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A Long War?

Michael Howard

When we founded The Institute for Strategic Studies nearly half a century ago, we had one very clear objective. We wanted to learn how to think about the effect that nuclear weapons would have on international conflict. Thermonuclear weapons were entering into the arsenals of the superpowers, and other major powers were following close behind. The destructive effect of these weapons was almost inconceivable, and against their delivery there could be no defence. Could they be used against an adversary with the capacity to retaliate in kind? Could their possession credibly deter their use? How could international conflict be managed without risking nuclear annihilation? And above all, how could nuclear proliferation be controlled?

At the time, the penalties for failing to answer these riddles correctly seemed so catastrophic that we gave our journal the deliberately intimidating title *Survival*. Often in later years we wondered whether we should not change it for something more anodyne, but after 11 September 2001 I at least was glad that we didn't. The nature of the threat may have changed, but the penalty for failing to respond correctly seemed little less severe. So, how should we think about the new challenges that confront us?

The first step in solving any problem lies in defining it correctly. That is why, when in the immediate aftermath of the appalling events at the World Trade Center President George W. Bush declared a 'global war on terror', a number of pundits, myself included, were deeply unhappy. We could not see that we were involved in a 'war' in any proper sense of the term, except in the rhetorical sense in which we speak of war on crime, or drugs, or poverty. Even if we were, 'terror' as such could not be an adversary. We cannot be at war with an abstract

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noun. This was not a pedantic quibble: as any scientist can tell us, if we misdiagnose the problem we are not likely to come up with a solution. Our objections seem to have made little impression on the White House, which still talks of a 'global war against terror', but at least the Pentagon has adjusted its language and now defines our predicament as 'a long war'. This is better, but still problems remain. I shall try to address four of them. First, is it really a 'war', and if not, what is it? Secondly, who or what is it against? Thirdly, what is it about? And, finally, how should it be conducted?

Like many others, I objected to the term 'war'. It implies something finite; a conflict with a clear beginning and an even clearer conclusion, preferably in 'victory' for our own side. Further, in 'war' our adversary is assumed to enjoy a degree of legitimacy, both prescriptive and defined by international law, which constrains both their actions and ours. We have certainly seen wars in which one or both belligerents have formally renounced those restraints, as the German Army did when it invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, but they are hardly examples many of us would wish to follow. Further, 'war' normally is essentially the concern of the military. Today that is not self-evident. The eradication of terrorist activities, whether internal or international, is primarily a matter for police, intelligence services and 'special forces', calling only exceptionally on military support. Certainly a war, or jihad, has been declared against us, but that does not necessarily demand that we should reciprocate. In my own lifetime 'war' has been declared on my country by insurgents in India, in Malaya, in Ireland, and by Jewish groups in Palestine. We always refused to grant these groups the belligerent status that would have legitimised their cause. Instead we treated their activities as criminal disruption of civil order to be dealt with by police, assisted when necessary by special forces acting 'in aid of the civil power'. When more drastic measures were called for, a 'state of emergency' would be proclaimed, usually of finite length.

I still feel that this would have been a more appropriate response to the challenge posed by al-Qaeda and the events of 11 September 2001. How inappropriate was the use of the term 'war' was rapidly shown by the embarrassing confusion in which the government of the United States has found itself over its treatment of 'prisoners of war'. But I must confess that we can hardly use the term 'state of emergency' to describe a situation that seems likely to stretch into the indefinite future. So what is it?

In my view the correct term, as my countryman General Sir Rupert Smith has pointed out in his book *The Utility of Force*, is *confrontation*: that is, a state of continuing hostility, normally conducted by propaganda, economic pressure, political agitation and low-level violence, occasionally erupting into armed

conflict over finite local objectives but never quite rising to major military operations. This would have been an accurate description of the Cold War, which was a confrontation kept short of overt war by mutual fear of the consequences. The existing confrontation remains limited because our adversaries do not have the military capacity to enlarge it, and our own military capability has limited relevance to the attainment of our objectives. But it may erupt into specific conflicts, as it did in Afghanistan and more recently in South Lebanon. (The war in Iraq, with all due respect to the US president, seems to me a separate case altogether.)

'Confrontation' may be the correct word, but I have reluctantly to accept the term 'war' for two reasons. First, 'confrontation' is not a word that fits into newspaper headlines. However much academic pedants and international lawyers may object, it will go on being 'war' so far as the media are concerned, and so for the general public as well. But secondly, and more importantly, the military *should* see it as a war. It may not be the kind of war that they have been brought up to expect and are trained to fight, but it is the only war that, for a generation or so, they are likely to get. Its conduct is not an optional extra, as the US Army seems to have regarded it a few years ago when they pigeon-holed its activities as 'Operations Other than War' while they trained and equipped themselves at huge expense for a Clausewitzian 'real war' to be fought sometime in the future against a massive but as yet non-existent adversary. If calling it a war is the only way in which the military can be persuaded to take it seriously and adjust their thinking, equipment and training accordingly, then so be it. Nonetheless, we would still be wise to think of it as an international police action defending global security against violent attempts by dissidents to disrupt and destroy it. The role of the military should still be seen as 'action in aid of the civil power', on a global scale, to maintain or restore civil order.

Next, who are our adversaries? Certainly not 'terror' in the abstract: that is a meaningless term that may have rhetorical value for political leaders, but obscures rather than enlightens serious analysis. Our adversaries are *people*. Who are these people, what motivates them, and what kind of threat do they pose?

Here I believe that, in spite of all the criticism levelled against him, Bush was right when he defined them as 'Islamic fascists'.

Islamic, alas, they are, although they are no more typical of their religion than the fanatics who have committed abominations in the name of Christianity throughout the ages, and in places still do. Much of their thought is indeed Islamic – a romantic longing, derived from Wahhabi teaching, to return to the

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doctrines and practices of a pure Islam. But they derive their ideology at least as much from Western as from Islamic sources, and 'fascism' is as good a description of these as any other. Today it is a general term of abuse used to describe despotism or violent tyranny, but in fact it was something far more profound and sinister.

Fascism in twentieth-century Europe was rooted in the rejection of the entire legacy of the Enlightenment on which Western civilisation is based; its belief in reason, toleration, open-ended enquiry and the rule of law. It appealed to people who were not themselves necessarily 'evil', although their beliefs – or lack of them – led them into appallingly evil acts; but they saw only the dark side of the Enlightenment, or rather of the global market capitalism that it bred: how the secularisation of thought and the birth-pangs of industrial and post-industrial societies had undermined all traditional values, creating what appeared to be a degenerate, materialistic world of hedonistic self-indulgence for those who profited by social change, and rootless misery for those who did not. Karl Marx had vividly described in the *Communist Manifesto* the impact of the Enlightenment on mid nineteenth-century Europe: 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned'. This description could apply with even greater force to the Middle East a hundred years later. The peoples of Europe, except for a tiny minority of intellectuals, did not buy Marx's solution to the problem. Instead they found comfort in nationalism; but the extreme form of nationalism was fascism, with its xenophobia, its detestation of capitalist internationalism (which it associated particularly with the Jews), its belief in the therapy of violence, its glorification of warrior virtues, and its contempt for human life, their own and everyone else's. In combination with Islamic Wahhabist teaching this is a pretty lethal combination.

If we are to understand the appeal of fascism, both then and now, we have to forget the great liberal fallacy – especially, I am afraid, the great American fallacy – that believes with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that the natural condition of mankind is individual 'freedom', and that the desire for 'freedom' burns hotly in every human breast. 'Freedom', as we understand it in the West, the belief in the individual and in individual judgement as the ultimate criterion of social and moral values, is a highly sophisticated and idiosyncratic concept that has taken us the best part of a millennium to develop. The natural tendency of mankind, as any schoolboy knows, is *not* to stand alone, or even to wish to do so: it is to join together for protection in like-minded groups – families, clans, tribes, not least juvenile gangs. The whole process of civilisation in the West might be described as the 'detrabalisation' of society, the creation of values and loyalties overriding those of the tribe; and under pressure that process can very easily,

and very rapidly be reversed. The greater the traumas resulting from social dislocation, especially from the impact of modernisation on traditional values, the stronger is this regression to tribalism likely to be, and the easier to exploit.

In Europe we have seen this within living memory. The Enlightenment may have liberated us from traditional feudal and religious constraints, but it has taken us nearly two centuries, including two world wars and God knows how many revolutions, to adjust to our new 'freedoms'. There is no reason to suppose that the peoples of the Middle East can do any better than we did. For Europeans at least 'the nation' provided an effective focus of loyalty to replace the old feudal and ecclesiastical values destroyed by the Enlightenment; but for much of the Middle East, with the notable exceptions of Iran and possibly Egypt, 'the nation' was an alien concept foisted on them by victorious Western powers after the destruction of the Ottoman Empire in 1919. Loyalties remain focused on the tribe or the religious community, loyalties from which these peoples have no wish to be 'liberated' by well-meaning intruders from the West or even by their own Western-educated elites. They remained attached to them as the best protection against the gale of modernisation that seems to be sweeping their whole world away. To a large extent they still do.

So although the immediate threat to Western interests and well-being certainly comes from the activities of fanatics like al-Qaeda who reject our values and will stop at nothing to destroy them, the real problem lies in the sympathy they enjoy within the deeply disturbed societies that have bred them. The sympathy is not so much for their objectives as for the struggle itself, the jihad, and for the resentment that motivates it. It is thus all too easy for that struggle to become a way of life for the idealistic young – especially the well-educated and underemployed young – and those who wage it are heroes whom they seek to emulate and ultimately to join. Osama bin Laden replaces Che Guevara on the walls of students' dormitories, even though they have little idea of who he is or what he aspires to do.

These religiously inspired fanatics are our immediate adversaries, but they are dangerous not only for what they can do but for the support they can command in doing it. Which brings us to the third question, 'What is this conflict about?' *De quoi s'agit-il?*: the first question to be asked by any commander before making his plan.

Well, it is about all sorts of things. This sullen animosity is directed against the West in general and the United States in particular; not only for its political and economic intrusion into the Middle East, but as what the Germans call the *Kulturträger*, the bearers of a culture seen to be destroying their way of life and violating the tenets of their faith. It fuels domestic resentment against Western-

oriented governments in the Middle East, from Egypt to Pakistan. It spreads the conflict between Israel and Palestine throughout the entire Muslim world. It fuels the vendetta that Iran has been waging against the United States ever since the fall of the Shah 30 years ago; and it deepens the resentment of the Muslim diaspora in societies where they feel themselves to be second-class citizens. The conflict thus extends from specific grievances such as the entirely understandable desire of the Palestinians to create a viable state to wild aspirations for the creation of a global *umma* to recreate the power and glory of a historic Islam.

This generalised resentment is not the result of any conspiracy, nor are its violent eruptions evidence of a coherent strategy. We are not faced with a finite

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adversary who can be appeased by political concessions or destroyed by military victories (which is another reason why we should not think of it as a 'war'). We are dealing with a *state of mind* that has to be transformed; a task demanding skill, sagacity, determination, empathy, and above all *patience*. It is certainly not to be cured by the institution of Western-style democratic processes that only give greater voice to Muslim resentment; as we have seen in Algeria, in Iran and most recently in Palestine. In the long run the solution can come only through the evolution of Islamic societies, but it must be an evolution

in conformity with their own cultural patterns. All we can do is to help remove obstacles to that process and take care not to create any of our own.

Which brings me finally to the question: If armed forces have to be used, what is their task and how should their campaigns be fought?

The task is simply defined, though infernally hard to implement: it is to destroy those elements who are seeking to obtain power by using violence, and create a situation in which the problems of the region, whether political, economic or social, may be solved by peaceful means. The military have to hold the ring, and if necessary create the ring that has to be held. They should be asked to do so only under the most compelling of circumstances: only where civil order has been overthrown or collapsed and insurgents have established a territorial base from which they can conduct more wide-reaching operations, as was the case in Afghanistan, can a case be made for outside military intervention. Even then, whether we do regard the case as compelling must be a matter for very careful political judgement. We have learned a lot since we intervened so blithely in Iraq three years ago: not least that such interventions, however skilfully they may be conducted, may well be only the initial phase of a prolonged conflict. Sooner or later boots may have to be put on the ground and stay there; for only the military can restore the security, the law and order, that they have

themselves disrupted. As we now know, that can be a long process. In today's confrontations warfighting and peacekeeping cannot be separated. They melt into one another, and the conduct of each determines the success of the other. The days are long past when generals could declare their mission accomplished and return to ticker-tape processions, leaving peacekeeping to the second-class troops of the United Nations or complaisant allies.

If we do have to fight these campaigns, the first essential is no different from that in warfare throughout the ages – to target and destroy the armed forces of the enemy. Until that is done, and is seen to be done, no lasting order can be restored. But in doing so we must obey a military equivalent of the Hippocratic oath observed by the medical profession: *do no unnecessary harm*. Do not kill the innocent if you can possibly avoid it; do no unnecessary damage to their property, and certainly do not wreck the infrastructure of their societies. To quote Rupert Smith again, war today is fought 'among the peoples'; peoples who it is our mission to rescue, help and protect. If we do not do so we have no right to be there at all. Few peoples are likely to welcome the intervention in their internal affairs, however well intentioned, of foreign troops probably ignorant of their values and culture; and it has to be admitted that our armies are not always recruited from the most sensitive and sophisticated sections of the population. But unless we do win their confidence we can never obtain the intelligence, the 'humint', that alone makes it possible to destroy the enemy; while if we leave them in an atmosphere of smouldering hatred we are never likely to 'win the war'.

The use of signals intelligence and smart weapons will certainly help us to distinguish and isolate our adversaries, but we can rely on them to make this task as difficult as possible by hiding among the civil population so that we cannot damage them without causing well-publicised loss of innocent lives as well. It remains open to question whether the gains achieved by the Israeli armed forces through their recent operations in South Lebanon were not more than outweighed by the propaganda reaped by Hizbullah from the images of suffering Lebanese women and children sitting among the ruins of their homes that were instantly flashed around the world. So to the injunction 'do no unnecessary harm' we should add 'make no unnecessary enemies'.

So whatever we call the conflict, whether war or confrontation, it is certainly likely to be long. The use of armed force offers no short cuts, and unless it is used with skill and restraint it may do more harm than good. The length of its engagements, when they occur, will be measured, not in days, but in weeks or even months, and they will seldom appear conclusive. It will be that most frustrating of conflicts, a war of attrition. Success, when it comes, will do so slowly

and incrementally, as successive failures make the hard core opposition lose heart and quarrel among itself, as its recruits fall off, its unpopularity grows, the population withdraws its support and the younger generation finds other gods.

The military may protest that this is not the kind of war that they joined up to fight, and taxpayers that they see little return for their money. But as I said earlier, this is the only war we are likely to get: it is also the only kind of peace. So let us have no illusions about it.

Acknowledgements

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