

U.S. Hegemony and the Response to Terror

by Samir Amin

The September 11 attacks call for a very different commentary from that which has dominated the media, whose main concern is to justify the use that the hegemonic establishment of the United States wants to make of the events.

The instinctive horror any normal human being must feel at the sight of a massacre of large numbers of innocent people should not make us forget the role in this of U.S. policy and that of its G-7 allies. This may be the first such slaughter to strike on U.S. soil but it is far from being unique. However, the media never made the same effort nor were they so persistent when they covered Iraqi civilian casualties; or Yugoslavs bombed by NATO; or Palestinians massacred at Sabra and Shatila on Sharon's orders and now being assassinated daily also by his order; or Egyptian prisoners of war murdered in cold blood. What can well be called state terrorism is no less horrific than that practiced by those who carried out the September 11 attacks.

The American public needs to know that this is the reason why the attacks on the United States have not met with universal and unqualified opprobrium as it has been led to believe. The strategic choice of targets—New York's financial center and the Pentagon—has even been applauded and not only by a handful of Islamic fanatics but by a large majority of public opinion in Africa and Asia and a sizeable sector of European opinion.

So far no light has been shed on what share of responsibility was carried by the actual perpetrators—highly organized Islamic kamikazes who may or may not have been part of one or more networks. The truth may never be known.

The present writer is one among many intellectuals who consider the primary victims of political Islam to be its own Arab and Muslim peo-

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ples, that the reactionary ideology upon which political Islam is founded offers no viable answer to the problems of its communities and that its modus operandi is unacceptable and even repellent. But it is precisely for these reasons that political Islam has always been and continues to be “well regarded” by the Washington strategists to whom it has often been allied.

The Taliban (like Osama bin Laden) have been described as “freedom fighters.” Their “rage” against the dreadful “Communists” (in actual fact modernizing national populists) whose chief transgression—in their view—had been the opening of the schools to girls, drew no censure from the Western diplomatic circles of the time nor was it denounced by their feminist movements. Those referred to as “Afghans”—that is, Algerians, Egyptians and others who were trained for assassination in U.S.-funded camps and were coached by experts from the CIA and allied Pakistan—are now exercising their “terrorist” skills in Algeria and elsewhere. Not only has Washington never had the least objection to them but it has supported and continues to support them to this day, saving its disapproval only for those who struggle against Israeli occupation. This distinction cannot be simply interpreted as sympathy within the dominant discourse for the heralds of cultural “specificity.” The reason for it doubtless lies in the North American establishment’s clear and cynical analysis: that political Islam traps the people it victimizes and makes them powerless in the face of the challenges of liberal capitalist globalization, and that this suits dominant capital’s purpose.

At this writing, I do not know exactly what form Washington’s response to the September 11 attacks will take. Most likely it will include massive bombings and the killing of thousands of civilians, victims already of the U.S. and its allies in political Islam. When it is over, whether bin Laden is destroyed in this operation or not, a redoubled hate for Washington will generate thousands of new candidates ready for revenge against American targets. But, by according the power of the military terror it possesses an increasingly decisive and exclusive role in the pursuit of its hegemonic goal, hasn’t the ruling establishment in the United States already made its choice? Beyond the horror or the killings that such an option implies, it is doomed to ultimate failure as it triggers hate for the United States across the world.

Such an option can only lead to the spread of a new “McCarthyism” within American society, as it gives free rein to the demonization of any opposition to the dictates of dominant capital—in the name of “national security” and a “war against terrorism.”

There is no possibility of a united front against terrorism. Only the development of a united front against international and social injustice can serve to make such desperate acts by victims of the system useless on their part and so no longer possible.

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Under capitalism the road of reform is in reality a blind alley. The whole structure of the system stands in the way of large-scale reform. The levers of power are in the hands of the capitalists, and they refuse to permit anything but temporary palliatives. This explains why the New Deal never came within miles of solving the unemployment problem and was already coming to be generally recognized as a failure when World War II came to the rescue. With the New Deal bankrupt, American capitalism eagerly chose the road of militarism and foreign expansionism and has been traveling it ever since. The structure of the system, while it blocks reform, is altogether favorable to militarism and foreign expansionism. Military expenditures involve neither redistribution of income nor competition with private enterprise; jingoism and war hysteria create an atmosphere in which dissent can readily be suppressed.

Hence we conclude that all roads lead eventually to the war-preparations economy as capitalism's answer to its own fundamental contradiction.

—Paul M. Sweezy, "Certain Aspects of American Capitalism,"
Monthly Review, November 1951