



## What 9/11 unleashed on us

The twin crises of liberal statecraft and of authority from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan are still with us.

### Reaction and Phobia after 9/11

1. The unprecedented acts of terror on 9/11, when death literally fell from the sky, were ostensibly motivated by an impulse to revenge and restoration.
2. The perpetrators who carried it out sought to teach a lesson to the West, and re-position their version of Islam as a powerful political force. But like a blast whose reverberations fly in all directions, the deepest impulses behind the attack were less strategic and more apocalyptic. They set in motion two crises that are still with us.



### The crisis of the West

1. The first was the crisis of the West. It is often said that more than 9/11, it was the overreaction and response to 9/11 that shaped its meaning.
2. There is a great deal of truth to that: 9/11 became the pretext to start two wars, put in motion the perpetual war machine, legitimise unaccountable exercise of executive power, institute the surveillance state, provide mendacious justifications for torture and reinstate the idea that civilian casualties could be counted as mere collateral damage.
3. The West was weakened in two ways. The United States was drawn into wars that it could neither win nor sustain. They also left a trail of political dislocation from Iraq to Afghanistan. This weakened the US's geopolitical credibility and authority.
4. But the West was weakened through a betrayal of liberalism domestically and abroad. Liberalism has still not found that foreign policy does not leave the world open to terrorist regimes and their sympathisers on the one hand, and does not devolve into arbitrary overreach causing needless suffering on the other.

11.09.2021

Saturday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

5. As an idea, liberalism depends upon a presumptive trust in the world, and in the dignity of individuals. It depends upon, even if feigned, a sense of innocence about the world, where the “other” is not an object of suspicion. It can rarely survive a climate of fear.

### The idea of terror

1. The most consequential outcome of 9/11 was to enshrine terrorism as an abstract and all-pervasive idea in our imagination. It showed that even very small groups, under the right conditions, can produce spectacular effects.
2. It created a disposition to believe that any location or person could be a target, or that threat lurked in the most unlikely of places.
3. It is true that the West unconscionably overreached. But this is exactly the psychological alchemy terrorism produces. The state is politically damned if it is seen as not taking every measure to prevent another attack.
4. That there was no repeat of an attack of that scale in the US might be chalked up to at least some kind of success. But it came with a price.
5. Many measures used in the war on terror weakened liberalism. The overreach of Western powers also gives succour to the very enemies it is trying to combat.

### Crisis of authority within Islam

1. But if perpetrators of 9/11 wanted revenge against the West, they also wanted to reconfigure Islam. This created a second crisis. In its semiotics, 9/11 was a modern event. Not only did it use modern technology, it used a modern communicative strategy: Create a spectacular event to establish a new norm and get more recruits to the cause.
2. It also wanted to destabilise all forms of authority in the Middle East. Al Qaeda and the response to it also marked the death nail of varieties of Arab nationalism. These trends predated 9/11. But 9/11 accelerated the crisis of authority from Egypt to Afghanistan and beyond.
3. New groups like ISIS that rose in the wake of al Qaeda deepened the crisis of authority within Islam, replacing the old conservatism with a new and more repressive radicalism. But they also deepened an already incipient crisis of authority of the nation-state form in West Asia.
4. If the West had an interest in, and overreached in its strategy, the same could be said of states in the Middle East and North Africa. One of the less talked about aspects of the war on terror is how much these states feared the destabilising effects of transnational groups like al Qaeda and ISIS that could in turn threaten their legitimacy.



11.09.2021

Saturday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

5. The irony of all this is, of course, that the West had to ally with repressive regimes, from Saudi Arabia to Egypt; they served each other's interests. But, ironically, it made the West an ally of the very repression that had spawned religious radicalism in the first place.
6. If the intent of the attackers was to induce a paroxysm of self-destruction in the West, it was equally to introduce a repressive, fratricidal and apocalyptic violence amongst its Muslim co-religionists. Yemen, Afghanistan and Iraq were just three of these battlegrounds.
7. So, in some ways, the aftermath of 9/11 became, not a war between Islam and the West, but states of all kinds and radical Islamic groups whose playbook was shaped in the aftermath of 9/11.

### Indian Perspective:

1. India, despite being a prime target, weathered the storm relatively well, because democracy provided a safety valve and inoculation against the temptations of apocalyptic terrorism.
2. Its biggest challenge came from support for cross-border violence in Pakistan. Countries like Pakistan spectacularly played both sides of the argument, positioning themselves as indispensable allies to the West, while doing their best to create an environment propitious for terrorism.

### Conclusion In the context of the triumph of the Taliban in Afghanistan:

1. In one sense, the twin crises that 9/11 unleashed, the crisis of liberal statecraft, and the crisis of authority from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, are still with us.
2. Biden would like to think that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan might help mitigate the first crisis. But the victory of the Taliban on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 will likely politically exacerbate both crises.
3. It will deepen the contest over authority in a number of states and embolden fundamentalists. Critics of liberalism will seize on its seeming inability to push back the Taliban. Domestic divisions within democracies will likely make a coherent response difficult.

While all established states fear the destabilising effects of transnational terrorism, they will also be tempted to both fish in troubled waters, and secure themselves first. So a coherent international response is also unlikely. Twenty years, and hundreds of thousands of lives later, we are back where we started: In grip of a fear we still don't know how to address politically.

## Two decades after 9/11, the nation-state remains robust

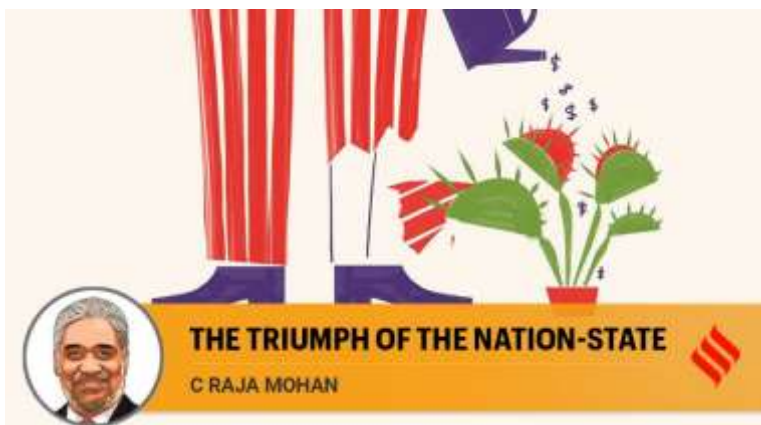
All nations, including liberal democracies, have curtailed individual liberty by offering greater security against terrorism.

### Justifying abuse of state power in the name of Terror

1. One major inference in the wake of 9/11 was about the power of non-state actors — demonstrated by al Qaeda's massive surprise attack on the world's lone superpower at its zenith.
2. Al Qaeda's rise seemed to fit in with the age of economic globalisation and the internet, which heralded the weakening of the state system and the arrival of a borderless world.
3. Two decades later, though, the system of nation-states looks quite robust after enduring the challenge from international terrorism. And the ambition of the jihadists — who organised the 9/11 attacks, to destroy America, overthrow the Arab regimes, unleash a war with Israel, and pit the believers against the infidels — remains elusive as ever.
4. Like Communism and many other millenarian movements before it, the violent Islamist wave has run against impossible odds.
5. In the battle between states and non-states, the former have accumulated extraordinary powers in the name of fighting the latter. All nations, including liberal democracies, have curtailed individual liberty by offering greater security against terrorism. Abuse of state power has inevitably followed.

### Challenge of Terror:

1. The state system adapted quickly to the disruptions created by 9/11. There was much anxiety about terror groups gaining access to weapons of mass destruction or leveraging new digital technologies to increase their power over states.



11.09.2021

Saturday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

2. The state system has succeeded in keeping nuclear weapons and material away from terrorists. It has also become adept at using digital tools to counter extremism. States passed sweeping laws that permit relentless tracking of the growing digital footprints of citizens in the information age.
3. If 9/11 made air travel risky, the states quickly developed protocols to de-risk it. Until the Covid-19 virus threatened it, air transport in the post-9/11 world grew rapidly and boosted the global markets for travel and tourism.
4. The trans-national nature of the new terror groups was countered by better border controls and greater international cooperation on law enforcement.

### **End of American Dream in multiple ways:**

1. The choice of targets in the 9/11 attacks — the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — was not accidental. They were designed to strike at the very heart of American capitalism and its famed military power.
2. Marking the 20th anniversary of 9/11 days after the humiliating US retreat from Kabul and domestic turmoil might suggest that al Qaeda and its associates did succeed in ending America's unipolar moment.
3. But a closer look suggests that the US was humbled less by al Qaeda and the Taliban than by Washington's own follies. American capitalism met its greatest threat not in 2001 but in the 2008 financial crisis that was triggered by the reckless ideology of deregulation.
4. America lost in Afghanistan and the Middle East because it over-determined the terror threat and put security approaches above political common sense.
5. American ideologues used the 9/11 moment to pursue all kinds of fetishes — hunting for nuclear weapons that did not exist in Iraq, promoting democracy in the Middle East, and pursuing disastrous regime changes in the region.
6. After 9/11, President George W Bush turned his attention to confronting an imagined "global axis of evil" — Iran, Iraq and North Korea. None of the three countries was involved in 9/11.
7. And the US rewarded Pakistan with billions of dollars in military and economic assistance that actively nurtured the Taliban and succeeded in bleeding and defeating the US in Afghanistan.
8. The Middle East crusades cost America enormous blood and treasure. They took valuable resources away from America's own internal needs. They also blinded the US to an emerging challenger — China — on the horizon. Washington's obsession with the Middle East gave Beijing two valuable decades to consolidate its rise without any hindrance.



11.09.2021

Saturday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

Although America's unipolar moment may have ended, the US will continue to remain the most powerful nation in the world, with the greatest capacity to shape the international system. America's size, capabilities and the resilience to reinvent itself have given the US vast margins for error. The US is well set to pick up the pieces and move on from 9/11.

### **Crisis in West Asia:**

1. The Islamist effort to destroy the Gulf kingdoms spluttered quite quickly as the Arab monarchs cracked down hard on the jihadi groups.
2. Many Arab states do not see al Qaeda and its offshoots as existential threats. They worry more about other Muslim states like Turkey, Qatar and Iran that seek to leverage Islam for geopolitical purposes.
3. These fears have pushed smaller Gulf kingdoms towards Israel and shattered the jihadi hope to trigger the final Islamic assault on the Jewish state.

### **Nation-states vs the transcendental religious forces**

1. Developments in China and Pakistan reinforce the proposition that politics among nation-states is more significant than the power of the transcendental religious forces.
2. China has embarked on a bold mission to "Sinicise" Islam as part of a grand design to subordinate religion to Xi Jinping's thought. Beijing justifies its crackdown on the Muslims of the Xinjiang province by citing the terror threat.
3. Few states in the Islamic world have raised their voice against Beijing; for they see cooperation with the powerful Chinese state as more important than religious solidarity with Xinjiang Muslims.

In the subcontinent, as elsewhere, violent religious extremism thrives only under state patronage. The answers to the challenges presented by the return of the Taliban and the likely resurgence of jihadi terrorism are not in the religious domain but in changing the geopolitical calculus of Pakistan's deep state.

<p><b>Mains DAWP</b></p>	<p>Q. What are the geopolitical, socio-political and security implications of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the world. Discuss impacts on India and Indian response to it.</p>
------------------------------	---