The convenient enemy – neocons, global jihadists and the road to Iraq

O inimigo conveniente – neocons, jihadistas globais e o caminho para o Iraque

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Introduction

The first major revolution of the 20th century began with a dilemma. The Russian revolutionaries of 1917 were put before the question of whether or not their revolution should be internationalized. This debate was one of the central points of disagreement between Stalin and Trotsky. While Stalin believed that a non-capitalist, rural and backward state like Russia could develop "socialism in one country", Trotsky, based on a more accurate reading of Marx, advocated the imperative of a worldwide spread of the revolution to the more advanced countries in Western Europe. The internationalization dilemma that has been so closely associated with the Russian Revolution seems to be a characteristic of revolutionary movements throughout the world. As a matter of fact, even in the United States there are those who advocate the export of the ideals of the American Revolution, the most prominent of this group being the neoconservatives.

Neoconservatives have been the loudest exponents of an aggressive expansion of US power abroad centered on moral values. Kagan and Kristol (1996), for example, advocate a "remoralization" of US foreign policy based "on the belief that the principles of the Declaration of Independence are not merely the choices of a particular culture but are *universal, enduring, 'self-evident' truths*" (1996, p. 31, emphasis added). From this reasoning follows a criticism of traditional US conservatives that would "preach the importance of upholding the core elements of the Western tradition at home" but "profess the indifference to the fate of American principles abroad". Thus, the United States should not follow President Adams' famous advice not to "go abroad in search of monsters to destroy", since "the alternative is to leave monsters on the loose, ravaging and pillaging to their heart's content, as Americans stand by and watch". Consequently, not going after these monsters would be "a policy of cowardice and dishonor" (p. 31). This outlook helps to explain neoconservatives' longstanding support for regime change in Iraq.

Nevertheless, before 9-11, neoconservatism was considered a marginal current of thought in US foreign policy, being proclaimed "dead" even by its major adherents, since the end of the communist threat took away the necessary external enemy neoconservatives needed to sustain their audacious foreign policy prescriptions. In other words, the post-Cold War world did not offer a convincing "monster" that would justify going abroad to destroy it. After the terrorist attacks of 2001 however, neoconservatism resuscitated. This resuscitation on the other hand, was provided by the dynamics of another then quasi-moribund revolutionary movement which, akin to the

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Trotsky-Stalin debate, faced the internationalization dilemma. As jihadists were facing a tough domestic situation during the 1990s, they split up in a national and a global faction. The latter, which is considered a small part of the broader jihadist movement, was responsible for carrying out the attacks in the United States in 2001, thereby creating the monster that reignited the neocon fire. Thus, global jihadism had given neoconservatives a new blow of life. Likewise, the Iraq War ignited the global jihad fire. As the chief ideological articulators behind the decision to invade Iraq, topple Saddam Hussein and go about democracy building, the neoconservatives ended up giving back the jihadist's "gift". As bin Laden said in one of his pronouncements, the Iraq invasion provided a "golden opportunity" to deepen the confrontation against the United States, therefore strengthening Al Qaeda's ideology and its militancy. In this sense, neocons and global jihadists are each other's convenient enemies.

Therefore, the intellectual story behind the Iraq war cannot be understood without taking into consideration these two components – neoconservatism and global jihadism. In the following pages I shall describe their trajectories until their explosive encounter in 2001. By doing this, I intend to demonstrate that both had been facing fairly similar existential crises prior to that event. September 11, 2001 gave neoconservatives the necessary ideological enemy they had been calling for, leading to the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003 which, for its part, reenergized global jihadism. The October 7, 2001 Afghanistan invasion is not considered for the purposes of this paper for two reasons. First, because it is not a pure neoconservative conception – in fact, it is likely that any US administration would have invaded Afghanistan. Second, because the Muslim response to the Afghanistan war was more reticent, as a US reprisal was obviously expected, and many in the Muslim world disapproved bin Laden's methods. As a matter of fact, in contrast to the 1979 Russian invasion of Afghanistan, as Gerges points out, "there was a deafening silence when the United States declared war on the Taliban and Al Qaeda" (GERGES, 2005, p. 188). This "deafening silence" also made evident Al Qaeda's ideological decline. The Iraq war, on the other hand, is a typical neoconservative creature and has definitively sparked the transnationalist faction within jihadism.

The road to global jihadism

The Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Qutb is considered the most influential religious writer for radical Islamism and has deeply influenced the jihadist movement. In a profile for The New York Times, Paul Berman (2003) called him "the philosopher of Islamic terror". Qtub came to the United States in 1948 and this experience only served to reinforce his fundamentalist tendencies. In his widely read book "Milestones" Qutb (2008) described his stay in the United States as reinforcing his view of Western "shaky religious beliefs, its social and economic modes, and its immoralities", and criticizes both capitalism and Christianism (p. 85).Upon his return to Egypt in 1951, deeply shocked by what he had experienced in the United States, Qtub joined the Muslim Brotherhood. After an initial support for Nasser in 1952, Qtub and the Muslim Brothers realized that the new government would be characterized by a strong nationalism, being far from the ideals of Islamic law they expected to see. Nasser began to crack down the Muslim Brotherhood and Qtub was sent to prison in 1954, where he wrote the enormous "In the Shade of the Qur'an", a commentary on Koran in thirty volumes. "Milestones" was in great part based on the commentaries of "In the Shade of the Qur'an" and because it is a far more accessible, it has become his most widely read book, influencing generations of young Muslims who would later resort to jihad. Qtub's eventual hanging by the Nasser's government in 1966 only served to turn him into a martyr for jihadists.

Qtub advocated a deep anti-secularist position, with emphasis on the importance of clerical rule based on *Sharia*, or religious law. According to Qtub, Muslims should not be in the defensive when it comes to establishing Islamic rule; instead they should actively seek to destroy "every obstacle that comes into the way of worshipping God and the implementation of the divine authority on earth, returning this authority to God and taking it away

from the rebellious usurpers" (p. 35). Using a term that sounds very familiar for Leninists, Qtub argued that the major responsibility for carrying out the jihad lies in the hand of a revolutionary "vanguard". This vanguard should be responsible for establishing *Sharia* all over the world. Among the reasons for pursuing jihad and establishing *Sharia* law, according to Qtub, was "to end the lordship of one man over others since all men are creatures of God and no one has the authority to make them his servants or to make arbitrary laws for them" (p. 34). That makes clear what kind of attitude Qtub's had towards democracy, a term that he rarely mentions in "Milestones" but is throughout present in the book in a certain way. Qtub understands democracy as being the rule of a group of some men over the others, which is unacceptable since rules must be given directly by God. Thus, Qtub rejects the idea of an "Islamic democracy" as well as of an "Islamic socialism" (p. 82), clearly parting ways with reformist Muslims who believed otherwise. True freedom, according to Qtub, is only achieved under God's governance, therefore the purpose of jihad "is to secure complete freedom for every man throughout the world by releasing him from servitude to other human beings so that he may serve his God" (p. 34). Secular governments in this view are nothing more than a "rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth. It transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others" (p. 4).

Another aspect of Qtub's thinking is the universality of the values of Islam. The object of Islam, he claims, "is all humanity and its sphere of action is the whole earth" and the defense of "the Islamic way of life" is more important than the mere defense of "the homeland of Islam" (p. 35). From the necessity to "secure complete freedom for every men throughout the world" and the universal aspect of Islam, follows the impossibility of coexistence between the Islamic society and the "*jahili*" (ignorant of divine guidance) society, leading to "a natural struggle between two systems which cannot co-exist for long" (p. 36). Accordingly, since it is "impossible to gather them together under one system" and "it is fruitless to try to construct a system of life which is half-Islam and half-Jahiliyyah" (p. 81), there is only one solution, that is "that the people of Jahiliyyah may come over to Islam, whether they reside in a so-called Islamic country and consider themselves Muslims or they are outside the 'Islamic' country" (pp. 84-85). Add to this that Qtub considers the "*jahili*" society the one that "does not dedicate itself to submission to God alone, in its beliefs and ideas in its observances of worship, and in its legal regulations". Hence, he concludes simply that his definition implies that "all the societies existing in the world today are jahili" (pp. 40-41).

One of the many young Muslims influenced by Qtub was Ayman al-Zawahiri, considered the chief theoretician behind Al-Qaeda, second only to bin Laden up until the latter's death on May 1st 2011. However, it must be understood that for Zawahiri and other jihadists, until the early nineties, jihad was a duty directed against secular Muslim governments, like in Egypt. Although they shared a general aversion toward Western civilization, the United States and its allies were not a strategic target at that time. In his review of some of the major jihad writers, Jim Lacey notes that "what is most notable about these and other early jihad writers is their focus on what they call the 'near enemy' – their own governments which they consider unjust and apostate" (LACEY, 2008, p. ix). What accounts then for the rise of global jihadism in the second half of the nineties? Why some jihadists have shifted from the internal to the external enemy?

These questions are skillfully explored Fawaz Gerges' book "The Far Enemy", in which he explores the reasons that led the jihadist movement, historically linked to the defeat of the "near enemy", to shift positions and decide to go after the "far enemy" in the second half of nineties. The "far enemy", as Gerges explains, is a term that jihadists use when referring to the United States and its Western allies. The "near enemy", in contrast, refers to secular regimes in the Muslim world and is where the mainstream jihadists have concentrated their efforts since the seventies. According to Gerges, "until the mid-1990's jihadist theory and practice focused almost exclusively on the domestic agenda" (2005, p. 44). The author points out three factors that contributed to the rise of global jihadism after the mid-nineties: the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the 1991 Gulf War with subsequent stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia, and the defeat of religious nationalists at home,

The Afghan War attracted young jihadists from all over the Muslim world to liberate Afghanistan and turned that country into an actual training base and "helped to create a transnational army of jihadis" (GERGES, 2005, p. 70). Gerges draws attention to the socializing and mobilizational effects of the war and the fact that it radicalized many Arab jihadists and destroyed the "superpower myth" in their minds, which led bin Laden to the conclusion that "poorly armed but dedicated men can confront better-equipped adversaries" (pp. 84-85).The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was later followed by the stationing of American forces in Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War. This event, according to Gerges, brought the United States to "the top of the list of bin Laden's enemies" (p. 56). Al Qaeda member and writer Al-Suri argued that before the Gulf War "al Qaida had no interest in operations outside of Arab-Afghan territory", but the war served to associate the United States with the "head of the serpent" (LACEY, 2008, p. 174). Al-Suri notes that bin Laden believed that, as the communist regimes in Western Europe had fallen with the collapse of the Soviet Union, "if the United States collapsed, all of the corrupt regimes in the Arab and Muslim world would also collapse" (p. 177).

Finally, a decisive explanation for the shift toward the far enemy, according to Gerges, is the fact that during the second half of the 1990s the battle against the near enemy was practically lost. Muslim government security services proved to be more efficient than the poorly organized jihadists, and Muslim society, tired of bloodsheds were also denying domestic support. By the end of the nineties, the jihadist movement was in shambles, losing both the military and the ideological battle, and the majority of them had agreed to a cease fire. Therefore, frustrated in their local struggles, "bin Laden and his cohorts rethought their business after the Afghan war and turned their guns against the West in an effort to stop the revolutionary ship from sinking" (GERGES, 2005, p. 25). In this view, the escalation to globalism is interpreted as an ultimate and desperate attempt to keep the jihadist movement alive. As "the battle against the near enemy had gone nowhere and brought no public dividends, taking jihad global held the promise of mobilizing Muslims worldwide and garnering public opinion support for what at the time seemed to be a dying cause" (p. 131). Gerges supports this view by examining Zawahiri's writings in his efforts to undermine the call for cease fire by an Islamic group in 1997. Zawahiri reasoned that "internationalizing jihad is key to shuffling the military-political cards and tipping the balance of power in the 'jihadis' favor". Thus, "the solution", they thought, "was to drag the United States into a total confrontation with the ummah and wake Muslims from their political slumber" (p. 160). Thus, the intellectual road that eventually led to September 11, 2001 was completed. What bin Laden and his cohorts didn't know however, is that their "solution" for keeping their movement alive would end up being the solution for the awakening of a current of thought in the country they were attacking. By September 10, 2001, neoconservatism was virtually dead as an autonomous political discourse in the United States. From the ashes of the World Trade Center however, the neocon phoenix was reborn.

The fall and rise of neoconservatism: "where are our aliens?"

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, with the demise of the Soviet Union neoconservatism basically lost the basis over which it had been sustained until then – anticommunism.[1] In 1996, a neoconservative of the caliber of Norman Podhoretz would write a "eulogy" to neoconservatism, sustaining its "death" and its disappearance as a "distinctive phenomenon requiring a special name of its own" (PODHORETZ, 1996, p. 19). The author stated that the neoconservative thought had accomplished its historical mission when upholding a more severe confrontation towards communism. The inexistence of a clear ideological enemy, in the period soon after the Cold War, removed the main motivation behind the neoconservative thought in foreign policy. In 1995, the founding

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[1] I have made a throughout examination of neoconservatism elsewhere. See: Teixeira, Carlos Gustavo Poggio. *O Pensamento Neoconservador em Política Externa nos Estados Unidos*. São Paulo: UNESP, 2010.

father of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol, referred to it as a "generational phenomenon" of US history adding that neoconservatism was basically "absorbed into a larger, more comprehensive conservatism" (1995, p. 40). According to Podhoretz (1996), on that year neoconservatism had already lost its "newness" and its "ideological distinctiveness" compared to other forms of conservatism (p. 23).

The neoconservative exasperation with the ideological effects of the end of the Cold War is clearly summarized by Kristol in the following passage:

> With the end of the Cold War, what we really need is an obvious ideological and threatening enemy, one worthy of our mettle, one that can unite us in opposition. Isn't that what the most successful movie of the year, "Independence Day", is telling us? *Where are our aliens when we most need them*? (1996, emphasis added)

September 11, 2001 would bring the aliens Kristol had been exhorting to materialize, though they would not come in flying saucers but in commercial airplanes. The terrorist attacks on the United States gave to neoconservatives the required ideological enemy on a silver platter – "international communism" would now be substituted by "international terrorism". Neoconservatism, unceremoniously declared dead in the previous decade, had again found its motivation and so resurrected in the beginning of the new century. According to Krauthammer (2003), since the September 11th attacks, there would have had an understanding that "the war on terrorism was now the successor to those great ideological struggles" of the Cold War. For Krauthammer (2004), 9-11 represented "a similar existential struggle but with a different enemy: not Soviet communism, but Arab-Islamic totalitarianism, both secular and religious" (p. 14). Similarly, Cohen (2001) argued that, like the Cold War, the war on terrorhad "ideological roots" and "may go on for a long time". Quickly, from the neoconservative perspective, the so-called "war to terrorism" began to be considered as the "World War IV", in a context where the Cold War is understood as the third one (COHEN, 2001; PODHORETZ, 2002, 2004, 2005). The ideological enemy was henceforth identified as being the "radical Islamism" and "the States breeding, sheltering, or financing its terrorist armory", whose objective would go further than the physical destruction, because "like the Nazis and communists before him he is dedicated to the destruction of everything good for which America stands" (PODHORETZ, 2004, p. 18).

Thus, terrorism substituted communism as the necessary threat for the survival of neoconservatism as a major current of thought. By deciding to attack the United States, global jihadists resurrected neoconservatism. The ultimate effect of this encounter between neocons and global jihadists was the invasion of Iraq which by its turn has ideologically invigorated Al Qaeda and global jihadism. As Gerges points out, "the global war was not going well for bin Laden", and so the Iraq War "provided Al Qaeda with a new lease on life" (2005, pp. 251 and 258) and played into the hands of global jihadists' ideologues. Moreover, Iraq became an important center for recruiting Muslim volunteers to fight against Americans, thereby taking over the role played by Afghanistan during the period of Soviet occupation. As a result, the Iraq War had an impact within global jihadism that neither the attacks of September 11, 2001 nor the war in Afghanistan ever had. For instance, while Al Suri "was cautiously critical of the September 11 operation, which put a 'catastrophic end' to the jihadist struggle that had started in the 1960s" (RUTHVEN, 2008), he believed that the US occupation of Iraq "inaugurated a 'historical new period' that almost single-handedly rescued the jihadi movement just when many of its critics thought it was finished" (WRIGHT, 2006).

Consequently, the ideological justification for the Iraq War was the result of the resurrection of neoconservative thought by global jihadists in search for keeping the revolutionary flame alive. Necons by their turn, as the main articulators for the invasion of Iraq, have repaid the "gift" and invigorated global jihadism. At the end, both neoconservatism and global jihadism finally had the convenient enemies they were looking for in order to keep them from fading out.

Conclusion

Ideologically speaking, the Iraq War of 2003 is a product of the encounter between global jihadism and neoconservatism. Global jihadists carried out their most spectacular attack on September 11, 2001 as an attempt to keep their revolutionary fervor alive. Having lost the battle for the "near enemy" by the early 1990s, some jihadists saw the internationalization of their struggle as an opportunity to reinvigorate their by then moribund movement. Inadvertently though, the terrorist attacks of 9-11 ended up resuscitating an intellectual current in the United States that is also globally oriented – neoconservatism. As a matter of fact, while 9-11 meant little for the broader jihadist movement, it represented a new blow of life to neoconservatism, giving them the necessary ideological enemy that they have been longing calling for. The neoconservative response was the Iraq War in 2003, which "blurred the lines among mainstream, liberal, and radical politics in the Arab world" (GERGES, 2005, p. 271) and gave global jihadists the ideological impulse they sought to get with the attacks of September 11, 2001. These events gave both movements a chance to legitimize themselves as compelling discourses within their broader movements.

In fact, although profoundly different in nature, methods and substance, neocons and global jihadists have more in common that their proponents would like to admit. First, they both have a "Trotskyite"-like worldview sharing a revolutionary ethos with an international stance and in constant need of a "permanent revolution" to keep the revolutionary fervor awake. Hence, while neocons sought to make the internationalist revolution within the US conservative camp, global jihadists are the internationalist force within the jihadist movement.

Second, since jihadists advocate the necessity of the reestablishment of the caliphate, they can be considered as Islamic brand of conservatism as, following Nisbet's (2001) definition of a conservative, they are anti-modern and look to the past in search of models for the present. Nonetheless, like neoconservatism, they are a strange brand of conservatives in a perpetual search for a revolution to feed their own conservatism. Rose (2000), for example, argues that "the neoconservatives – like their liberal cousins – are often quite radical" (p. 44). Mearsheimer (2005) considers that "the label neo-conservative seems like a misnomer when one considers the scope and ambition of the foreign policies that neo-conservatives prescribe for the United States". Accordingly, both movements share this strange idea of something we could call a "revolutionary conservatism" that would probably make Burke turn in his grave.

Third, both share highly ideological nature in the sense they believe to be defending universal values that must inevitably be spread to the whole world. Neocons argue for a moral American foreign policy based on the idea of the universality of American values and the defense of the "American way of life". Global jihadists also believe in the universality of Islamic values and, in Qtub's own words, in the necessity of defending "the Islamic way of life". While for neocons only democracy can bring true freedom to humanity, jihadists believe that democracy means "servitude to other human beings" and that true freedom can only be achieved under God's governance and the establishment of Sharia.

From these divergent points of view follows a fourth similarity, as both have a highly confrontational nature that denies coexistence and therefore disregards the effectiveness of any dialogue and a pacific settlement, leaving confrontation as the only option. Since both believe to hold the true answer for bringing freedom to humanity through the spread of their own particular values taken as universal, "hostility and inevitable confrontation" (GERGES, 2005, p. 70) is left as the only logical culmination. Neoconservatives portrait "Arab-Islamic totalitarism" as America's "new existential enemy" (KRAUTHAMMER, 2004, p. 16), and sustain that the United States "should not seek coexistence [with totalitarian regimes] but transformation" (KAGAN; KRISTOL, 2000, p. 20). It is remarkable the similarity between this line of reasoning and Qtub's identical discourse about the impossibility of coexisting with societies that doesn't follow Sharia – "a natural struggle between two systems which cannot co-exist for long".

As each side views the other not as a legitimate adversary but as an existential threat, the confrontation should be taken to its utmost consequences – the destruction of the enemy as it is.

Finally, neoconservatism and global jihadism are actually marginal manifestations within their respective broader movements – conservatism and jihadism – and with time they tend to go back to the fringes. The momentary boost they have gained on September 11, 2001 and March 20, 2003 seems to have been just it – a passing moment. On one hand it is hard to imagine that the US constituency will have stomach for further nation-building in the foreseeable future. On the other, the side effects of global jihadism may threat jihadism as a whole, diminishing its initial support after the Iraq war. Moreover, as the situation in Iraq seems to improve, global jihadism tends to lose its appeal. The irony is that, at the same time neoconservatives and global jihadists have revitalized each other, they may have created the conditions for their eventual ruin.

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Abstract

Ideologically, the Iraq War was a product of the encounter of global jihadism and neoconservatism. Prior to September 11, 2001, both were facing enormous difficulties in keeping their appeal as compelling discourses within their respective societies. Nevertheless, 9-11 revived neoconservatism by giving them the ideological enemy neoconservatives were longing calling for, leading to the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003 which, in turn, reenergized global jihadism.

Resumo

Em termos ideológicos, a Guerra do Iraque foi resultado do encontro entre jihadismo global e neoconservadorismo. Antes de 11 de setembro de 2001, ambos passavam por enormes dificuldades no sentido de manter seu apelo enquanto discursos legítimos no contexto de suas respectivas sociedades. Entretanto, os ataques de 11 de setembro reavivaram o neoconservadorismo na medida em que forneceu aos neoconservadores o necessário inimigo ideológico clamado pelos mesmos, levando à invasão do Iraque em 20 de março de 2003 que, por sua vez, revitalizou o jihadismo global.