

2003 and after - The Domestic War on Terror: How Iraq Changed Everything

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In light of the Chilcot report released Wednesday, teleSUR re-publishes an interview with Arun Kundnani, one of the foremost critics of the war on terror.

Daniel Bey - Maybe you could spend a bit of time explaining the ideological, the political and the historical roots of the so-called war on terror and explain how things have developed since 9/11.

Arun Kundnani - There's such a deep sense of amnesia, especially in the United States. People simply aren't aware that the war on terror that began after 9/11 was the second war on terror: there was also a war on terror under Reagan. The difference was that the first war on terror took place without there being any terrorism in the United States. What you also see in the 1980s war on terror is the same kind of ideological basis that argues there is an inherent tendency within Islam toward terrorism.

That idea really comes from the activists in the United States who, in the late 1970s and early 80s, were advocating on behalf of the Israeli government. This period was also the first time that public opinion in the United States was beginning to question the country's alliance with Israel. The reason for this was Israel's occupation of Lebanon in 1982 and the massacres in Sabra and Shatila: people started to understand that these actions were being paid for by U.S. taxpayers.

The Israelis were eager to present an alternative narrative that could shore up public support for U.S. funding of the Israeli military occupation. The narrative was that when you look at violence in the Middle East, in particular Israel and Palestine, we shouldn't see that violence as the result of a political conflict rooted in a national liberation movement on behalf of the Palestinians. Look at it instead as the result of an inherent fanaticism that was part of Islamic or Arab culture. It was a clash of cultures, not a political conflict.

And in that conflict, Israel was the modern, democratic culture and the Palestinians represented the backwardness of Arab culture. The Israeli side can claim to share our values, the western values that supposedly connect Israel to the United States.

After 9/11, this narrative was deepened and generalized so that it wasn't just about Arabs but about Muslims in general. Islamophobia is inherently connected to the attempt to legitimize Empire. It's a way of reducing these conflicts, these incidents of violence to "their culture" and not our politics.

Thinking about the Iraq War and its effect on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in the United States and Europe, what changed after 9/11 and the 2003 invasion?

In terms of the fundamental structure of how foreign policy thinkers and the wider culture think

about Muslims here in the United States, I don't think very much did change with 9/11 or the Iraq War. Both became opportunities to deepen the power of certain ideas but the ideas and the ideology were already in place.

The key historical moment here is the end of the Cold War. As Edward Said points out, in the early 1990s people like Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis understood that they were able to tell a story about Islam as the new enemy, and this quickly became a powerful factor in the foreign policy conversation among the Washington elite.

If you look at what Tony Blair has to say in his speeches after 2003, he gets his argument from Bernard Lewis, who claims there's an inherent fanaticism to the culture of the Middle East. There are two options to contain this fanaticism: one is to have dictatorships that prevent it from being expressed against the West, the old conservative formula of Kissinger that led to the long-term relationships between the U.S. government and the Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian militaries.

But Blair, Bernard Lewis and other neoconservatives interpreted 9/11 as an indication that that methodology no longer worked, so they opted for the second option: to completely eradicate the culture. In Iraq they wanted to destroy the entire social fabric and start from scratch, rebuilding the entire culture in the image of American neoliberalism.

The model for Bernard Lewis was the Ataturk model in Turkey, but what happens in Iraq is that Iraqis themselves prevent that destruction from happening. As all people eventually do when confronted with imperialism, what happens in Iraq is that the people themselves resist. But the attempt to realize this neoconservative vision in Iraq has left us with the complete devastation of a society.

What's striking is just how delusional the idea that through violence you can enter a country, destroy every aspect of that society's functioning and rebuild it from scratch: it's a kind of weird, neoconservative vanguardism.

What's the connection between policies introduced in Iraq and the domestic sphere in the U.S. and Europe, or to paraphrase yourself: how have those policies come home?

The war came home in various different ways. The fundamental principle is that when you go to war in a country in the modern era and when that war is not motivated by self-defense in what is essentially a colonial war, you need to find some way to legitimize it to the population back home, who aren't inherently interested in invading other countries. In the modern era, the story usually involves racism.

And in Iraq, you get a kind of Islamophobic blowback, especially from 2004-5 onward. The attempt to justify the Iraq War necessarily involved fostering stereotypes about Islamic culture. As the occupation faced defeat, these kinds of stereotypes grew all the more intense. "We are trying to give them democracy but because of their culture, they don't want it," was the argument.

In Iraq, what was central to Petraeus' counterinsurgency approach were very long-standing, traditional ideas surrounding the role of culture: the idea that in order to secure the occupation you had to divide up the population according to what the embedded anthropologists would have called different tribal identities within the Iraqi population.

At the same time, you start to see a fascination in the American commentariat with the idea that the sophisticated anthropological knowledge of the American military command could somehow fix the problem of a supposedly barbaric, fanatical culture by dividing, monitoring and controlling it on the basis of tribal allegiances. Very few journalists scratched beneath the surface to reveal this was just

a very standard, old-fashioned divide and rule strategy.

Actually, we ought to more accurately describe it as a “define and rule” strategy because often these tribal identities were being produced by the military occupation itself. The sectarian conflicts that have plagued Iraq and Syria since the occupation are not ancient hatreds that people in America believe are a sign of the primitive culture of the region; they have essentially been produced through the military occupation itself.

Then there are the more practical, policy-related areas in which the war comes home: surveillance technologies that were first developed for use in Iraq, which are then applied within the United States. Also, what happens to the high numbers of ex-military personnel who served in Iraq, whose experience is bound up with the Islamophobic, colonial worldview that was inevitably part of that war? They work in law-enforcement agencies including the FBI on counter-terrorism, bringing home the same mentality in Iraq toward Muslims to law-enforcement agencies in the United States.

When a society launches a colonial war, there are all kinds of ways in which it leads to racism back home.

What about the difference between the Bush and the Obama administrations? You argue that Obama “bureaucratized” the war on terror.

What began as a neoconservative project was mainstreamed by the Obama administration. He made it possible for the War on Terror to be a permanent feature of the foreign policy conversation. That’s why any future president coming into the White House next year is going to be continuing the exact same framework as Bush left us with in 2008. Obama has not fundamentally altered the inheritance. There are some slight changes in the rhetoric and how he presents it but the essential approach is the same.

A very interesting article came out about a week ago by Jeffrey Goldberg called the “Obama Doctrine.” Based on an interview with the president, it probably gives us the clearest insight into Obama’s foreign policy thinking. And it’s very clear that Obama’s approach to foreign policy is entirely within the mainstream foreign policy establishment in ways that quite a few people on the left deluded themselves into thinking otherwise for quite a while.

The way in which Obama understands the Middle East comes out very clearly in that piece. The same assumptions repeat themselves: there’s a cultural problem in the Middle East, it’s not about a history of conflict over U.S. foreign policy and interventions; the legacy of European colonialism; the fact that we’ve backed authoritarian regimes, the Israeli military occupation. It’s not about these problems for Obama. The problem in the Middle East for Obama is cultural.

In your latest book, you spend a lot of time analyzing how domestic policies in the war on terror have affected and criminalized dissent, especially among Muslim communities.

The spaces for dissent for Muslims in the war on terror have been shut down. Actions that for anybody else would be seen as dissent are, for Muslims, seen as extremism. Within the domestic war on terror discourse, extremism is always a precursor to terrorism, so with the widening of counter-terrorism legislation, ideas the government considers unacceptable are now a crime. People are criminalized not for what they do but for what they say and express.

One of the earliest examples is the Holy Land Foundation case, which was an organization providing charitable support to Palestinians, a minimal level of solidarity. The leaders of the organization were convicted of material support for terrorism on the grounds that money being sent to Palestine was

finding its way into the hands of Hamas. But Hamas were the administrative authority in places where this money was being distributed, so it's hard to imagine the money not going to the group in some form or other.

The prosecution was politically motivated; it was an attempt to shut down even minimal levels of solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Since then, the same legislation, the so-called "material support statute," has been used to criminalize hundreds of Muslims in the United States, many of whom have been criminalized for expressing political opinions against the war on terror and opposing U.S. foreign policy.

In terms of everyday life, for Muslims this has created a culture of self-censorship because people are aware of the high-levels of surveillance in the United States. Every mosque is under surveillance as well as cafes, bookshops, community organizations, so people no longer want to express their opinions on religious and political activities.

That's a loss for Muslims because they're losing a core aspect of their citizenship within the United States. But it's also a loss for the United States generally because we lose the opportunity to learn from their knowledge of what's being done in our name in regions of the world they're likely to be familiar with. It actually means we continue to have debates about American power around the world that are totally disconnected from the reality of what's going on on the ground.

Thinking about how Muslims have been demonized and targeted through various different interventions since 9/11, how do you see these kinds of measures affecting other groups such as asylum seekers and the wider population in the U.S. and the U.K.?

I'm not sure if that's how this works. It may be the case that they come for the Muslims, the asylum seekers, the migrants and Mexicans and various other groups seen as minorities, but everyone else is allowed to get on with their lives in a fairly comfortable way. The moment when this hits the majority doesn't happen because the system has some inbuilt checks against that happening so it can maintain its legitimacy.

The problem we have is that our inherited idea of what political evil looks like is very much the classical, mid-20th century idea of totalitarianism: Nazism, Stalinism, Orwell, Hannah Arendt. But it may be that these images get in the way of grasping what we're now dealing with.

The reason we had totalitarianism in the 20th century is because there were mass-movements that were insurgent. In our age, you don't see these kinds of movements in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, so the system doesn't need to deploy that type of totalitarian response to maintain the basic reproduction of a capitalist society like it did in the 20th century.

For the mainstream Left this poses a challenge because there's always been a tendency to drop questions specific to racialized groups off the agenda. This has been one of the vulnerabilities for Bernie Sanders.

We need a politics that can grasp the evil of these newer forms of criminalization, surveillance and so forth without having to tell a story about how these ultimately affect everyone. For the foreseeable future, this stuff will only affect specific communities. It's a kind of totalitarianism outside the traditional, Orwellian image. It calls into question the stories we tell about political evil.

Our default idea of political evil is Nazism. But what if we start to tell a story where we give as much weight to European colonialism as our default idea of what political evil looks like, with its history of genocide, suppressing freedom of expression, censorship, police states, ethnic cleansing, mass-

displacement?

The war on terror looks very much like that: race is central to the history of European colonialism and the war on terror. If we to start shift that sense of history then we don't need to reach for the analogy of Nazism before we denounce something as a political evil.

You argue “radicalization is the solution, not the problem.” Thinking in those terms, where do we go from here? How do you see the war on terror developing and what should our response be to it?

What is it that leads to a small number of young, European people thinking it's a good idea to go to Syria and volunteer to fight for ISIS? It's because there's an absence of visions of utopia, of successfully trying to change the world. We don't have anyone else giving us visions of social progress. We just have the highly bureaucratized and formal politics of the mainstream parliamentary system – which nobody really believes in anymore, if we're honest about it – and a handful of social movements that are addressing important issues but don't really articulate a vision of what a different society might look like.

This has created a kind of vacuum within which a group like ISIS can appear attractive to a small number of people. ISIS have a very clear, explicit idea of what an alternative society might look like. It's a very simplistic politics rooted in a black and white worldview with very little behind it. Nevertheless, it speaks to certain issues that people are trying to grapple with.

I think, therefore, the solution is not to create societies in which visions for social progress become criminalized more and more, which shuts down the space for radical politics. The solution is precisely to create alternatives to ISIS but not liberal, mainstream alternatives. We need radical political alternatives.

We need to do a better job on the Left of actually having a presence and engaging with the communities that are generating a level of interest in ISIS, working-class communities of color but working-class white communities as well that have not been offered any kind of alternative to center-left politics. The Left has become too suburbanized, a little too comfortable and a little bland in its discourse.

We're in a situation where communism was discredited with the end of the Cold War and now capitalism is being discredited. There is a space, an opportunity, people are looking for some new way to organize social relations but we're not doing a very good job of offering anything. The Left is totally dominated by academics, elite journalists, professions that are unrepresented by people from working-class backgrounds.

A political formation which is meant to be about the liberation and emancipation of working-class people is not able to practice what it preaches in its own movement. It's a total paradox.

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<http://www.telesur.tv/english/opinion/The-Domestic-War-on-Terror-How-Iraq-Changed-Everything-20160321-0003.html>

* Arun Kundnani writes about race, Islamophobia, political violence and surveillance. His latest book, "The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic War on Terror," was published by Verso Books in March 2014. Born and bred in London, he moved to New York in 2010 on a fellowship with the Open Society Foundations and now lives in Harlem. He is the author of "The End of Tolerance: racism in 21st century Britain," which was selected as New Statesman book of the year in 2007. A former editor of the Institute of Race Relations' journal "Race & Class," he was miseducated at Cambridge University, holds a PhD from London Metropolitan University, and teaches at New York University.