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Spiegel Online

Ten Lost Years

By Jakob Augstein

Ten years have passed since Sept. 11, 2001, and today only losers remain. Islam has been taken hostage by blinded ideologues. The West has betrayed its values in its struggle against terror, and we are now burdened with Islamophobes. Without 9/11, the crimes of Anders Behring Breivik and the rise of right-wing populists in Europe would be inconceivable.

What remains etched in our minds, 10 years after the fact? Two images tell the entire story. One is of the burning Twin Towers and the other of a prisoner being tortured in Abu Ghraib. This is the iconography of human insanity: the horrific crime in New York and the horrific crime of the war against terror.

Violence was fought with violence, only to generate even more violence.

Anyone who believed that people had learned something from the wars of the 20th century was promptly disabused of that notion at the beginning of the new millennium. In fact, we have learned nothing. We are still all too willing to exterminate each other, even with our bare hands. And we always have good reasons to do so. We are always in the right.

What remains, 10 years later? The realization that those who pursue the law of revenge are condemning themselves. And that a record of horror never adds up. The policy of the United States after 9/11 wasn't merely immoral. It actually damaged the country.

The roughly 3,000 people who died on Sept. 11 were followed by more than 6,000 dead American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, countless civilian victims, 5 million refugees and costs currently estimated at more than \$3 trillion (€2.13 trillion).

What should the West have done after the attacks on America? The "War on Terror" should have ended when al-Qaida was driven out of Afghanistan. Instead, the United States turned it into an ideological world war.

It expended so many of its resources in this struggle, beyond all reasonable measure, that it led to shifts in the global tectonics of power. The rise of China, which may have been unstoppable already, was accelerated. The United States overestimated its abilities, and the neocons' fantasies of omnipotence failed as a result. Democracy -- if it ever was the objective -- cannot be bombed into existence by some outside force. It has to grow from within.

A Perilous and Pointless Division of the World

What remains, 10 years later? What remains is that many Muslims and Westerners consider each other to be fanatical and dangerous (the Muslims also consider people in the West to be corrupt and greedy). What remains is a division of the world into Muslims and Westerners that is as perilous as it is pointless, a division that goes deeper and seems more irreparable than anyone could have imagined before the concept of the clash of cultures was invented. It is a division that separates nations and continents, but that is also tearing apart Western societies from within. The pathological Islamophobia spreading through large parts of Europe and contributing to the rise in the popularity of right-wing populist parties and movements is inconceivable without 9/11. And the crimes of mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik are inconceivable without 9/11.

When we look at what remains, 10 years later, it no longer matters whether Osama bin Laden, that revolutionary of evil, achieved his actual objective. His giant caliphate uniting all Muslims was not achieved. On the contrary, as a result of his attack on the Americans, the al-Qaida leader brought ruin to Afghanistan, the only country in which his ideas had already been largely put into practice -- from a ban on tape-recorders to acid attacks on schoolgirls to the destruction of ancient statues. Bin Laden failed as a revolutionary. But as a terrorist he was successful beyond compare.

Ten years later, is all of this merely cause for despair? No. It is correct that not even the great flood managed to wash away all evil from the earth. In the end, God said with resignation, as it is written in the First Book of Moses: "I will henceforth curse the ground no more for man's cause,

for the imagination of man's heart *is* evil, even from his youth." But what Franz Kafka describes in "The Trial" as the most horrible thing of all, namely that "the lie has become the order of the world," will not prevail in the long run.

Osama bin Laden lies dead on the ocean floor, George W. Bush has retired to some farm in Texas, and the Arab Spring has begun in North Africa. That's a start, at least.