

# Fear as Driver of International Relations

Written by Muqtedar Khan and Isa Haskologlu

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/09/02/fear-as-driver-of-international-relations/>

MUQTEDAR KHAN AND ISA HASKOLOGLU, SEP 2 2020

We know that sentiment rather than reason or rationality drives voter behavior (Winter, 2015), market investment behavior (Baker and Wurgler, 2007) and even foreign policies of nations. Decisions and patterns of action cannot be divorced entirely from human emotions. One ignores them at one's own peril. Culture, identity, and symbolic politics (Kaufman, 2006), emotions along with rationality (Khan, 2004), constitute the core of human motivation. Fear is one such primal emotion that plays a profound role in determining how individuals, groups, tribes, and states shape the choices and actions of human agencies. Scholars and experts of finance take fear so seriously that they have devised many indices to measure fear (Rubbiani, Asmerom, Rizvi, Naqvi, 2014), quantify it, and predict its impact. In this thought piece, we explore how the emotion and idea of fear has shaped the political philosophy of the state and how fear is a key construct in international relations theories.

We explore five different discourses that constitute the contemporary political theory of international relations and explore the different ways in which the idea of fear anchors those discourses. This list of five discourses is certainly neither exhaustive nor necessarily a list of the five most important discourses, they merely represent the epistemic landscape that interests the authors of this essay. Another thing to note is that the five fears we have identified reflect five distinct political phenomena; they are (1) fear as the progenitor of the state, (2) fear as the primary ontology of the international system (3) fear of war as the basis of global governance and (4) fear as an instrument of change as terrorism, coercive diplomacy, and sanctions and (5) fear of extinction and fragmentation as the trigger for civil wars and ethnic conflict.

### From Fear to Power: Political Philosophy of the State

We begin this essay with a nod towards the political philosophy of fear and examine how prominent past philosophers explained the emergence of polities, political cooperation to provide security and order using the primal emotion of fear. Any parsimonious study of the political philosophy of fear must include Thucydides, Ibn Khaldun, and Thomas Hobbes, an ancient, a medieval and a modern political philosopher. They are central to understanding how fear as experienced in the state of nature is ultimately overcome by the power of collectives consolidated into a *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1900), a powerful political institution that channels human fear to emerge and then exploits it to persist. Fear is both the origin and *raison d'être* of the state. The journey from the state of nature to a modern state is a journey from fear to power. According to Hobbes, in the state of nature, life is nasty, brutish, and short and driven by a fear of violent death, and in the state of statehood life is safer, orderly but still fearful. Rather than fearing sudden death in a situation of *bellum omnium contra omnes* – war of all against all — one now fears the state that would punish one for disobedience and this fear, the fear of the power of the state becomes the means to overcome the fear of sudden and violent death. Essentially one is exchanging fear and uncertainty for fear and certainty.

In Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* (Khaldun, 2015), the life of the Arab nomad, the Bedouin, in the desert is a metaphor for life in the state of nature. It is hard and difficult and individuals cannot survive in it by themselves. Ibn Khaldun argued that the basic tasks needed for survival of humanity cannot be performed without cooperation between human beings who are weak but find strength only when they form collectives. Thus, the antidote for fear for survival is collectivity and the best form of that according to Ibn Khaldun is *asabiyyah*, the natural solidarity that is borne out of kinship. He posits *asabiyyah* as a necessity to overcome the fear for survival and suggests that its goal is to establish a kingdom where the state then acts as a deterrent against the possibility of the strong devouring the weak and

## **Fear as Driver of International Relations**

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helping all to survive and establish civilizations. Power to overcome fear in Ibn Khaldun's theory of the state comes from *asabiyyah* (Khan, 2019). Fear in Ibn Khaldun's perspective is not as dreadful as that in Hobbes' because it is apparent that despite his political and scientific realism, Ibn Khaldun believes in the power of the divine and hence his fear is moderated by the comforting idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing and protecting God, a divine backup in case the state fails to mitigate his fears. Ibn Khaldun sees the fear of God as a driver of virtue that can be channeled in state formation.

Len Goodman in an interesting comparison (Goodman, 1972) between Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun not only underscores how central fear is to their political philosophy but also shines a light on the role that fear played in starting wars, in generating arms races, in triggering the security dilemma. The idea that fear breeds fear is still valid and still a powerful way to understand the national security policies of modern states. While 'kinship, faith and fear' are at the core of Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the rise and fall of civilizations, 'fear, honor and interest' are key to Thucydides's understanding of motivations for war (Gilchrist, 2016).

### **Fear in Contemporary Realist Theories**

In the modern era, unlike when Ibn Khaldun and Hobbes were writing, the modern state is well established and this idea of fear as the driver of international politics has now been theorized as anarchy. Fear is now understood as the fear of anarchy or absence of order (Schmidt, 1998). While effective states, unlike failing ones, can establish order within their jurisdictions, the international arena remains to some extent without the kind of order that a *Leviathan* like state can impose. Constructivists and other non-rationalist approaches to the study of international relations argue that this idea of anarchy as the ontological feature of international politics is socially constructed (Wendt, 1992). But neoliberals, more or less, have accepted this realist premise as default and are seeking to establish cooperation under anarchy (Oye, 1986). To put it succinctly modern international relations is driven by the construct of anarchy or fear of disorder (Hobbesian dread) and lack of cooperation (Ibn Khaldun's nightmare).

Contemporary realist thought is heavily influenced by intellectual giants such as Hans Morganthau, Kenneth Waltz, and John Mearsheimer. In an interesting book titled *Realism and Fear in International Relations*, Pashakhanlou explores how fear as a central concept not just shaped the realist theories of these scholars but given their importance to the realist paradigm shaped the modern realist thought itself (Pashakhanlou, 2017b). Morgenthau's realism essentially extrapolates human attributes, such as the desire for power and domination, to the collective level and to states. And since fear is a powerful human emotion it is also transferred to collective fear that prompts states to seek power, balance power, and fear being dominated by other powers. Pashakhanlou's reading of Waltz's work identifies fear as the prime motivator of war (Pashakhanlou, 2017a). Indeed, fear of war overcomes the potential benefit that can accrue from cooperation. Hence anarchy is never entirely transformed, regardless of interdependence and war is always possible. It is also readily apparent from Mearsheimer's work too that fear remains central to realist thinking whether historical, classical, or structural (Tang, 2008). Even superpowers are driven by fear, fear of challengers, fear of declining hegemony, and fear of new technologies and new coalitions that can alter the balance of power.

### **Fear of War as the Basis of Contemporary Liberalism**

In an award-winning essay, Mary Wrenn argues that fear essentially has two elements – ontological insecurity and existential anxiety (Wrenn, 2014). The former she argues is the fear of failure to reproduce the quality of life and the second she insists is about coping with the finiteness of existence. She contends that in the modern era, when some of the needs for survival have been ensured, the basic instinct for survival has evolved and has now become a transformative force. She maintains that fear under the neoliberal paradigm has transformed from protecting humanity from the insecurities of the market to guarding against the fear that the markets will collapse. Hence the most important anti-fear human institution, the state, now protects markets because neoliberalism has made the failure of markets our biggest fear. Mary Wrenn's ontology is a reading of the world as it was evolving and emerging during the heydays of neoliberal ideology and institutions.

But today we are living in an era where all institutions, such as democracy and global governance, those concrete

## **Fear as Driver of International Relations**

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realizations of idealist, liberal and neoliberal perspectives are decaying, and authoritarianism, majoritarianism, and mercantilism are ascendant. The ontology of our world today resembles more and more the precepts of realism and less and less like that of the liberal paradigm. The fear that liberal institutions sought to overcome and channel into productive social and politico-economic development is back as these institutions become weaker and less effective. Unlike the pessimism of realism that feared fear itself, liberals recognized fear as a potential instinct for survival that could be used to mobilize individuals to former institutions, and institutions and states to cooperate – a pyramid scheme of cooperation from individual to states – that enable what James Rosenau and colleagues famously described as governance without government (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992).

### **Fear as an Instrument of Coercion**

Until recently the global war on terror was the grand strategy that not only informed U.S. foreign policy since 2001, but also became the most critical issue that shaped the agenda of international organizations and international alliances. The fear of terrorism dominated geopolitics on the global stage. Some of the efforts of the international community have proven successful and the number of people killed by terrorist attacks has reduced in Western Europe and the United States in the last two decades (Ritchie, Hasell, Appel, Roser 2013). Since 2014 terrorist incidences are on a steady decline. Fear of terrorism is now being replaced by traditional fears of rising powers like China and Russia. Terrorist organizations weaponize fear. Terrorists increasingly use brutal tactics on civilians to generate horror and fear (Sullivan, 2015). It is how they hope to compel states to change their policies. Ironically the fear they generate may also justify the opposite kind of politics. Al Qaeda targeted the U.S. to force it out of the Middle East and ended up with a more enhanced and militarily robust and pernicious US presence in the region via the Iraq war.

Failure to prevent terrorism and to respond effectively to them diminishes the credibility of governments in the eyes of their citizens. Political leaders fear losing legitimacy and often their fear of being seen as weak prompts them to retaliate with disproportionate military force to mitigate the impact of terrorist attacks, to destroy terrorists' ability to strike again, and to replace people's fear with confidence (Cronin, 2009). However, only 7% of terrorist groups end with military force (Jones and Libicki, 2008). Use of force against terrorism often creates conditions which confirm old grievances, generate new ones and may fuel the rise of insurgencies and terrorism. The number of terrorist attacks per annum increased significantly after US invasion of Iraq whose purpose was to end terrorism.

In the age of globalization, terrorism evolved into transnational terrorism, which induces fear not only in the target state but also in the region and the international community through its spillover effects. Terrorist organizations now cause global fears because their activities can destabilize regions, impact trade routes, and realign allies. Another worrying aspect of this fear generator is that some states are employing these tactics in their policies. By creating violent proxies states are using fear of proxies to achieve their foreign policy goals. Iran's use of Hezbollah in Lebanon (DeVore, 2012), Iraq and Syria, the U.S.' use of the mujahideen in Afghanistan (Pear, 1988), and Pakistan's support of terrorist groups against India (Felbab-Brown, 2018) are a few examples of how states too are channeling fear through proxies to bring about policy change.

Some states, when they have an overwhelming power advantage over an adversary, use coercive diplomacy to generate fear in the population of the adversary to bring about political and policy changes. US use of sanctions and other tactics against Iran to precipitate regime change, Israeli blockade of Gaza to force the people to stop supporting Hamas, are examples where fear is used by states as a policy instrument.

### **Civil Wars and Ethnic Conflict: Fears of Extinction and Fragmentation**

In this last section, we return to where we started, the state, and the power it generates through cooperation and integration of its constituents to overcome the fear and uncertainty of a Hobbesian state of nature. Thus, fear leads to the emergence of the state, but if the state rather than looking like a Leviathan begins to manifest fragility and cracks, the fear of disintegration of the state raises the specter of the fear of the state of nature.

States which are ethnically diverse in their demographic composition and suffer from the politicization of ethnic,

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racial, or even religious diversity are exposed to multiple risks. We catalog three types of fears in such states; (1) there is the fear that ethnic minorities in seeking autonomy may endanger the territorial integrity of the state by presenting an imminent threat of secession. (2) The minorities who may have achieved what Ibn Khaldun calls *asabiyya* – a solidarity based on their shared identity begin to fear cultural and sometimes even genocidal extinction from the state's desire to sustain its territorial integrity by enforcing cultural and ethnic homogeneity. A homogeneity that privileges the identity of the majority while suppressing the identity of the minorities. These two fears are the two sides of the same coin, fear of extinction and fear of fragmentation. If not managed or resolved can undermine the state and return the society to the state of nature. (3) In addition to the two fears, the fragility of states also engenders fear in the region surrounding the state and the international community because ethnic conflicts and civil wars tend to have spillover effects that spread violence, generate refugees, and impact regional economic negatively. One merely has to examine the cases of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the civil war in Syria, the sectarian conflict in Iraq, and the ethnic conflict in Turkey to understand the full scope of this triple fear.

The rational choice perspective suggests that when a country's fragility increases, ethnic groups' fear of their security becomes more salient, and information failure breeds a security dilemma between the state and the ethnic minority. Ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs manipulate those security fears and polarize groups, which lead to a civil war (Lake and Rothchild, 1996). Social-Psychological School places emotions at the core of the issue and claims that both ethnic groups adopt a zero-sum game perspective: one's gain is another's loss. Consequently, groups will perceive any concession as a failure. Symbolic politics theorists argue that prejudices and other symbolic predispositions, combined with threat perception and the way leaders frame the dispute enhances the possibility of conflict (Kaufman, 2015). Ethnic groups mobilize when they fear extinction through cultural assimilation, marginalization, and state oppression. States respond by fearing this very mobilization.

The spillover potential of ethnic conflict creates fear in the international community. Between 1997-2012, the number of people killed in civil wars exceeded deaths from other forms of organized mass violence such as inter-state wars, terrorism, or genocides (Call, 2012). Ethnic conflicts destabilize the region with flows of refugees and the possibility of drawing neighbors into the conflict. They impact regional economies, disrupt trade, and create demographic challenges to states that are forced to receive refugees escaping civil wars and ethnic conflicts.

As fear is one of the main drivers of ethnic conflicts, the international community tries to end civil wars by mitigating fears that are agitating the conflicting parties. International interventions can come from regional or global powers or international institutions and civil society organizations that promote international peace. These third parties can adopt several different types of fear mitigating strategies including balancing the power of the conflicting parties to increase the probability of loss and reduce the possibility of victory. Such transformed odds often induce parties to compromise and make peace out of fear of losing. Third parties may also try to institute confidence-building measures and enhance trust between the parties to overcome the fear of distrust (Kirschner, 2014). Secondly, third parties may play the role of a referee that monitors that parties are adhering to the settlement and are fulfilling their commitments (Walter, 2002). The idea that there is a guarantor of compliance by the other side often reduces fear of betrayal and encourages parties to move forward towards peace.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we have explored how fear as a theoretical construct informs several discourses under the broad umbrella of international relations. We have looked essentially at literature and examined the idea of fear. What we have not examined here is how fear has also played a major role shaping global orders and alliances. The Cold War was about western fears of communism and eastern fears of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. Subsequently, global politics was driven by fear of Islamic revivalism and Muslim fears of American hegemony and western cultural imperialism (Khan, 2002). We are now entering an era where global politics could be driven by western fears of an ascendant China and Chinese fears of western containment. We also notice that there are other sources of fear that are shaping international relations; fear of environmental disasters, of cyber terrorism, of global pandemics, decline of democracy and failed states. Fear is a primal instinct that is necessary for survival and it shapes human choices and actions in all spheres of life, including international relations. Fear will always be there, how we cope with it and how we channel it will determine how our institutions evolve.

# Fear as Driver of International Relations

Written by Muqtedar Khan and Isa Haskologlu

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## Fear as Driver of International Relations

Written by Muqtedar Khan and Isa Haskologlu

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