

9/11: how the United States' - and UK's - hubris met its Nemesis

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On the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks, Gilbert Achcar explores the consequences of attempted US expansionism in the 'Greater Middle East'

Twenty years ago, nineteen men, filled with hatred of the United States and faith in the promise of paradise, blew themselves up, killing thousands of people and provoking one of the greatest global political shocks in world history. They all originated from the Middle East; fifteen of them were citizens of Washington's oldest and closest ally in that region: the Saudi kingdom. The chickens had come home to roost.

For decades, the US government had intrigued in the Middle East, supporting despotic regimes and fostering Islamic fundamentalism as an antidote to anything deemed to be left-wing. In 1990, the USSR's agony seemed to usher in a 'new world order' dominated by Washington – what an American columnist aptly dubbed the 'unipolar moment'. The US empire, which hitherto was still reeling from its 'Vietnam syndrome', managed to overcome it – or so Bush Sr believed – in launching a devastating attack on Iraq in 1991. Bush had been prompted by Margaret Thatcher to push Iraqi troops out of neighbouring Kuwait, which they had invaded in August 1990. Iraq was then strangled by a cruel embargo that caused 90,000 excess deaths every year, according to UN figures.

That was the first time ever that the United States conducted a fully-fledged war in the Middle East. It had hitherto waged wars by proxy, especially through its Israeli ally. The 9/11 attacks were the direct result of this shift: a spectacular 'asymmetric' response on US soil to US massive deployment in the Middle East. And yet, far from stepping back and reconsidering an involvement that had blown back so dramatically, George W. Bush and the neoconservative wild bunch that populated his administration saw in 9/11 their Pearl Harbor. It was another opportunity to further US expansionism in what they called the Greater Middle East, a vast area stretching from Western Asia to Central Asia and 'AfPak' with no common feature other than Islam.

Bush and his team brought post-Cold War American hubris to its peak. They went into Afghanistan, along with NATO and other allies, with a view to turning the country into a platform for US penetration in a region strategically located between Russia's heartland and China, the two potential challengers to Washington's unipolar hegemony. Eighteen months later, they invaded Iraq, their most coveted prize due to its oil reserves and location in the Gulf, a vital region for oil-related strategic and economic reasons. This neo-colonial expedition was much more contested worldwide than the Afghan one, despite Tony Blair's enthusiastic support and the UK's inglorious participation.

The invasion of Iraq had been the leitmotiv of the Project for the New American Century, the think tank whose name epitomised American hubris and of which key figures of George W. Bush's administration had been members. They held the self-delusory belief that the United States could remake Iraq in its image, and that the Iraqis would overwhelmingly espouse this prospect. They had

much less illusion about Afghanistan, judging by the number of US troops deployed there –far less than in Iraq. But there too, they engaged in a foolish project of state-building, after realising that there were actually more willing collaborators of the US-led occupation in Afghanistan than in Iraq itself.

They thus discarded the cardinal lesson of Vietnam of never getting bogged down in a protracted military adventure whose success is uncertain. Iraq quickly turned into a quagmire. By 2006, the occupation had clearly become a mess. While US troops were busy fighting an Arab Sunni insurgency led by the same Al-Qaeda that Washington had extirpated from Afghanistan, Iran secured its control of Iraq by way of allied Arab Shia forces enabled by the US-UK occupation itself. The US ruling class blew the whistle and forced the occupation's main architect, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to resign. A bipartisan commission of Congress devised an exit strategy, involving a temporary 'surge' in US troops along with buying the allegiance of Arab Sunni tribes to overcome the insurgency. Bush then concluded an agreement with the Iran-backed Baghdad government for the withdrawal of US troops by the end of 2011. His successor, Barack Obama, oversaw the withdrawal's completion.

Obama tried to repeat the 'surge' in Afghanistan. It failed miserably, as US-allied corrupt warlords never had much credit (the Taliban had taken over in 1996 after defeating them). Obama then initiated an exit programme, which his successor Donald Trump suspended for a while to try a new 'surge' – not against the Taliban alone, but also against Al-Qaeda's new avatar, the Islamic State (IS). The latter had moved from Iraq into Syria in 2012, built up its forces there taking advantage of the civil war, then gone back into Iraq in a sweeping invasion of the Arab Sunni areas in the summer of 2014. This provoked an ignominious debacle of Iraq's governmental forces set up, trained, and armed by Washington.

The United States fought back against IS by massive bombing in support of local fighters on the ground, who paradoxically included left-wing Kurdish forces in Syria and pro-Iran militias in Iraq. IS was reduced back to an underground guerrilla force – except that it had already started spreading globally, especially in Africa and Asia. Taliban hard-line dissidents created a local branch of IS. By getting rid of Osama bin Laden in 2011, Obama had finalised Al-Qaeda's defeat, only to witness soon after the emergence of its yet more violent avatar.

Trump eventually threw in the towel. He reduced the number of US troops to the bare minimum and concluded an agreement with the Taliban for the withdrawal of remaining foreign troops in 2021. This was overseen by Joe Biden, in the tragically botched manner that the whole world witnessed in August. The Kabul government's army collapsed in a debacle identical to that of the Baghdad government's troops. As in Greek mythology, the United States' (and UK's) hubris had once again inflamed the ire of the goddess Nemesis and been punished consequently.

The defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused a relapse of the United States into the 'Vietnam syndrome'. This doesn't mean though that Washington will refrain from imperial aggression: it only means that it won't engage anytime soon in protracted large-scale deployments in other countries with a view to rebuild their state. Washington will rather use more intensively its 'over-the-horizon capabilities', as Joe Biden pledged in his 31st August allocution. Obama, who had opposed in the Senate the 2003 invasion of Iraq, resorted much more intensively to drone strikes than his predecessor. This pattern was continued by Trump, along with missile strikes, and likewise with Biden.

It will no doubt further intensify. Such strikes are war in small doses, no less lethal over time than occasional massive injections, and more pernicious in that they escape public scrutiny. They must be stopped.

P.S.

- Labour Hub. September 10, 2021:

<https://labourhub.org.uk/2021/09/10/9-11-how-the-united-states-and-uks-hubris-met-its-nemesis/>

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