radicals are largely driven by beliefs aimed at restoring the no longer existing "true" Islamic order, a system of divine rule with strict application of the sharīʿa. In order to achieve this goal, they rely on jihād as a "holy war", which they see as a neglected religious duty. However, it should be emphasised that terrorists are only a minority within the broad spectrum of Islamism.

The Iranian revolutionary leader Āyatullāh Ḫumainī rejected the Shiite doctrine according to which no just rule could be established in Iran during the absence of the twelfth Imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdī, who was mysteriously raptured in 874. He therefore opposed this doctrine and declared that it was the duty of every devout Muslim to contribute to the creation of an Islamic state in Iran – and to use all available means to this end.

In the 1980s, Islamist groups such as the Egyptian Jihād group responsible for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar as-Sādāt attempted to overthrow infidel regimes in the Middle East through terrorist violence or to create conditions for the establishment of genuine Islamic states.

As already mentioned, Islamist terror has increased significantly since the 1990s. In February 1993, for example, Sunni extremists carried out an explosive attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, killing six people and injuring at least 300. The far more devastating attacks on the trade centre were to take place eight years later, on 11 September 2001. Around 3,000 victims were killed.

This tragedy was followed by a long series of further acts of violence – in Djerba, Riyadh, Bali, Casablanca, Baghdad and Istanbul. In the meantime, terror had become transnational, even global. Its "godfather" was none other than the Saudi millionaire heir Usāma bin Lādin with his al-Qāʿida ("the base"), founded in Afghanistan in 1988. The organisation expanded in 1998 to become the "International Combat Front against Jews and Crusaders", which served as an umbrella organisation for jihadists worldwide. This global network had national and regional "offshoots" as well as local cells with the so-called non-aligned mujahideen, which at times operated completely independently for the jihād. The network is still largely intact.

The main enemies of the Islamist terrorists were and are the USA ("source of all depravity in the world") and Israel:

– America because of its military dominance in the Middle East and its support of Israel,

– Israel ("outpost of Western imperialism in the region") because of its brutal occupation policy in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

According to its 1988 charter, the Palestinian Hamas still sees "holy war" against Israel and the annihilation of the Jews as the only means of resolving the Palestinian conflict. (The most recent attack on southern Israel on 7 October 2023, with its horrific massacres, fully confirms Hamas' intentions).

The unprecedented terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, which we know for certain were the work of al-Qāʿida, were tantamount to a declaration of war on the United States. In response, President George W. Bush forged a broad alliance against terror, which included not only friendly nations. For the first time in its history, NATO then declared a state of alliance, and the UN emphasised America's right to self-defence. As the Taliban were known not to want to hand over the ringleaders of 11 September, fighting began in Afghanistan on 7 October 2001 under the leadership of America and Great Britain. Within a few weeks, they ended with the collapse of Taliban rule and the partial destruction of the al-Qāʿida infrastructure. A transitional government under Ḥāmid Karzai was established in Afghanistan, and ISAF troops were responsible for their protection. However, the security situation improved only slightly thereafter because al-Qāʿida and Taliban fighters continued to put up resistance, particularly in the southern provinces.

In later years, it became clear that America had turned away from the multilateral course it had temporarily adopted and was pursuing a predominantly military "world order policy" without respecting the principles of international law. According to the doctrine of American neoconservatives, multilateral consensus-building would lead to an unacceptable risk in political decision-making.[2] In the face of jihadist-terrorist threats, "pre-emption", that is preventive action, was therefore what mattered. America thus ultimately claimed the right to intervene at any point on earth where there was a threat and, if deemed necessary, to enforce regime change.

The second phase of the global war on terror emerged in George W. Bush's State of the Union address on 2 January 2002. The fight was now to be extended to Iraq, which, alongside Iran and North Korea, epitomises the "axis of evil" par excellence. In the course of the debate on this mission, the Europeans were already divided into two camps: those countries that supported the American course, such as Great Britain, Italy and Spain, and those that opposed it, such as Germany and France.

The invasion of Iraq, led mainly by American and British troops, began on 20 March 2003, and the regime of the dictator Ṣaddām Ḥusain collapsed – like that of the Taliban – after a few weeks without strong resistance. The armed conflict was essentially justified with the following arguments:

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2   Cf. Harald Müller: *Amerika schlägt zurück*, Frankfurt, 2003, p. 117 ff.

– Ṣaddām Ḥusain was an accomplice to the 11 September attacks in America
   and therefore had to be fought as part of the war on terror. However, there was
   no evidence for this!

– Iraq threatened the security of the USA and the international community
   with weapons of mass destruction. However, no such weapons have ever been
   found.

– Iraq must be liberated from Ṣaddām Ḥusain's despotic regime and trans-
   formed into a stable and peaceful democracy that could serve as a model for
   the entire Middle East.

The general situation in Iraq after the death of the despot, particularly in the
"Sunni triangle" of Tigru–Baghdad–Fallujah, was characterised by the following
factors: uprisings by Sunnis formerly loyal to the regime, radical Islamic Shiites
of the separatist army of Mahdī, i.e. the fanatical cleric Muqtadā aṣ-Ṣadr, and
furthermore attacks by al-Qāʿida fighters who infiltrated the country to prevent
Western reforms.

Jordanian-born Abū Muṣʿab az-Zarqāwī, a close confidant of bin Lādin, is said
to have been al-Qāʿida's most important liaison to Iraq at the time. The first free
elections in Iraq were then scheduled for early 2005. However, the critical secu-
rity situation raised doubts as to whether the democratisation of the country,
which should take place after the elections, could be achieved.

Most Arab states considered the policy pursued by USA in the Near and Mid-
dle East to be hypocritical and untrustworthy. They accused the Americans of
being more interested in oil and their own supremacy than in the well-being
of the peoples in the region. The West should not impose or force its ideas of
democracy, the rule of law and a market economy on the Islamic world. Instead,
it should support countries willing to reform and finally realise that complex
social systems cannot be changed at the touch of a button. According to this
view, what is needed on both sides is understanding and a willingness to engage
in dialogue, tolerance and mutual appreciation.

The articles in this anthology were written in 2004 and therefore reflect the state
of affairs at that time. They have deliberately not been updated, as the descrip-
tions of religious and cultural-historical backgrounds and global political con-
texts they contain are still valid and, from today's perspective, offer an instructive
insight not only into the historical situation but also into its professional evalu-
ation at the time.

Islam and the West

Albrecht Metzger

"Where does the hatred come from?" This question has been haunting the world ever since eighteen young men from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates hijacked four passenger planes on 11 September 2001 and flew them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. The victims were mainly civilians, very few of whom had probably ever had anything to do with the Middle East, let alone had any control over its destiny. This makes the question all the more urgent: Where does the hatred come from? How can anyone seriously believe that they are dying in the fight for law and justice when they are killing thousands of innocent people who live far away from their homeland?

It is tempting to blame Islam for this monstrous crime. After all, Muḥammad Atta and his accomplices saw themselves as good Muslims fulfilling their religious duty. They were members of the terrorist network al-Qāʿida, which justifies its actions by claiming that Islam is fighting against "Jews and crusaders", who have conquered, desecrated and desecrated its lands, and that in this situation it is a commandment from God for every Muslim to strike down these enemies, whether civilians or not, at any time and in any place in the world. Why not simply believe the attackers? They must know best what spurred them on to commit their crimes. Bad cards for Islam, then, because quite a few journalists, politicians and even some experts did just that – they took the attackers at their word and put Islam in the dock, accused it of incitement to hatred, declared it guilty of murder and sentenced it to a punishment that would only end when Islam had cut its barbaric roots and committed itself to the values of the European Enlightenment.

Statements to this effect can be found above all in the American press, sometimes revealing in a frightening way how thin the blanket of civilisation is in the West too. Anne Coulter, a respected commentator in right-wing circles whose books have been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks, called for an offensive approach to Muslims after 11 September:

> "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."[1]

This was probably not really meant seriously, but it was evidence of a mindset that is prepared to accept a war of religions. In Europe, the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, formerly famous for her interviews, went the furthest out on a limb in this respect. In her book *Anger and Pride*[2], which was very well received

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[1] http://www.townhall.com/columnists/anncoulter/ac20010914.shtml.
[2] *Die Wut und der Stolz*, Munich 2002.

in Germany, she describes Islam as a barbaric religion that can only be fought with barbaric means.

This kind of writing appeals to the emotions and is therefore easy to debunk. It becomes more difficult when related ideas are packaged academically and presented in a language that does not immediately arouse a burning desire for "holy war" in readers. Islamic scholar Bernard Lewis epitomises this approach. Since 11 September, he has become a widely read author, and not only in Germany. Lewis does not want to convert Muslims to Christianity, he even repeatedly expresses his respect for Islam, which once produced a great civilisation. The problem, however, according to Lewis, is that Islam has ossified over the past centuries and has therefore missed out on catching up with the rest of the world. As heirs to a great civilisation, Muslims could not bear to lag behind the West for 200 years and accept one military defeat after another.[3] Muslims would use terror and violence to try to regain their former greatness, but this aggression would only lead to further defeats and increase hatred. Lewis has the solution to this dilemma at hand: The Islamic world should abandon its totalitarian model of society and join the Western liberal one. Lewis attributes the anger of Muslims to an infantile inferiority complex for which the West is not responsible. The historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler takes a similar view. For him it is evident that Islam alone is able to

> "mobilise a core of religious convictions that can be raised to a radical anti-Western fundamentalism against the danger of being overwhelmed by Western modernity. Where is an internal Islamic enlightenment or reformation that finally addresses such problems?"[4]

But is that true? Has Islam really always been so stubbornly opposed to modernisation and secularisation? A look back to the beginning of the Enlightenment reveals a different picture. After Napoleon landed his army in Egypt in 1798, the Islamic world realised its military, technical and economic inferiority compared to Christian Europe. From then on, it endeavoured to catch up. But in the beginning, the conflict with the West was anything but violent. Both the Ottoman Empire, which ruled almost the entire eastern Mediterranean at the time, and Egypt, which had become virtually independent following the withdrawal of French troops, sent students to Europe to acquire the knowledge of Western science. The Muslims continued to believe themselves to be in possession of the true religion, but this did not prevent them from learning from the "infidel" Christians.

It is worth taking a closer look at that period. It shows that the violent confrontation between the Islamic world and the West, which we take for granted today, was by no means pre-programmed.

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[3] See, e.g., *Die Wut der arabischen Welt*, Frankfurt a. M. 2003; and *Der Untergang des Morgenlandes*, Bergisch-Gladbach 2002.
[4] *FAZ*, 19 December 2003.

A fascinating diary report left to posterity by a certain Rifāʿa aṭ-Ṭahtāwī documents how relaxed Egyptians were in their dealings with Europe at the time. Aṭ-Ṭahtāwī was a scholar at Azhar University in Cairo, the oldest university in the Islamic world. It was founded in 936 and is still considered the most important religious institution of Sunni Islam. Aṭ-Ṭahtāwī was one of the first group of students to leave the harbour of Alexandria for France in 1826. The Azhar scholar was to take care of the spiritual well-being of the students, who were immersed in a world that was completely new to them.

But how did the cleric see this world of the infidels? Aṭ-Ṭahtāwī was firm in his faith when he arrived in Paris, and on his return five years later nothing seems to have changed. Nevertheless, his report is characterised neither by arrogance nor by contempt for the French. On the contrary. Even when he encounters behaviour that repels him, his judgement is mild; and overall he is full of praise for the Franks – as he calls the French – whom he recommends to his compatriots as a role model in many things. He particularly emphasises the emancipatory aspects of the European Enlightenment, and that was by no means a matter of course for a religious scholar who had enjoyed a conservative education. The carefree attitude of aṭ-Ṭahtāwī, his naïve view of Europe was not yet affected by colonialism and the collective sense of humiliation that would spread throughout the Islamic world in the coming decades.

At the time, France had an excellent reputation in terms of technological progress and the standard of its science. Aṭ-Ṭahtāwī recognises without envy that Europe is in advance of the Orient. More interesting, however, are his social observations. Some things put him off, others amaze and amuse him, but overall he has the impression that he lives in a society that takes justice very seriously. He almost apologises to his readers for the insight that man-made laws can also produce a just society, that reason can achieve what Muslims actually only trust to the divine law, the sharīʿa. Thus he writes about the French constitution:

> "We will cite this document for the reader, even though much of its content is not to be found either in the Book of God or in the Sunnah of His Prophet – upon him be peace and blessings! – so that he may recognise the way in which their reason decided that justice and equity are fundamental for the prosperity of a country, and how both rulers and subjects were guided by this knowledge, so that their country flourished, their level of education increased, their wealth grew more and more and general contentment began to prevail. For you will not hear one of them complain about an injustice. Justice is the basis of civilisational prosperity."[5]

There was no question of aṭ-Ṭahtāwī rejecting the rule of law and democracy, and since he did not report anything to the contrary, the students travelling with him probably thought similarly. This is worth mentioning because there is a persistent prejudice in the West that Islam and democracy do not go together. But

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[5] Rifaa al-Tahtawi: *Ein Muslim entdeckt Europa: Die Reise eines Ägypters im 19. Jahrhundert nach Paris*, edited by Karl Stowasser, Munich 1989, p. 93.

here we see a Muslim who comes from a conservative religious background and is hearing about popular rule for the first time in his life and yet is not shouting "blasphemy".

In addition to justice, aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī emphasises the "Franks" thirst for knowledge, which spurs them on to ever new achievements and protects them from the lies of the powerful. As he writes:

> "They are also not prisoners of blind faith in authority but always want to get to the bottom of things and find out about them, so that even the common people can read and write and, like others, deal with deep questions [...]. Thus the broad masses of this city, unlike the rabble in most barbarian countries, are by no means like the dear cattle."[6]

The few passages in his diary in which aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī feels disgust for French society concern its attitude towards religion. On the positive side, he sees the openness with which Parisians welcome other religions into their midst. This, he writes,

> "is due to the fact that most people in this city have only the name in common with Christianity, so that they neither follow its teachings nor develop any fervour for it."

However, when this lack of zeal turns into arrogance towards the Creator and his prophets, aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī is literally seized with rage:

> "Among their despicable beliefs is that they claim that the intellect of their philosophers and metaphysicians surpasses that of the prophets. They have many such disgraceful convictions, such as when some of them deny the counsels of God and predestination, even though there is a saying that runs: He is wise who believes in destiny and yet is resolute in all things."[7]

However, aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī's positive impressions clearly outweigh his negative ones. He feels that much of what he sees is worth emulating. He recognises that the Europeans have a head start – and yet he does not feel that he is losing out, because he believes he is in possession of the true faith. The Europeans are ahead of the Muslims thanks to their

> "gift of organisation, indeed their justice, their knowledge of the art of war and their versatility and ingenuity. And if the Muslims were not supported by God's omnipotence, they would be nothing compared to the power, possessions, wealth and brilliant skills [...] of the Europeans."[8]

Aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī was sent by Muḥammad ʿAlī, the ruler of Egypt at the time. Muḥammad ʿAlī had come to Egypt as an officer in the Ottoman army as part of Napoleon's expedition. After the expulsion of the French he remained in the country and developed political ambitions. His leadership qualities also convinced the Sultan in Istanbul, who appointed him governor of Egypt in 1805. Without any foresight he had thus created a rival for supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean.

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6 Ibid., p. 74.
7 Ibid., p. 30 and pp. 80–81.
8 Ibid., p. 16.