

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/05/20135287294352522.html>

Obama's haunting and the curse of governance

The seeds of the present war were not sown during 9/11, but half a century before and were nurtured by US policies.

Mark LeVin
5/28/2013

If Obama wants to end the "war on terror", he has to change American policy across the Muslim world - and indeed, globally - to support real democracy, justice, freedom and development across the region [Reuters]

"These deaths will haunt us as long as we live..."

I hope so.

It would be nice to believe that the President of the United States, or any other leader, is actually haunted by the deaths of civilians at the hands of the military he commands.

In this case, the President was referring to civilians killed by American drone strikes in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is impossible to know the precise number - critics put the estimate at 1,000 or even higher - and until now the US government has attempted to minimise the number by claiming most of the dead were combatants, based on the rationale that any military-age male hit by a drone was most likely a combatant and thus a legitimate target.

This is not the way you clear away ghosts.

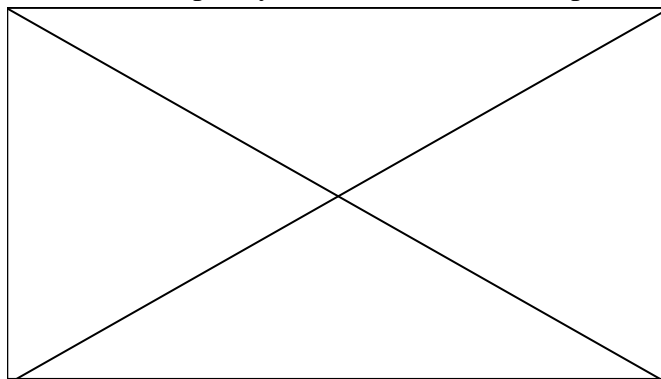
Indeed, if the President has been haunted by civilian deaths, many of the ghosts are of the men he executed merely because they possessed a certain "signature" - the way they looked or where they were at a specific moment. Imagine the uproar if the President was targeting young black or hispanic men for harassment or arrest, never mind termination, merely because of the clothes they were wearing or corner they were hanging out on (or because they responded to someone being blown up down the block or were even at a funeral of an alleged gang member, all of which has happened to civilian victims of US drone strikes).

Of course, the President would never do that. But young Muslim men living in what to Americans are "the most distant and unforgiving places on Earth"; well, maybe all those strikes haunt him enough to want to process them with his fellow Americans to help clear the air, and even his conscience. But they do not seem to be haunting him enough for him to end the practice. If the President's speech on May 23 at the National Defense University reflected an unusual and very public expression of ambivalence about policies that are still being pursued by his administration, the ambivalence remains largely at the level of rhetoric rather than policy. The "appropriate balance between our need for security and preserving those freedoms that make us who we are", which the President declares he is trying to strike, is one that can only be achieved by understanding precisely who the "we" are that the administration's actions are trying to "secure", and then determining whether this "we" actually represents the American people and whether its security is in fact the goal - or at the least, a likely outcome - of his policies.

Twilight histories

"And so our nation went to war."

If the President is haunted by his actions, a core reason is likely because he has not, and indeed cannot, provide the proper historical context for understanding the present policies and why they seem to be producing such animosity abroad and, increasingly, concern inside the US. While the President traces the present moment back "over two centuries", and reminds his listeners that Americans have always been "deeply ambivalent about war", he refuses to shine light on the decades of US policy that contributed to the present dynamics of the "war on terror".



Inside Story Americas - How effective are US drone strikes?

Instead, he merely refers to the "long, twilight struggle of the Cold War" as part of the "price [that] must be paid for freedom". But was the Cold War really a "twilight war"? Tell that to the roughly 95,000 American soldiers killed in Korea and Vietnam, not to mention the millions of Koreans and Southeast Asians killed by American forces. Or to the - literally - countless people killed, governments overthrown and conflicts stoked in proxy wars across Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East and, finally, Afghanistan.

If these were all twilight wars, what does the President consider to be war in the light of day?

Does President Obama really not understand that when he describes a "group of terrorists [coming] to kill as many civilians as they could", people around the world are more likely to think of al-Qaeda than the US? To say this in no way diminishes the evil of al-Qaeda and Muslim terrorism; far from it. Rather, it points to the reality that the seeds of the present war were not sown at the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11. They were planted half a century before and were nurtured (whether carelessly or deliberately is another matter) by US policies that for decades put terror in the hearts of people around the world.

That other countries - the Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Mao's China, and on and on - also pursued and supported oppression, violence and terror at home and abroad does not change the reality that terrorism has been a core tool in the arsenal of US strategic policies, whether diplomatic or kinetic, for as long as it has been a "great power". Indeed, if we consider the crucial role played by the cleansing and near extermination of Native Americans and of slavery in the first centuries of American history, the use of large scale violence against civilians to advance the interests of elites is at the core of America's political and cultural DNA.

Of course, that does not make the US "exceptional" (as its leaders are so fond of saying). It makes it all-too normal a country. But when every leader in memory has defined the US as "exceptional" for precisely the opposite reasons to what in actuality makes it normal, the cognitive dissonance makes it nearly impossible for Americans to come to grips with the root causes of the present global conflict in which it is enmeshed.

Roots of the 'war on terror'

This is why, when the President argues that "And so our nation went to war. We have now been at war for well over a decade. I won't review the full history..." he won't review the full history because he simply cannot review the full history. To provide a full, or even a fuller, historical accounting of the roots of the "war on terror" and how they impact current US policies, would be to reveal the moral bankruptcy of the very policies Obama is, quite literally, sworn to uphold.

When he next argues that "these threats don't arise in a vacuum", the President ironically can only sustain this claim by creating an ideological vacuum in which to contextualise it. Thus he argues that:

"Most, though not all, of the terrorism we face is fuelled by a common ideology - a belief by some extremists that Islam is in conflict with the United States and the West, and that violence against Western targets, including civilians, is justified in pursuit of a larger cause. Of course, this ideology is based on a lie, for the United States is not at war with Islam; and this ideology is rejected by the vast majority of Muslims, who are the most frequent victims of terrorist acts."

Of course the US is not at war with "Islam"; that is a straw man argument Obama, like his predecessor, is fond of deploying. But it is at war with millions of Muslims. What is more important here is that Obama, like Bush before him, is lying here: Most Muslim terrorism is not simply the product of a groundless and irrational ideology; it is a direct response to US and broader "Western" policies that either have directly oppressed, harmed and killed millions of people across the Muslim world, or supported governments that do so.

The horrific video of the machete-wielding, blood-drenched terrorist in London explaining his rationale for butchering a British soldier just before Obama's speech is only the latest proof of this. That such actions have no moral or legal justification cannot change the fact that over and over again, terrorists justify them by pointing out all the violence Western governments have supported or themselves visited upon Muslims around the world.

The US military and intelligence agencies have long admitted the reality that those who "hate" America do not do so because of the freedom Americans enjoy, but rather because of the freedom their government has worked to deny the inhabitants of "distant lands" around the world. But the President cannot own up to this reality; instead he can only talk of black and white choices, of "weigh[ing] these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives" of "do[ing] nothing in the face of terrorist networks".

What the President must do if he wants to bring the "war on terror" to a close, is acknowledge that the "war on terror" will be won not by winning the "battle of wills and ideas", but rather by changing the foundations of American policy across the Muslim world (and indeed, globally) to

support real democracy, justice, freedom and development across the region. The only successful "counter-terrorism" policy would be one that counters the terrorism the US has for so long supported, whether it is the terror of Israeli occupation or the terror of brutal autocratic rule in countries from Morocco to Saudi Arabia. How the President can talk about counter-terrorism while his administration serves as the lynchpin for a system of violence and repression in dozens of countries is as audacious as it is mendacious. Listening Post - The dangers of reporting the 'war on terror'

"America is at a crossroads..."

... explained President Obama about a third of the way through his talk, declaring that "we must define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us". The problem with this reasoning is that the struggle long ago completed its imprint on the American political psyche. Thus the ongoing support by a majority of Americans for the continued use of drone strikes despite the violations of international law and morality they entail is evidence of this reality.

The President cleverly attempted to put himself on the right side of the "rule of law" by declaring that it was his predecessor, President Bush, who "compromised our basic values - by using torture to interrogate our enemies, and detaining individuals in a way that ran counter to the rule of law".

This argument only holds water as long as one buys the present administration's argument that "everything we do, though, that is carried out against al-Qaeda is carried out consistent with the rule of law, the authorisation on the use of military force, and domestic law..." as CIA Chief John Brennan recently argued, despite clear evidence that civilians have been and continue to "frequently" be victims of these policies.

The problem with the rule of law is that it ultimately follows the rule of politics - those in power get to make the laws, or at least interpret them to justify their own actions and ensure that even when they behave in ways that a normal person would consider illegal (and in fact, are illegal to most interpretations of international law), they remain within the framework of legality as they have arrogated to themselves the power to define it. Thus the Obama administration will continue to kill people anywhere in the world outside of recognised battlefields without trial or due process, as long as it is done within what the US governments determines is "due process" and the "rule of law" (Palestinians understand this logic only all too well, as do Egyptians who long suffered under Mubarak's American-supported "rule of law").

This process ultimately can come back to haunt the administration pursuing it, however, as we have seen with the current scandal involving the Justice Department spying on reporters engaged in the normal business of their craft. But it is only natural that even a supposedly liberal administration would become increasingly jealous about guarding its secrets, and through them, its power, as long as citizens do not push back against such policies (in fact, it is not just citizens who can affect change. In the case of Guantanamo Bay, it is the spectre of the mass wave of hunger strikes that has haunted the administration to the point where the President has decided he had no choice but to expend precious political capital to fulfill one of his most glaringly unfulfilled original campaign promises).

This is a dynamic that conservatives have long understood about government far better than liberals - its natural tendency to arrogate power and weaken the rights of the people it is meant to serve. Since the very birth of the modern nation-state system half a millennium ago the "state" - that is, those who are closest to the centres of political and economic power and the institutions they control - has been defined by its "firm domination over peoples", to quote the 17th-century Italian thinker Giovanni Botero. Whether republic or monarchy, and whatever the rhetoric or

ideology deployed by rulers, the reality is that the role of citizens has ultimately been to foster the strength of the state, and not the other way around.

The equation was reversed for a time in the post-Depression/World War II era when an unprecedented balance of power between governing and economic elites, and the mass of people represented by the working class, was achieved in the industrialised West. That balance enabled the post-War miracle in Europe and the US, but it came at a very steep price for the peoples of the "Third World", whose suffering in the "twilight wars" of the Cold War era was an inseparable part of the prosperity "at home", much as the suffering and exploitation of the colonies was central to the unparalleled prosperity of the great European empires of the first great eras of globalisation.

Need a change in policy

With the technological advances of contemporary globalisation, this balance of power was upset to the advantage of the corporate class, and thus states once again saw as their main function the protection of economic elites and the increasingly violent disciplining of everyone else to ensure the former's ever increasing share of wealth and power. This process, described today under the rubric of neoliberalism, ensures that even seemingly "liberal" politicians like Barack Obama can only enter into and remain in power to the extent they adhere to its logic, even when their campaigns are ostensibly built around helping the "common man". The use of the most advanced technologies to spy on reporters is an apt example of this dynamic run amok.

Every once in a while, however, the state overreaches. Whether it is invading too many countries, killing too many civilians, spying on too many journalists, slavishly catering to a small corporate/financial elite, or so mistreating prisoners that they prefer an agonising death from hunger to continued participation in the spectacle of state power - governments can suddenly pass the point where the people under their control will sheepishly participate in their own subjection. At this point a new narrative - or rather, a new-old narrative - is needed, in lieu of a serious change in policy, if the status quo is to continue. President Obama made an effort to create such a discourse with his speech at the National Defense University. It is too early to tell if the media, public sphere, and the "people" will accept it at face value and return to their "normal" lives, as the administration and much of the commentariat hope. It has been so long since Americans have been forced honestly to examine their history that there is little precedent for the public forcing the government to talk and behave in a more historically honest manner.

What is clear, however, is that if the President and the "firm domination" he represents do not feel serious pressure from Americans fundamentally to change the basic dynamics underlying US policies in the Muslim world, the policies that have made terrorism a basic experience of American life will continue, and the level of animosity and anger represented by the seemingly random and insane acts of terrorists from the sidelines of the Boston Marathon to the streets of London will become an ever more present fact of life in the West.

Whether the violence will ultimately lead to a greater erosion of basic rights for all citizens, or will so anger citizens that they forcefully confront their governments to demand a more holistic change, remains anyone's guess. What is sure, however, is that it will not be Obama that pushes such a new track forward. Instead it will be activists like Medea Benjamin of Code Pink, who has become such a powerful fixture at these kinds of occasions that President Obama has been forced to bestow an unprecedented level of legitimacy upon her and the movement she represents, and the Guantanamo hunger-strikers, reclaiming their dignity at the expense of their bodies, who will offer the most powerful narratives for activism against untrammelled state power in the future.

Mark LeVine is professor of Middle Eastern history at UC Irvine and distinguished visiting professor at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University in Sweden and the author of the forthcoming book about the revolutions in the Arab world, *The Five Year Old Who Toppled a Pharaoh*. His book, *Heavy Metal Islam*, which focused on 'rock and resistance and the struggle for soul' in the evolving music scene of the Middle East and North Africa, was published in 2008.