

# War on Terrorism as a Global Civil War

by Stein Temnessonl

Presented to the IPRA Commission on Civil Wars at the  
IPRA General Conference in Seoul, South Korea, 2002

PEACE EDUCATION BOOKS



**Keywords:** 9/11, Afghanistan, Al-qaeda, anti-globalization, anti-state anarchists, Asia, CIA, civil war, Comintern, domestic terrorism, economic reconstruction, foreign terrorism, global civil war, global reforms, globalization, Guantanamo Bay, Homeland Security, imperialism, international war, internationalized intrastate war, Islamist, Jihad, Middle East, national sovereignty, nonviolence, Osama bin Laden, Pakistan, peace research, radical Islamism, rogue states, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Taliban, terrorism, transnational terrorism, transnational war, UN Security Council, unipolar world, USS Cole, war on terror, WMD, Yemen

## Introduction<sup>[1]</sup>

By 1998, research on terrorism had noted that the threat of catastrophic terrorism spans the globe, defying ready classification as solely foreign or domestic.<sup>[2]</sup> Like other foreign policy analysts, peace researchers normally distinguish between international and civil wars. While the former are waged between states, the latter are fought between rival armies within one state. Because the wars of liberation in the colonies during the period of 1946-75 do not fit into any of the two categories, they have been categorized in the PRIO/Uppsala dataset as extra-systemic.<sup>[3]</sup> They made up a substantial part of the wars registered in the 1946-75 period, but since 1976, all wars have been categorized as international, civil, or internationalized intrastate.<sup>[4]</sup> The number of civil wars has usually been higher than the international wars, and since 1960 much higher.<sup>[5]</sup>

The war that broke out on September 11, 2001 between Al-qaeda and the U.S. does not seem to fit into either of the two normal categories, nor the internationalized intrastate mold because it did not have its origin in any particular intrastate war. The U.S. war on terror includes an international war between the U.S. and its allies and the former Taliban Government of Afghanistan. However, this war did merge with the ongoing civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance; thus, the war between the U.S. and Al-qaeda cannot be reduced to a mixture of an international war and the civil war in Afghanistan, and did not only represent an international turn of that civil war. Afghanistan did not initiate the attack against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, which cost the lives of nearly 3000 people. However, Afghanistan did provide sanctuary and training camps for the initiator of the attack: Al-qaeda, which was not a state, but a transnational organization with cells in a network in several countries, and with goals that cannot be confined to any particular state. Moreover, the U.S. did not limit its reaction to the attacks of September 11, to either a campaign of law enforcement or a war against Afghanistan. Instead, the Bush administration launched a global war against a vaguely defined phenomenon called *terrorism*. It included Al-qaeda, but also a number of both national and transnational organizations, as well as some states that were alleged aides to terrorist groups and in possession of or seek to develop weapons of mass destruction: WMD.

It seems, therefore, that the war between Al-qaeda and the U.S., both from Al-qaeda's and the U.S. perspective, is neither an international war nor a traditional civil war. It may represent a new kind of war, linked to the process of globalization, which, in the arena of violence, may have opened an era of global civil wars. Thus, is this the first of a series of wars in a process of establishing a U.S. dominated global state?

The term global civil war seems like a contradiction in terms. Up to now, by definition, if a war goes beyond the border of a nation-state, it is international and not civil. However, the war between Al-Qaeda and the U.S. is transnational rather than international, and its features in many ways resemble those of internal wars. Just as in most internal insurgency wars, the armies of Al-Qaeda and the U.S. do not operate on an equal level. Their power is at an asymmetric extreme: on one side is a nearly global system of states led by a superpower; on the other side is a clandestine group that uses: 1) surprise attacks against symbolic targets, and 2) mass killings to harm its adversary. Thus, the war seems, in effect, civil and must be analyzed with the methods used for understanding civil wars, though it is transnational and global in character. Intuitively, the term global civil war, thus, seems appropriate. It does, however, presuppose the existence of a global society, or at least a process leading towards a global society. A civil war can only exist within a society. Hence, the term *global civil war* is only appropriate if humankind, by now, constitutes one shared human society, or is on its way to becoming one.<sup>[6]</sup> This article does not build on the assumption that there is a world society but that the world may be moving towards a shared society, with the existing state system forming the framework of a global state. This may be formed either through more or less peaceful multilateral cooperation among a great number of states, or through a violent state-building process characterized by active warfare between one or several dominant states and a number of transnational rebel armies, perhaps in alliance with a few dissident states. The article will probe into the main reasons that the term global civil war describes the conflict between Al-Qaeda and the U.S., and then discuss some possible counter-arguments.

### Al-Qaeda's Transnational Character

The Al-Qaeda, which means base or principle, grew from a transnational community of radical Islam; they took part in the U.S.-supported jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s; they had sanctuaries in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda's recruits came from a number of countries in the Middle East and Asia and from immigrant Muslim communities in Western Europe. The top leader, Osama bin Laden, grew up in the Arabian peninsula within the borders of Saudi Arabia, though his wealthy family had its roots in Yemen. Other key leaders of Al-Qaeda came from Egypt. The organization seems to have been formed in the late 1980s as a loose transnational network, managed by a small group of people around bin Laden.<sup>[7]</sup> Their power within the network was built in part upon 1) a claim to represent the true will of the Prophet, and 2) the considerable wealth derived from inheritance and shady business. When the

Taliban took control of most of Afghanistan in 1995-96, training camps were established for the organization in that country. There, young Islamic fundamentalists would come from all over the world to study the Koran, clandestine organizational techniques, and warfare. The training camps were lost when the U.S. backed Northern Alliance crushed the Taliban in late 2001.

In May 2002, a report showed that among the 384 captives from the war in Afghanistan, held by the U.S. at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, there were citizens of more than thirty countries.<sup>[8]</sup> Not only has the recruitment of Al-Qaeda had a global reach, but also its organizational structure and armed operations. Despite severe repression, the group continued, in the second half of the 1990s, to operate inside some Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and they most likely had access to wealthy and powerful cliques. Al-Qaeda seems to have been behind the attack against the U.S. forces at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and the daring attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000. However, the organization did not limit its operations to the Middle East. The first attempt to destroy the World Trade Center in New York in 1993 was, most likely, made by associates of those who formed Al-Qaeda. It seems to have been proven that Al-Qaeda was involved in the suicide bombings against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Then came the spectacular attacks against New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. All of Al-Qaeda's known targets, thus far, have been U.S., although in several parts of the world. The perpetrators seem to believe that they are engaged in a global war of insurrection against the U.S.

What about their goals and are they also a global presence? It may not be pertinent to point out that the long-term goal of Al-Qaeda is to convert all of humanity to Islam because this, at least in principle, would constitute the final goal of any missionary religion. Short to medium-term goals are more relevant in defining the movement's character. Al-Qaeda is not a nationalist organization: it does not aim to liberate any particular state, such as Saudi Arabia, and not the Arab nation as a whole. Its first goal is to liberate Islam's holy places—Mecca and Medina—and force the withdrawal of all U.S. occupation forces from the Arabian peninsula.<sup>[9]</sup> The shame of bearing witness to how the armies of the infidels garrison the core region of the Prophet seems to have been the main motivating force for Osama bin Laden's break with the Saudi regime in the early 1990s. Al-Qaeda aims not only at driving out the U.S., but also at liberating the peninsula from the moribund Saudi regime, which is guilty of collaboration with the infidels.

After the Arabian Peninsula, the radical Islamists of Al-Qaeda will want to liberate other holy places, such as Baghdad and Jerusalem to revive the Caliphate. The propaganda of Al-Qaeda's makes it clear that its leaders refute the legitimacy of all such states that formed in the Middle East since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 and the abolition of the office of Caliph in 1924. (The Ottomans succeeded the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad in their function as protectors of the faith after the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258.) Osama bin Laden's followers intend to resurrect a multinational society—or empire—with a duty to protect Islam. If not entirely global, Al-Qaeda's goals go far beyond the national level. The immediate goal of his actions is most likely to polarize the Islamic world between the truly faithful (the *umma*) and the regimes that collaborate with the U.S., and, thus, strengthen the forces of radical Islam in the Muslim world in general and the Arab lands in particular. In the words of Michael Scott Doran: "Osama bin Laden is engaged in a serious civil war over Arab and Muslim identity in the modern world."<sup>[10]</sup> Thus, Al-Qaeda's recruitment, organization, and goals are all transnational; the target of their operations is the leading global power.

### The Globalization of U.S. Homeland Security

From the U.S. perspective, the war against Al-Qaeda is also global. The fact that a transnational terrorist group was able, during the Clinton administration, to hit a series of U.S. targets abroad led to anxiety, committee work and planning, and the creation of some new anti-terrorist institutions, though not to any fundamental change in U.S. national security policy. Domestic security and anti-terrorist measures continued to receive far less attention from politicians, government officials, and analysts than concerns for more traditional security matters such as the relationship to Russia, China, and to rogue states. During the first eight months of the Bush administration, the main security-related goal of the White House was to build a National Missile Defense (NMD) that could shield the home territory from attacks by other nations. However, when Al-Qaeda launched its dreadful attack against two of the main symbols of U.S. economic and military power on September 11, 2001, Washington rapidly redefined its national security, building on the many proposals that antiterrorist specialists had put forward for several years. September 11 did not interrupt the NMD program. Bush launched a vigorous war on terrorism, including increased intelligence cooperation with other countries, as measures to prevent the financing of terrorist groups,<sup>[11]</sup> threats against states that provided support to terrorist groups, and a sustained bombing campaign in Afghanistan—all this combined with logistical and other support to the Northern Alliance and the establishment of new bases in Central Asia.

The target of the war on terrorism was not just Al-Qaeda, but a range of insurrectionary movements, most of which operate mainly within a nation, such as the *Abu Sayyaf* in the Philippines, the FARC in Colombia, etc. Rhetorical castigation of such movements was linked to attacks on three lesser enemy states: Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, which were accused of developing WMD and providing support to terrorists. An important part of the redefinition of U.S. national security is the blurring of the traditional division between domestic security and national security, which internationalizes the U.S. law enforcement.<sup>[12]</sup> There was general agreement that the FBI and the CIA would have to cooperate with each other more than they had in the past because an internal security threat such as the hijack of an aircraft could very well be planned and operated from abroad. The CIA also seems to have preferred bringing suspected terrorists caught abroad to the prisons of third states [rendition] because the U.S. laws prevent the use of the [allegedly] most effective methods of interrogation.

In May 2002, President Bush proposed to merge a number of institutions, such as the border police and the coast guard, under the new Department of Homeland Security. Part of the rationale for this reform was to help prevent unwanted visitors from entering U.S. territory through tighter border controls, alone. It would be more effective to 1) cooperate with other states in collecting intelligence about possible visitors, and 2) create a standardized global system of smart passports, which would rapidly distinguish trustworthy travelers from those with a criminal or otherwise doubtful record. The inspection of all containers from worldwide that arrived in U.S. ports every day was deemed impractical as it would slow down trade and make the U.S. less competitive. Instead, the establishment a U.S. presence in all major ports of origin and the cooperation with local port authorities in making sure that only well certified companies could load containers on ships bound for the U.S. In addition, the U.S. State Department asked the governments of the world's main shipping nations to allow U.S. agents to inspect their ships on the high seas.

All of this represents crucial steps in the globalization of U.S. domestic security. In the WW II years and the cold war era, national security for U.S. was already conceived within a global framework; however, the enemy then was first an axis of states, followed by a Soviet-led camp consisting of states and national liberation movements. The cold war was a quasi-war between two state-based camps, separated in Europe by an iron curtain, and supporting opposite factions in the civil wars erupting in Asian, African, and Latin American. After the cold war, the U.S. foreign policy emphasized the creation of a free and global market of trade and investments while demonstrating its military

superiority in campaigns against states that were breaking international law, notably Iraq and Yugoslavia.

The redefinition of U.S. security after September 11 was more radical because the enemy changed from the unreliable or potentially hostile states to a loosely defined transnational phenomenon. The U.S. needed to protect itself against a defined enemy and against the risk of terrorist attacks from any possible direction, too. Thus, the U.S. security network extended its domestic security policy into a global structure, as was the traditional national security. The U.S. territory could no longer be defended solely at home; law enforcement became a prominent part of U.S. foreign policy. This meant that Washington must consider the internal security of other states as part of its own security, and requested other states to integrate their anti-terrorist measures with the work of U.S. agencies. This represents a globalization of U.S. governance: a further step on the way to a U.S. dominated global society.

The position of the United Nations remains significant. This global organization of states is built on the principle of equality for its member states, although five great powers have veto power in the Security Council. The UN represents the cumbersome multilateral road to global governance, which requires negotiations, treaties, and agreements among a great number of states. For example, the dominant politicians in the U.S. Republican Party have long been skeptical to the UN organization, which they consider ineffective and heavily bureaucratized. They also fear that it may restrain the freedom of action of the U.S., and even interfere with internal U.S. affairs. However, after 9/11, the UN Secretary General as well as the Security Council, which includes Russia and China, backed the U.S. war on terror—absolutely and unconditionally. The UN sanctioned the U.S. approach to the problem, including the bombing of Afghanistan. The reason for this support was not just that everyone agreed, but also that no one wanted to alienate a “wounded giant.” To not alienate the world’s only superpower and, thus, be politically marginalized, the UN Security Council as well as the General Secretary willingly provided global legitimacy to the new U.S. concept of global security.

There can be no doubt that the U.S. war on terror is global in its reach, in both rhetoric and practice. Thus, both from Al-Qaeda’s and the U.S. perspective, their war is conceived as transnational and global. While one side refutes the existing state system and seeks to disrupt it and resurrect a historically defunct empire, the other wants to stabilize the existing state system by assigning all responsible states a participatory role in U.S. led efforts to enforce Washington’s version of global security. Thus, a global civil

war goes on between a transnational insurrection movement and a hegemonic state, which sees the security of the rest of the world as an extension of its own security.

All the above seems to indicate that the term global civil war does make sense, but some valid counter-arguments still exist. Is this really war? A first main objection to using the term global civil war is that the U.S. and Al-Qaeda conflict may not be a war at all. While the antagonists describe their struggle as war, this may not be true in an analytical sense. Terrorists are transnational criminals, not soldiers, or even guerrilla fighters. When President Bush speaks about a war on terror, the term *war* should be understood as a metaphor, as in the expression: the war on drugs. This was suggested right after September 11 by several commentators, including the military historian Michael Howard, who recommended that the U.S. Government disrupt Al-Qaeda through sustained, discreet, and silent police work rather than a loud military campaign.<sup>13</sup> Another analyst has later suggested that the U.S. campaign to repress terrorist groups and prevent further terrorist actions should rather be seen as risk management than war.

While this is an attractive proposition, it says more about what Bush ought to have done than what he actually did. Before September 11, Bush lacked a clearly defined enemy. After September 11, he could focus U.S. national security on the image of the dangerous terrorist, and gather his nation, as well as most of the rest of the world, around his anti-terrorist campaign. He did it loudly, he did it as war, and he did it with success, though he did risk transforming Osama bin Laden into a hero for future generations of those who oppose the U.S., a symbol from which the global rebels can seek inspiration during many years to come.

Because both sides in a conflict 1) understand that what they are doing is war, 2) use arms against each other, and 3) cause the death of thousands—it seems difficult to categorize their interaction as something else than war. The U.S. and Al-Qaeda war will, no doubt, be listed as a war in the most common databases. In addition, it seems reasonable to conceive of the September 11 attack against New York and Washington and the bombing of Afghanistan in the following month as parts of the same war. Thus, the war took place in the U.S., Afghanistan, and globally: many arrests and incidents occurred in other parts of the world as parts of that war. Therefore, the first counter-argument has been proven false. The next, though, is more difficult to refute.

### What is new about Transnational Terrorism?

Both sides seem to see Al-Qaeda as something new: a precursor of a phenomenon that is likely to characterize the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Al-Qaeda, of course, sees itself as a novel fact. Any political movement wants to have a bright future because that will increase the participants' motivation and facilitate recruiting new members. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that the U.S. Government emphasizes the novelty of Al-Qaeda, and ties it, explicitly, to the danger that terrorists may acquire WMD. The execution of September 11 did not, in fact, rely on any sophisticated technology. What made the spectacular attack possible was the dedication of a whole group of militants to accept death in a daring action. The tools used to hijack the civilian planes that crashed into the twin towers and the Pentagon were the simplest: box openers and razor blades. Thus, September 11 did not build on any new technology or strategy.

For a transnational movement to carry out politically motivated violence has been a common practice. It happened in the late 19th century when anarchists killed the/ an

1. French President in 1894,
2. Austrian Empress in 1897,
3. Spanish Prime Minister in 1897,
4. Italian King in 1900 and
5. U.S. President in 1901.<sup>[14]</sup> These killings and the violent rhetoric of the anti-state anarchists led to
  - Adoption of draconian anti-anarchist laws in several countries,
  - International congress in 1898 and,
  - Multilateral treaty in 1904 all of which aimed to establish cooperation among states in the repression of international anarchism.

Many expected the wave of anarchist terror to characterize the 20th century. However, when the King of Serbia was assassinated in 1903, the King of Portugal in 1908, and Austrian archduke Ferdinand in 1914, the perpetrators were not anarchists, but disgruntled nationalist officers. The formative event for the 20th century in Europe was not anarchist terrorism, but instead was the international WW I.

A new movement grew out of WW I with the aim of overcoming national borders, defeating imperialism and establishing a just society worldwide. This movement was organized in the Communist International: the Comintern, which was established with headquarters in Moscow in 1919. After the failed city-based insurrections in some European nations in the aftermath of WW I, agents of the Comintern waged

a dragged-out struggle against the police forces of the European imperial powers, which cooperated in repressing the communist movements both at home and in the colonies. This was a transnational struggle, with a range of insurrectionary movements receiving training and sanctuaries in the Soviet Union, just as the Al-Qaeda did later in Afghanistan. However, the Comintern never succeeded as a transnational movement. It preferred to form independent communist parties for each nation, both in Europe and in the colonies; thus, the communist movement was only successful in those countries where it managed to graft communist ideology onto basic nationalism. China and Vietnam, where communist parties remain in power today, are the prime examples. During WW II, the Comintern dissolved, and international communism became a state-based block in world affairs rather than a transnational insurrectionary movement. The Cold War of 1947 through 1989 took the form of a global conflict between blocks of states, but not a global civil war. The dissolution of the socialist block and the U.S. triumph in the cold war made the U.S. the world's leading power, and, thus, the prime target of any movement fighting the prospect of a unipolar world.

Although there is nothing new about having transnational insurrectionary movements, WW I, WW II, and cold wars characterized the 20th century much more than those movements did. The key question now is whether Al-Qaeda will survive as a transnational movement, if at all, and if other similar movements will emerge. Perhaps the U.S. and Al-Qaeda war is just an episode. Although both Al-Qaeda and the Bush administration in Washington consider themselves to be engaged in a long war, they could be wrong. Al-Qaeda may not, after all, be the beginning of a new phenomenon: it may, just as well, be the last desperate attempt of some failed and marginalized Islamists to join forces and display a force they do not have. This perspective of Gilles Kepel<sup>[15]</sup> analyzes 1) the failures of radical Islamism in Egypt, Pakistan, and Algeria, 2) the decline of Islamist fervor in Iran, the impossibility of escaping repression in Saudi Arabia, and 3) the frustration that Islamists from all these countries felt when only the peripheral states of Sudan and Afghanistan would give them sanctuary. The marginalized elements that joined up in Al-Qaeda do not represent the future, he claims, but the past. In terms of ideology, they are attached to the past: they want to revive the Caliphate. Their unrealistic hopes seem based on the assumption that a sudden Islamic revival could occur in today's world in the same way that the faith spread from the Arabian peninsula to North Africa, Southeast Europe, Central, South, and Southeast Asia in centuries long past. Today, however, the state system is, most likely, too well entrenched to give way to the onslaught of a loosely organized army of Jihadis. Pakistan is the most recent place where the Jihadi movement has fallen into serious trouble with a national army.

How the U.S. and Al-Qaeda war will be classified in history, depends on future developments. The two most likely scenarios are these:

1. Al-Qaeda will be beaten back by military, police and financial controls. It will fail to launch further attacks, other insurgent groups that use terrorist methods remain mainly confined to national frameworks, and terrorism again fades from its role as the foremost enemy of the U.S. Thus, the Al-Qaeda's war will, most likely and mainly, be known as a mere episode, like the wave of assassinations around 1900.
2. Al-Qaeda is able to launch new attacks, other transnational groups of a similar kind emerge, or the U.S. is able to sustain the fear of international terrorism by playing on the memory of 9/11 and dramatizing new dangers. This describes the state of affairs wherein the term global civil war is more apropos.

### Implications for Peace Research

The globalization of violence via global civil war is, of course, a nightmare scenario. What, then are the implications of this for peace research? What can be done to prevent global civil violence? Peace researchers, of course, cannot passively accept the emergence of global civil war. They are dedicated to the pursuit of peace, and must look for counter-strategies that prevent the globalization of armed conflict and institute global mechanisms of conflict management. Anti-globalization peace researchers will look for ways of resisting globalization and defending local, national, and regional societies. Pro-globalization peace researchers will instead look for ways of instituting global governance via diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and the gradual creation of a global civil society to which multilateral institutions can and will be accountable. While these are two alternative strategies, peace researchers can agree upon much even across the divide between proponents and opponents of globalization. In conclusion, the present article will make three suggestions.

The first is to consider the Al-Qaeda struggle against the U.S. as a real war and, thus, make it a central concern. If it were to be considered simply as a case of international law enforcement, then it would, most likely fall outside the area of primary concern for peace research. There is good reason to take Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush seriously when they consider themselves to be at war against each other. Both have inflicted much death and destruction on their enemies and innocent civilians; thus, it seems reasonable to consider them at war.

The second proposal would draw upon the methods and findings developed in research about traditional civil wars to analyze the global civil war. This, then, would require

a thorough investigation of the driving forces behind Al-Qaeda's emergence and radicalization, as well as the motivations behind the Clinton Administration's muted response, and the Bush administration's dramatic response. Furthermore, it means looking into the main factors that could lead the war to endure and the factors that might shorten it. In this linkage, discussion must commence about the respective roles that greed and grievance play in the U.S. and Al-Qaeda war. Light must be shed on how the war might de-escalate in a way that would not leave sufficient grievance to allow a resurgence of transnational Islamist warfare at the first convenience. This makes it necessary to address the larger question of how to create a global system of power that is accountable and sensitive to popular needs to remove the need for launching global wars. This means addressing the problem of the vast swaths of marginalized people.

The third proposal is to pursue specific global counter-strategies with constant discussion of the merit of each of them. The seven strategies are as follows:

- Limit, through international treaties and monitoring, the spread of arms (both heavy and light) to insurgent groups as well as states.
- Prevent the proliferation of WMD and limit the number of states possessing them to the smallest possible number.
- Satisfy (through relief efforts and economic reconstruction) the basic economic, political, and religious needs of the Muslim populations, so the basis for Al-Qaeda type movements is removed.
- Institute global reforms that remove the grievances, which could legitimate the utilization of terrorist methods by all kinds of insurgency movements.
- Preclude U.S. unilateralist approach by instituting global mechanisms that the U.S. cannot afford to ignore.
- Resist the U.S.-led globalization by upholding the principle of national sovereignty and defending cultural and political diversity.
- Encourage the utilization of nonviolent methods of struggle—rather than suicide bombings and other terrorist actions—as a means to influence global and national civil societies.

The 20th century is recognized to have been a century of excessive violence, though one with great rebel leaders who practiced nonviolence such as Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. King.<sup>[16]</sup> Their philosophy and practice of nonviolence had links to the visionaries who espoused liberation from all kinds of repression. Gandhi was Hindu and Dr. King a Christian; nevertheless, their movements were not religious, per se. The ethnic and religious insurgencies that characterize the world today are of a violent nature, and the inhuman suicide bombings are becoming more frequent. This trend must be stopped.

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