The End Days of the World System? Before Armageddon the Long Nights of Ignorance

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The Copenhagen School of International Relations stressed the discursive foundation of how we approach the world. How we think of the international, what we admire and particularly what we fear, creates a structural formation to which policy-makers respond, or which they try to manipulate. They cannot instantly recreate it as something new and different. By the end of a long process of responses it might be different – but it won't be unrecognisable from the original public discourse. Insofar as policy makers seek to create threats of a 'previously unknown' international relations, and then seek public discursive support, they first seek recourse to a battery of media and personalities of validation – the use (or misuse, a misuse to which the academics concerned are amenable, and culpable,) of the 'New Mandarins' in Chomsky's term, of 'expert' validators for newly created policies that require such public discursive support is now part of the lexicon of policy-makers.[1] The creation of Iraq as a possessor of 'weapons of mass destruction', imminently launch-able at the West, might as well have used an advertising agency for the catch-phrase, almost the jingle, 'weapons of mass destruction' – but a host of sudden Middle Eastern experts lined up behind the subterfuge, especially those who instantly conflated Iraq with Islamic threat, with Axis of Evil; and led the public to believe it was a do-or-die 'clash of civilisations'.

The discourse became one of fear. Part of this was clearly understandable after the attack of 9/11, but the linking of this fear to Iraq was the deliberate manufacture of a misunderstanding. Discourses of fear and misunderstanding depend, in the first instance, on simplifications. The creation of simplification as discourse is a curious work of art – but, as the public responds within this discourse, and piles discursive pressure on policy-makers to act, those same policy-makers are able to apply stock and repertoire responses. The response has to be by repertoire as there neither time nor organisational inclination to create something new. If all defence mechanisms have, at huge cost, been geared to certain sorts of war, it has to be that sort of war if instant action is required. An entire military machine cannot be re-calibrated and re-equipped; and even parts of it would require doctrinal re-orientation. Thus, after 9/11, it was not enough of a response to hunt down terrorists in shadowy enclaves. The policy and military machines needed to hit another state – an enemy within a clearly identified state – one susceptible to planning mechanisms long developed and rehearsed for invading another state. Clearly, the enemy lived in that state. After the identification and invasion of Afghanistan came the identification and invasion of Iraq – the latter unleashing the very same Islamic enemy that had been created for discursive purposes and then developed a discursive life of its own, participating in a virtuous (or vexatious) circle that linked public and political discourse most intimately.

The Threat Moves Indoors

The slow realisation that 'Islamic terrorism' doesn't require a central host state – and the even slower realisation that Osama Bin Laden deliberately lured Western forces into an Afghan conflict so that it could be a site of 'war for public

relations' in order to condemn the 'Western Crusaders' in the creation of an Islamic discourse – was painful as well as slow, as it required exactly a recalibration of repertoire. And, if the enemy no longer had a location that could be attacked; indeed, if often the enemy was within our own states; then discourse led on from fear and simplification to a species of police-state panics – none of which came close to defeating the 'enemy' and, indeed, probably elevated its recruitment figures. Suddenly, there were even more enemies.

The new mood of internal securitisation did not necessarily lead to any sophistication in thought, as domestic policy – surveillance, policing – utilised repertoire responses in exactly the same way foreign policy had. However, gradually the realisation dawned that Al Qaeda was different to the Taliban in Afghanistan; that Osama, while sympathising with the Taliban, probably used them as much as helped them, in order to launch his global war using the cellular structure of Al Qaeda. It was a Hydra-headed monster: cut off one head and another dozen grew from the bloody neck. Osama didn't mind losing Afghanistan as his operations spread far beyond their early epi-centre. And he won time – as Western forces encamped themselves in Afghanistan and then, in a gesture almost calculated to help Al Qaeda's discourse, waded into Iraq. Al Qaeda had no previous presence in Iraq and it was able to launch-pad its Middle Eastern operations from there courtesy of the US-led intervention.

But, because Al Qaeda was cellular, and its repertoire could morph from country to country, and in the end Osama became only one of several regional leaders, intelligence never had a central focus – a coordinating point in which all knowledge could make sense, or at least achieve coherence. And then when, slowly, it did begin making some forms of linked but disparate sense, the intelligence community was most reluctant to take the advent of ISIS seriously. The community had just worked out some repertoire for dealing with Al Qaeda. Did it have to start again? Surely it could analyse ISIS in the same way as it had learned to analyse Al Qaeda. And, besides, there was almost no knowledge of ISIS before its sudden advent. Critically, this applied even to the academic world. No expert mandarins could explain the phenomenon, let alone explain it in a way that made sense in policy and public discourses and the desirable linkage and intimacy of the two discourses. Those discourses at least had to retain their public air of simplicities and fear.

As for Osama, had he somehow managed to retain leadership of the amorphous organisation, then killing him was probably the worst thing the US could have done. Now, there certainly is no central leadership, and the many heads of the Hydra are multiplying. Sometimes, in their quest to multiply, remain viable, or simply survive, they have even fought ISIS. We might perhaps have needed Osama as the new dragon lurched into view.

Out of a Blue Sky

The term, 'out of a blue sky' was used by Western commentators, stunned that the Soviets could launch a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 without any prior indication that they were planning such a large operation. The failure of Western intelligence was that it was not looking at the Soviet Union with Afghanistan in mind. It was not so much 'out of a blue sky' as the wrong weather forecast. Similarly, consumed finally with the threat of Al Qaeda – and not just the Taliban which, by this stage, was a most convenient distraction almost planned to keep the West focussed on one place and not too many others – ISIS appeared 'out of a blue sky' and, before a blink of an eye, had conquered huge swathes or northern Iraq and Syria. The very expensively US-equipped Iraqi army melted like snow on a sudden hot day of a dramatically early summer. By this stage, Iraq and Afghanistan were receiving the greatest amounts of US military aid, outstripping the chief benefactors of old, Israel and Egypt – but to no avail. Apart from surprise, ISIS battle strategy was simply too much for an appallingly Generaled Iraqi army. And ISIS filled the voids created in the disorder of the Syrian civil war, and took over most of the Al Nusra organisation that had hitherto been fighting as an affiliate of Al Qaeda. But the coordination of the sudden move, its superbly equipped and mobile battle plans and doctrine, its huge fleets of Toyota pickups – all in the same colour, all mounted by Browning machine guns, all needing to have those machine guns bolted to a reinforced tray or bolted to the chassis of the Toyota, each one in exactly the same way and to the same battle-ready standard – spoke of an external provider not only of finance but strategy, doctrine and early training. Fingers pointed at the Saudis – but Western intelligence had nothing public to say about that, and the policy and public discourse was carefully maintained to depict Saudi Arabia as an essential, valuable, indeed noble ally. The social policies of the kingdom – public beheadings, lashings, the denigration and restraint of women – might have seemed the stuff immediately associated with ISIS in its conquered territories, but

the fiction that was now discourse said in public that the two were not related.

The *Atlantic* magazine article of March 2015 posited that ISIS had an agenda, i.e. was not mindless; had highly sophisticated technological and media outreach, i.e. was not simple; had international reach in fact, i.e. was not a desert insurrection, and had a Wahhabi animation, i.e. espoused a body of thought. All these conclusions, within a brief and hurriedly argued article, seemed startling – and could only seem startling because the information it contained also came 'out of a blue sky'. The simplification of threat into something simply evil had not allowed for even a summary sophistication of evil.

Wahhab and the Desert Blues

The scholarship that has emerged, quite suddenly, on Wahhabism is often hurried and fails to make distinctions. In fact, Lawrence of Arabia first noted the joyless aspect of Wahhabi strictures as he visited one of his favourite oasis towns to find that coffee, singing, and flirting with women were suddenly *haram* or prohibited. It is exactly the joyless strictures which have characterised the sudden scholarship. Its austerity and puritanism make it an exact caricature fit for what a 'fundamentalist Islam' is meant to be. It also allows it to be automatically conflated, in a reductionist manner, without regional cultural differences and hugely different political agendas taken into account, with the Taliban and its social atrocities. All evil becomes the same, and it becomes generalised to the point of being amorphous. This can only get in the way of detailed analysis. It becomes a stereotype without anything complicating the brief that is sent up to political masters who seek only confirmation that a simple-minded one-dimensional Devil is stalking the world.

The teachings of Wahhab were in fact simple. Among Islamic scholars he is not regarded as a peer. He attained prominence and power as an ally of the early House of Saud, so that at a very early stage his work was used for politicised purpose. Betrayal by the House of Saud, realignment with the House of Saud, secret agreements with the House of Saud after the 1979 Siege of Mecca all continued and developed the politicisation of the desert teachings. In modern times, they have their politicised roots in the Sykes Picot agreement of 1916, which divided the Middle East into zones of possession and zones of influence between the British and the French. The feelings, inclinations, and preferred borders of the Arab peoples were as naught. The protestations of Lawrence of Arabia were as naught. But, insofar as a new Islamic State seeks to overturn the imperial borders and reunite the Arab Sunni peoples, and cleanse from Arabia apostates such as the Shi'a and Yazidis – never mind the Western imperialists of today – theirs is an anti-colonial and political agenda as well as any religious one. None of this might have come to pass if Saudi Arabia, as it was at time of independence in 1932, had remained poor. Oil was not discovered till 1938. Before then, it was one of the poorest countries on earth, reliant on tax charges levied against pilgrims to Mecca and Medina. The Spartan conditions of life then would have pleased Wahhab – but sudden wealth, greatly exacerbated after the price rises of 1973, brought political influence and a form of global political power, and modern Wahhabism should be seen in that light – as a key benefactor-in-tow. It is not something that can be analysed only in terms of its foundational roots.

It should be seen certainly in terms of its religious roots and teachings, but also in its political context, and its ideological impulses. Even the religious teachings have a modern dimension as they seek to impose themselves upon modern conditions and their social policies, the needs of modern public administration, and the speed of modern media and communications. ISIS has put into place a public administration for its conquered territories, it must deal with modern economics as it finances its huge operations and pays its armies of foreign fighters, and it deals with a massive communications and social media outreach capacity which it has fully mastered. It has to turn all of these things in the direction not only of religion but ideology. It is against the West. It is antipathetical to the West and anti-social to it, and recruits among those in the West who are anti-social. Those who attacked Paris and Brussels were criminals, recruited not to turn them into devout and learned Muslims, but into ideologised fighters who, already hardened, would welcome a justification – a form of just cause – in fighting against a system that had marginalised them and ostracised them.

It is not against the West only in terms of Western lifestyle. That lifestyle has echoes even in a socially-policed Saudi Arabia. It is against a Western state system in which Westphalia houses a hegemony of Western powers. It is against

that hegemony. Its fight for an Islamic state system is to reverse international hegemony. If it is successful, Islamic State may prove to be no more radical in terms of its everyday workings than Saudi Arabia now is. But, until then, it is against Western outreach, certainly in the holy places, and certainly in terms of the direct expression of US hegemony in its support – physically in the Middle East – of Israel. It is not just Israel as Israel, but Israel as a bastion of Western hegemony. As for the more purely religious teachings of this form of Islam, there must be sounded notes of caution.

The Impossibility of Hermeneutics in Foreign Policy Formulation

The problem with interrogating a body of religious teaching is that the tools for interrogation need to be appropriate. Even with theological tools, there is no sustainable assumption that one theological system fits all theologies. Moreover, before the theology must come the text itself, and it must be appreciated in terms of the nuances of the language used and its cultural and historical context. Then there must be a certain hermeneutic sensitivity – an almost intuitive sensitivity, a spirituality if you like, that allows a penetration of the 'mysteries' of the text. The following checklist of what are essentially cautions applies to any effort to 'crack' a religious persuasion.[2] It is not possible to 'get to the bottom' of Wahhabism as a research agenda for combatting it. Such a teleological ambition distorts and pre-ordains the theological enquiry.

1. Before seeking authorities as interpreters of meaning, it is first necessary to read the foundation texts.
2. It is necessary to acknowledge and appreciate historical and cultural contexts.
3. It is necessary to acknowledge and seek to appreciate linguistic conventions and, in particular, the role and deployment of metaphorical reasoning.
4. It is necessary to acknowledge traditions of intertextuality, that is, a sacred text is interpreted by a legal text, as in Islam; a sacred text is interpreted by a mystical text, as in Judaism; both texts are interpreted by an ideological text, as in religious Zionism.
5. Hermeneutics have a function of investigating both deep within as well as a scripture's effort at transcending itself, that is, its meaning is both deep and rises above itself.
6. There are centuries of epistemological and ontological debate, all of which form genealogies that backdrop and inform current debate.
7. Current debate can deliberately or by force of circumstance pervert and distort first principles of sacred teaching.

It is almost impossible to turn proper religious enquiry into a foreign policy brief or accord it much utilitarian use in foreign policy formulation. It allows no options for actions – precisely because religious interpretation generally reveals in the first instance options for understanding. Which option for understanding should be chosen for which option for action becomes, finally, guesswork. New policy repertoires can hardly be informed by guesswork – except that, at the moment, exactly such repertoires are being created by guesswork of the most superficial sort – and often they are bargained into place to satisfy competing organisational demands, and not to address seriously and deeply the issue at hand. This is true within a single government, e.g. that of the US, and is even more so of a multilateral organisation like NATO.

As for the rational actor who might, like a presidential messiah, make sense of all, and call all the right shots from all the right decisions based on all the right judgements… well, the advent of President Trump hardly satisfies the hopes in that kind of vision of a rational actor who faces up to ISIS. For now, Trumpian or Trump-less, we face a protracted period of cycles and circles of simple policies and simple discourses. And with or without the defeat of ISIS on the plains of Nineveh, its vision of a different state order with a different normative inspiration has impacted hard upon the world.

Notes

[1] Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, NY: Pantheon, 1969.

[2] Drawn from my fuller checklist: Stephen Chan, 'Trauma and Dislocation in the Postsecular World: Religious

Fervour and the Problem of Methodology', in Luca Maveli and Fabio Petito (eds.), *Towards a Postsecular International Politics: New Forms of Community, Identity, and Power*, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where 'post' was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).