

The Lies of 9/11 & The War on Terror

EXPOSED | Prof. Irfan Ahmad

25 years after the 9/11 incident in the USA, many are beginning to catch up with what those events really kicked off: The global war on the non-West and the multipolar world. Watch professor Irfan Ahmad in this talk deconstruct the narrative the transatlantic club has built to justify a quarter of a century of violence against the Global South. Professor Irfan Ahmad, Professor of Anthropology-Sociology at Ibn Haldun University, discusses his book *Terrorism in Question: Decolonizing Anthropology and the Study of Islam*. The conversation examines the neocolonial construction of terrorism, Islamophobia, enemy-making, the Global War on Terror, epistemic whitewashing, and the need to understand political violence through a more humane and decolonized anthropology. Links: Irfan Ahmad: <https://fs.ihs.edu.tr/cv/academicians/69c5956fcdb15-irfan-ahmad-cv-f-21jan2026-3-pdf.pdf> *Terrorism in Question*: <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/AhmadTerrorism> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 *Terrorism in Question* 00:03:07 *Decolonizing the terrorism question* 00:06:40 *Securitization and the enemy* 00:08:25 *From communism to Islamic terrorism* 00:15:27 *Good Muslims, bad Muslims* 00:21:17 *Manichaean thinking and Islamophobia* 00:27:38 *The Global War on Terror* 00:31:28 *Epistemic whitewashing* 00:40:55 *Terrorism as ideology and theology* 00:49:59 *War, neoliberalism and academia* 00:51:35 *The anti-conclusion and rehumanizing terrorism* 00:57:04 *Final thoughts and book recommendation*

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies, today for the second time with Professor Irfan Ahmad, a professor of anthropology and sociology at the Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul. Irfan, welcome back. Thank you, Pascal, for having me a second time. And thank you very much for coming online, because we want to discuss a new book of yours, which you entitled very brilliantly, *Terrorism in Question: Decolonizing Anthropology and the Study of Islam*. So tell us something about it. Tell us in what way, shape, or form you are decolonizing the terrorism question.

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. So as you know, this term decolonization is quite in circulation, you know, these days. And people from all fields of inquiry—there is decolonization of everything. But my point was, to what extent are all these calls for decolonization truly decolonization? Because many of the things which are happening in the name of decolonization today are actually, in my view—not all of them, but some—actually attempts of recolonization or neocolonization. So we have to be very careful that certain things in the name of decolonization are happening, but actually these are attempts for

recolonization or neocolonization. So I'm somebody who is trained in the discipline of anthropology, and before that in sociology. And as you know, at least since 9/11, terrorism is, in one way, the pivot of global politics.

And then anthropologists have very little to say about terrorism, both historically and contemporaneously. So my question was that something which has so importantly shaped, okay, not simply politics, but also culture, the ways we look at things, our own subjectivities, the idea of the enemy, you know, the threat, and so on and so forth. Okay, it also has repercussions, for example, in academia. So how to understand this pivotal moment of the 21st century, which is not, by the way, far from over; it is still continuing, right? And how anthropologists can give a better understanding of this whole phenomenon from a decolonial perspective, because one of the major arguments of the book is that the way the Western world, the political elites, the so-called terrorism experts, the security experts, the dominant explanation that we get from them is actually neocolonial.

#Pascal

Can you flesh that out? In what sense is the terrorism narrative that we have at the moment, and that came into being certainly with 9/11 25 years ago, how is that colonial or neocolonial?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so there are some people who came up with this idea that 9/11 actually marks a new moment in the history of terrorism because they thought that there is something called new terrorism, okay? And they wanted to differentiate this new terrorism from old terrorism. And there were many elements of this so-called new terrorism, but one core element of this newness was that we have something called new terrorism because it is primarily religious slash Islamic terrorism. From there, the assumption was that terrorism in the past, before 9/11, or before the rise of so-called Islamic terrorism, was secular, or it was not religious. Now, if you look at the history in the 19th century, in the 18th century, both in British colonialism as well as French colonialism, they didn't use the term terrorism at that time.

They were shifting terms. But one recurring term is fanaticism. Okay. Muslims have been described as fanatics. And the meaning of fanatic is somebody who is not using reason, who is somebody intoxicated with psychological defects. Okay, so what happens after 9/11? One of the features of this so-called new terrorism, it was described as religious slash Islamic. And therefore, in policy circles, in political elite circles, you see that there is no serious attempt to engage with them or listen to their grievances. Okay, because if we begin with the assumption that, if terrorism is social and political, humanly produced, then the question would be how to talk or address. Okay, so rather than engaging with it, it was thought that it is so irrational.

The only way left is to combat it rather than engage in some kind of dialogue or discourse. Right. So what you see, the trope of fanaticism, or Islam as an irrational religion, as an obscurantist religion,

that idea resurfaces after 9/11. And unlike the self-view of many Muslims, rather than being seen as a social-historical product, it is eternalized because once you say that it is religious, then in some extremist discourse from the government side, it is something which cannot be engaged with. Okay. And that actually goes against the, you know, at least Habermasian idea of deliberative democracy. If there are problems, then we can talk, we can have discussion, and we can, you know, come around a table and address it. So in that sense, it is neocolonial or recolonial. Okay.

#Pascal

You know, the term has been around before. And in my field of, you know, political science and especially security studies, one of the things that we've been calling out now for 25 years is how the term terrorism moved from something that Western states largely addressed with police measures, as in, you know, we need a civilian force to make sure that we're safe from terrorism, to the military, basically, which is a process we call securitization, right? You securitize the issue and you make it an issue of the military. And we've seen, I mean, millions of people have died in this U.S. struggle against terrorism. And the countries in West Asia have been completely burned to the ground. The entire war against Afghanistan in Central Asia was done under that thinking.

Of course, the war against Iran was—sorry, war against Israel—Iraq, Iraq, sorry, too many I's in the West. The war against Iraq was justified with this idea that we need to prevent nuclear terrorism from happening because he's about to have weapons of mass destruction. I mean, this terrorism term was thrown around as a reason for most of the aggressive wars of the last 25 years. How does that one fit into this colonial framework that you're saying that the study of anthropology, to a good part, still uses? Hey, just a very quick note. The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on neutralitystudies.com. Links below. See you there.

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so one of the things which I do is also—this book is also a critique of the discipline of anthropology. So I'm somebody who is trained in anthropology, but I'm also critical of it. So the critique is on two levels. One is that I think that actually the way anthropologists have looked at the question of terrorism or political violence more generally, it is not sufficiently anthropological. Okay, so anthropology actually can play a more important role in understanding it, but the contemporary generation of anthropologists are not doing it. Now, what I mean by this is the following: that the idea or the notion of the enemy has been at the heart of modern politics. So, of course, you know, I'm mentioning Carl Schmitt, not normatively, but descriptively, which is to say that I'm not endorsing his politics.

But in his theorization, politics is all about differentiating the friend from the foe or the enemy. And that idea of politics has been at the heart of politics more generally, but also and equally, I would say, to those who designate themselves as democracies. Now, in the Cold War, of course, the

enemy was communism. And one of the arguments that I make is that since liberal democracies lack a positive identity to rally around, therefore they need an enemy to bring so-called like-minded people together. So what happens, one of the genealogies of terrorism is this: that at the end of the Cold War, so this is the Reagan era, once you have this communism as enemy weakening, and finally it leads to the collapse of communism, then you need to have another enemy. And Colin Powell is on record to say that I'm running out of enemies.

#Pascal

Hmm.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay, so you need to have this enemy. Now, what happens here is that then Islam or Islamic terrorism is manufactured as the enemy. But here we need to slightly make a modification, because it is not like during the Cold War, Islam was absent and suddenly after the Cold War, Islam is invented as a new enemy. You have overlaps also. And one major thing which very few people talk about is actually, and this is something which is crucial to bear in mind, is that intellectually speaking, the idea of Islam as an enemy is floated already in 1986. And this is important because the current prime minister of Israel, he co-edited a book in 1986. It is called Terrorism: How the West Can Win.

And it is an edited volume. And at that time, he was Israeli ambassador to the UN. Okay. And the institute which had organized that conference from which the book was eventually published, okay, that institute was named after his brother, okay, Jonathan Netanyahu, okay? Okay. And that book put at the center that, look, terrorism is the enemy of the West, and therefore the subtitle is How the West Can Win. Now, it has 40 contributions, and Edward Said actually wrote a critique of that book. And in his reading, the message that that book wanted to say was, is that the Arabs are the terrorists, and Arabs alone are the terrorists. Okay?

So you already see the idea being floated in 1986. Anyway, now the formal end of the Cold War is somewhere in '89 or '90, you know? So what I want to say is that it is not straightforward that, okay, communism was the enemy until the end of the Cold War, and then Islam was invented as a new enemy, right? There are also overlaps, okay? Now, I think in contemporary times, you see that idea of the Arabs slash Muslims. That is what has appeared on the global scene in the Middle East, but also outside of the Middle East. Western states also mobilize their discourse in terms of Muslims living in the West. And then 9/11 becomes the metaphor through which this whole idea of Islamic terrorism.

Sometimes they also use this word called jihadism, you know. So that becomes the galvanizing point. Now, I think I would like to also add something. Once you make this 9/11 as something like a benchmark to define international politics, so 9/11 serves as a reference to what happened in the

US, but then you will see that the same language is used by other states. So, for example, Britain would say that we had our own 9/11, which is the London bombing. India would say that we had our own 9/11, which was the attack in Bombay. So that becomes the metaphor through which international politics, in terms of the construction of the enemy, is mobilized in different regions and in different nation-states.

#Pascal

This is a very good observation. And, you know, I'm pretty sure we could go back and almost for every generation find one of these metaphors. They usually have to do with the start of war. I mean, for the longest time, a Pearl Harbor moment was considered, you know, this type of experience. 9/11, of course, the other one. How do you look at this politics of it, of the interaction between these actors? Because to me, now in 2026, in a very weird way, we came full circle.

We went from the United States government inviting the Mujahideen from Afghanistan and having them in the White House and dining them and shaking hands and giving them weapons, and to them defeating the Soviet Union, but then attacking, being responsible or partially responsible for these attacks, and then being fought against for 20 years. And now we have an al-Qaeda al-Nusra leader governing Syria and having been invited to the White House, shaking hands with the US president, being interviewed on stage by Mr. Petraeus, General Petraeus. You know, it's very, very strange. It's a strange cycle that we've come through, from fighting terrorism to officially again being buddy-buddy with those very types of terrorists. How does that make sense to you?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so you see, the moment that you refer to, I think at that time, a famous and important U.S. politician, his name, Brzezinski—Brzezinski? Yeah. He famously said that fanatics fight better. So this was his way of encouraging the Afghan fighters, or Mujahideen, right? Now, of course, as we know, once the enemy, as communists, was gone, then, of course, selectively, the same actor can be used for divergent purposes. But I think what is important here is this: the notion of—by the way, just to add to your point, now India is comfortable with the Taliban. This is a recent move. For a long time, India considered the Taliban as something which is terrorist, and we cannot have any dialogue with them.

Now the Taliban minister has visited India, and he has been welcomed. Just for the audience, I think it might be useful: Taliban basically, in Arabic, literally means—Talib is a single knowledge seeker. Taliban is the plural. So the center, the madrasa Taliban derives, or sees its ideological affinity, is based in India, you know, called Darul Uloom Deoband. So they were even given access to it. Anyway, the point is this: that actor can be used for divergent purposes, but behind this change is a logic which has been consistent from Cold War times until now. And that is something which Mahmood Mamdani, the political scientist, would describe: the idea of a good Muslim versus bad Muslim.

#Pascal

Hmm.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay, so at one point in time, as long as the USSR was a threat, you know, these Afghan fighters were good Muslims. Later on, they can become bad Muslims, and then again they can become good Muslims, right? So as long as you support the discourse of terrorism, right, then you are a good Muslim. But I have recently, in another podcast, said that insofar as the distinction that Mamdani makes between good Muslim and bad Muslim, it is useful. But I think we have come to a point now where actually the good Muslim is basically an anti-Muslim. Yeah. Okay, so, and such figures, okay, now even a person like Salman Rushdie, and you have a lot of atheists.

Okay, they were quite vocal supporters of the war on terror. Okay, so these discourses, of course, change. Okay, but the changes have to be seen, whether it is at the core or at the substance or some appearance or some elements here and there. But this idea of the enemy doesn't change. The character of the enemy may change. You know, if there is somebody called A, you know, later on it can become B, right? But then the change is grounded, or what doesn't change is the idea of the enemy itself and its foundation, which is, after 9/11, of course, the idea of Islamic terrorism or Islamic extremism.

#Pascal

Two questions, or like one question, one kind of thought about this. Where do you think is that rooted? A lot of this is something that is so kind of, to me, deeply Western, this Manichaeian worldview, this kind of distinction into good and evil, God and devil. You know, the binary thinking and no in-between. Where do you think that is coming from? And do you think it is different in other civilizations? And the second thing, your explanation of, you know, the good and the bad Muslim just reminded me of this. I was at a conference in Russia, and it was about Russophobia, and one of the conclusions we came to is that one of the core beliefs of Russophobia is, of course, the distinction between good Russian and bad Russian, and the good Russian is basically an anti-Russian.

It's the Russian who betrays Russia. It's the Russian who betrays the system and then sides with the other one and helps fight whatever it is—the Soviet Union, communism—or helps fight Tsarist Russia or helps fight expansionist Russia. And that's the good Russian, whereas the bad Russian is the stereotypical kind of clownish depiction of a brutal Neanderthal who is very stupid but also very, very violent and bloodthirsty and so on. Do you think that there's this underlying—is it possible that there's this underlying kind of, like, mental trope that the West is kind of projecting time and time again into wherever it tries to seek an enemy?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, I mean, in the book, actually, I talk about the construction of communism as an enemy after World War II, right? I'm forgetting the name of the person, but the one who is considered as an architect of the CIA and also much of the security discourse after World War II.

#Pascal

Allen Dulles or the other Dulles brother?

#Irfan Ahmad

No, I'll have to check. He died very recently.

#Pascal

Never mind.

#Irfan Ahmad

Okay. So he famously, or infamously, said that, of course, we can have our friends in multiples, but the enemy has to be singular. Okay?

#Pascal

John McCain.

#Irfan Ahmad

I think so. Yeah? I mean, you are a political scientist, so probably you may be right. Yeah, most likely. So the friends can be multiple, but the enemy has to be singular. And that enemy has to be the cause of everything. So what happened, given the experience of the Western world with Nazi ideology or Hitler's unleashing of terror, so all these bad things or evil things were also attributed or projected. Okay? Now, this is—and I think, if I may add it here, because that will enable us to understand what is also important—is the phenomenon of Islamophobia, which is connected to 9/11. Okay? You have rise of... So, once you say that the enemy has to be singular, okay, and it has to be personification of everything evil, bad, destructive, which you think can happen.

And therefore, you will see that during the war on terror, an Indian newspaper showed a photo of an ISIS guy having sex with a donkey. And then it says that the video may not be true, but nonetheless, watch it. And then there is another one in which it is said that an imam in Morocco has given a fatwa, which is like an opinion, that even six hours after your wife is dead, you can have sex with her. So what I want to say, in this war on terror discourse, these are the kind of evil things

which are attributed to the enemy. Yeah, right. So this is one thing. And the second dimension is not the reality of threat, but threat itself is thought of in anticipatory terms: that it may happen, this is what will happen. So it is not simply controlling or defining the present, but also mobilizing an anticipatory future, anticipated future or projected future, to shape a world in your own ideological terms.

#Pascal

We see this time and again, how then such threats are used in order to justify security discourse, right, and justify more and more investment into the security state, into military means, into planes, into armies, and into increasing defense budgets, or, like in the Western case, mostly the offense budget. So do you think that this terrorism discourse was, like, filling—was it filling that gap after the end of the Cold War, that the enemies were running out? Or was it—it wasn't genuinely new, right? I mean, that's what you're contesting in the book. I mean, there's nothing that new about this entire thing, but it did kind of take now a backstage again and made room for, you know, hot wars, the Ukraine war, the war of aggression against Iran, and so on. How do you think of this in-between period now, when terrorism was the main security buzzword?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so one thing which many people have not talked about is this: remember, it was not simply war on terror, it was global war on terror, right? So it is also a global threat, okay? Now, what happens as a result is the construction of an enemy which is global, which is, like, everywhere. So in the Cold War era, the enemy is elsewhere. I mean, of course, it is also present inside, but not in the same way as in the global war on terror, because you have Muslims in America, in Europe, in Britain, in Germany. So in that sense, it becomes global. So what happened before the war on terror, you had several kinds of problems. For example, ethnic problems or subnational problems. Okay. So, for example, as a result of war on terror, all these regional conflicts.

So, for example, you have in the Northwestern Frontier Province of Pakistan, which is now KPK, right? You have a tribal problem. Yemen has a tribal problem. Algeria also has a tribal problem. Earlier, it was seen in ethnic terms, in terms of nation-building, as a subnational problem. What the global war on terror does is that it dispenses with all these categories and weaves them all into the discourse of terrorism. And this is logically entailed because once you have an idea of a global enemy, right? So remember, going back to this guy who I think his name is Kennan, we can have friends in multiple, but the enemy has to be singular, right? Right. So this is how all these regional conflicts, they get rid of their local dimension. They are denuded of national, subnational elements and painted in a global Islamic terrorist discourse.

#Pascal

Right. By the way, just a side note, you were right. It was George Kennan, not John McCain, of course. George Kennan, yes. Yeah, the great diplomat. So now we got it squared. So, in a sense, then the entire discourse is, of course, a very Western discourse and a very Western approach, that if all you have is a hammer, then everything becomes a nail. So all of these ethnic conflicts and whatnot were made into terrorism nails, which then could be hammered down with the same methodology. And predictably enough, this didn't work. It only creates more problems downstream. Plus, the whole issue that it has been very well understood by the United States that some of these terrorist outfits are very useful proxies to work with. Now, you wrote a chapter with a beautiful title, "Epistemic Whitewashing: Ethnography of a Conference and Counterterrorism." What do you mean by epistemic whitewashing? I think that's a very interesting term.

#Irfan Ahmad

Right. So, you know, as an anthropologist, I was happily surprised when UNDP invited me to a conference, which was in 2016 in Oslo.

#Pascal

So the United Nations Development Programme, right? UNDP.

#Irfan Ahmad

Right, right. And at that time, so one has to also see the shifting terms. So just in the wake of 9/11, the term used was counterterrorism. Okay. But then the UN and other Western states thought that, okay, this is not useful or this is not an effective term. So they switched to counter-radicalization. Okay. So I was invited to a session in which the goal was how interfaith dialogues can lead to de-radicalization of youth, especially the Muslim youth, because, you know, the idea was that, you remember, because the new terrorism is Islamic and religious, right, after 9/11, and therefore the main driving force is religion or theology, and therefore we need to have interreligious dialogue in order to counter radicalization. Right. So I participated. And as you know, I'm also an anthropologist. So I was not simply presenting my paper, but I was also listening to all the presentations.

#Pascal

You were studying these people there.

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, exactly. So in a way, you might say that this was an ethnography or anthropology of Europe.

#Pascal

Mm-hmm.

#Irfan Ahmad

And what I saw, and I write in the book, was that the assumption throughout the conference was that Islam is a source of threat, and they never had this idea that Islam can also be a source of peacebuilding, or Islam is also a source of conflict management. So I introduced this mass movement which is known as Khudai Khidmatgar, God's Servants, which was before World War II in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area of what is now Pakistan. And this was one of the most spectacular movements. People believed in nonviolence. Its leader was Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and he thought that Islam is all about peace.

So when the colonial authorities were shooting these people, they opened their chests, and they had Quran close to their chests. So they did not indulge in violence. They did not retaliate, because for them, the idea was that, you know, Islam is, we will give life, or we will sacrifice our life for the sake of peace. So even though I introduced such things from history, I think probably not more than 0.5 percent people in the conference—and it was a huge conference—they knew about it. But more importantly, the entire discourse was, in my view, based on unexamined assumptions.

So by epistemic whitewash, I mean this: that in the conference, nobody ever mentioned how nationalism is also a source, or the nation-state is also a source, of political violence, which, if you remember, because we were talking about the tribal social formation earlier, it was called ethnic subnational or, you know, a problem of nation-building. Right? So one of the things which I say in that chapter, that by epistemic whitewash, it doesn't address the question of the global enemy, which the terrorism discourse entails and requires. And the second point was that it did not name, okay, how nationalism is also a source of political violence and terrorism.

And as an alternative, I give three case studies: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, which was in the past called Burma, and India. So if you talk about Sri Lanka, the Tamil terrorism, quote-unquote, it actually began as a part of Sinhala-dominated Buddhist nationalism because they were not being accommodative or sensitive to the aspirations of the Tamil minority. So there was a question of language, there was a question of employment, the question was also about autonomy because most Tamils lived in a particular area. And in Myanmar, you have a Buddhist majority which thought that these Rohingyas, they do not have a place in that Buddhist imagination of Myanmar as a Buddhist nation.

And likewise in India, and you can extend this argument also to Israel, because the idea is to have a greater... And as you know, Israel was created as a Jewish homeland, which is a nation-state. So now it is not simply securing the nation-state, but also having a greater Israel in which Palestinians... So this is the idea of the national home in which the Palestinians are a problem, and therefore they

need to be got rid of, okay? So Palestinians are, from my perspective, terrorized people, but the nation-state discourse, and in the case of Israel this Zionist discourse, which is in line with the Western discourse, instead presents the terrorized as terrorists, right? Okay?

So the nation-state is crucial. I think in Spain, if you look at the ETA problem, this is also connected to the idea of the nation-state. Okay? The IRA, that is also—once you want to have a Protestant-dominated idea being imposed on the Catholics, of course, it is not in line with their cultural or religious aspirations. They want to have their own sense of autonomy. So these were the, if you want to use that term, elephants in the room, which the UNDP discourse was not at all talking about, right? And therefore, I bring this term, that epistemic whitewash. So it was simply peddling the Western states' discourse, not trying to understand or examine it in an alternative way.

And therefore, my approach was to do an ethnography: how these power elites—and here, Pascal, this is very important, because anthropology, as a discipline, when it emerged, was often concerned with studying the pre-literate people, the uneducated, the village, the tribe. And I was doing something diverse, that if we can have an anthropology of Europe, let's see how the discourses of these power elites—because all the people who were participating, especially those who were from the UNDP, these are very educated people. These are not primitives. You know, these are very civilized people—but how can we do an ethnography of these people and try to understand the discourse of terrorism?

#Pascal

You know, this would be—or this is—highly interesting. And I really think we should encourage a lot of researchers and students to do this more, to actually use the Europeans and North Americans as a subject of study in order to understand, like, how their internal discourses work and their sense-making of the world. Because you're right, this is a tribe. And the more I look at them, the more it becomes clear that this tribe also has mechanisms to keep itself clean and to keep the epistemic bubble where it is, and that it has axioms and premises from which it derives its worldview. But the thing is, of course, that this epistemic bubble was able to press its concepts upon large parts of the world unquestioned.

And the terrorism discourse is, of course, then one of them. Because in a very befitting way, I mean, you're pointing out that the terrorized is then described as the terrorist. One thing I wonder is how much this terminology also has to do with the development of warfare, or how war is thought about. Because in a way, terrorism is nothing but a conflict fought asymmetrically by the weaker side. The classical discourse on wars is, of course, one which also developed international law, the laws of war, and the West has developed a lot of concepts in order to humanize war, among others with concepts like combatant, right? The distinction between combatant and non-combatant is crucial because one can be killed, the other one not, even during war.

So we have this attempt at taming war. But then a terrorist is a completely different thing, right? A terrorist is by default something that can and must be eliminated. The saying also, well, we don't negotiate with terrorists and so on. And reclassification, of course, of combatants as terrorists, which then makes them killable. And we see how Israel uses that rhetoric, right? They're all terrorists. I mean, two-year-old terrorists or 80-year-old terrorists, all terrorists, therefore they can be killed. Do you connect this terrorism terminology also, like, in some way with the way that linguistically, you know, violence is thought about today?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so one of the major elements of this so-called new terrorism, which was introduced after 9/11, is, as we have discussed, that it is religious slash Islamic, right? And then the second one is that, in most understandings of terrorism, including the social scientist who I have a lot of respect for, called Charles Tilly, so the general understanding was that terrorism is a tactic. It is a method. What the post-9/11 discourses on terrorism did, it completely abandoned that idea and said that, no, actually terrorism is an ideology. It's a full-fledged ideology. And therefore, people like Salman Rushdie and others, they started talking about reformation of Islam. So you cannot have a good Muslim unless they reform their theology, right?

#Pascal

Okay. Islam itself is terroristic, right? As in, anyone practicing Islam must harbor, like, the roots of terrorism. That was the general idea, right?

#Irfan Ahmad

So therefore, you have to make a departure from this general understanding that terrorism is a tactic. And then you start focusing on ideology, and from ideology you go to terrorism. And by the way, you had many—I know some people, this might be interesting for you—after the end of the Cold War, some who were experts of Russia in the Western establishment, they suddenly became experts of Islam, or they rebranded themselves as experts of Islam. And they did not have linguistic capability, because if you want to present yourself as an expert of Islam, you must know Quran and Hadith and the Arabic language.

So anyway, the point is, once you have abandoned that tactic, transformed into an ideology and theology, then this is, Pascal, very important to understand, because after 9/11, this Islam as a threat, it becomes a mobilizing tool. And I would like to venture to even say that the MAGA movement in America is not possible to think about without the anti-Islamic mobilization which happened after 9/11 in the U.S. There is a book which talks about, I think it is called Irregular Army,

written by a British journalist. So this Islamophobic environment which was created in the U.S., but also outside of the U.S. in so-called Western democracies, we have somebody called War Secretary of the U.S. What is his name?

Peter Hegseth? Hegseth. Hegseth, right? Yeah. Now, he's the guy who has served in Iraq in the war. He has multiple roles. He was also a television journalist and anchor. Now, he has a tattoo on his body, which is about the sign of the Crusade. And on one part, he also has this something written called kafir, which is a term in Quran, and Quran also talks about it. Basically, the literal meaning is one who conceals the truth. But another explanation is, or most popular one is disbeliever, or the one who doesn't believe in God. So you have somebody like this war secretary, who is a product of that war on terror. And he believes in the end-of-the-world theology, right?

Yes, he does. So the attack on Iran, the support for Israel. And I think I was just, before this talk, I was listening to his profile on BBC. This was audio. The guy, in one of his, I think it's somewhere in a cafe or in a restaurant after he had come back from Iraq, he even said, "Kill all Muslims." So anyway, what I want to say is this: that once you have transformed the understanding of terrorism not as a tactic or a strategy and transformed it into a theology, okay, and that theology is mobilized as counterposed to a Christian idea of Western civilization. And in the case of Peter Hegseth, it is also white Christian supremacist nationalism, right.

So then it becomes a dangerous mix, right? And then somebody with such kind of ideology who is in a powerful position, right? And there are some writings which also talk about how the U.S. Army has been infiltrated with people who have neo-Nazi ideology, white Christian ideologies, right? So this is at the political level, but I also want to say, as an anthropologist, that this perverted notion of Islamic threat, it has also shaped everyday cultural experience of Muslims, like whether you have a beard or not, if you're a Muslim woman, whether you should wear a scarf or not, how to conduct yourself in public spaces, what to carry, what not to carry.

If you carry a book on Islam and if you're traveling to the U.S., which I did many times, then you have to really think that, okay, the security agencies might ask questions. So it is not simply in the realm of political wars or combat; it also shapes your day-to-day conduct, right? And more importantly, I would also say that a lot of people these days talk about neoliberalism as a threat, especially those who are from critical theory or the left. But I would say that many elements of this neoliberalism, and one key element of the war on terror, is also privatization of war, the contracting of private security companies.

So actually, I would suggest that the war on terror, a full understanding of it, has to also be seen in terms of the transformation of political economy. So we cannot understand neoliberalism, the way it is operating, and also terrorism. In academia, like, you know, the kind of funding that you will get, as you know, in places like Germany, Netherlands, UK, regular jobs for professors or academics are shrinking, and people are encouraged to apply for grants, right? So these grants are also, of course, tied to the so-called national interest or the European interest of the nation-states, in which the kind

of research that you do has to fit this global and national and international interest of the state, if not directly, at least indirectly.

#Pascal

Yeah, the concrete agendas that are being created. And, you know, terrorism in this sense is really only one of these phenomena, right? We've seen it in other areas as well, and it usually works through securitization to raise funds. We've had the war against communism. We've had the war against drugs, the war against terrorism, the war against the virus. Now we have the war against the Russians and the Iranians. You know, you pick and choose. But this kind of idea that everything must become a war is kind of entrenched in a lot of circles in the West. A question to the anthropologists then is, of course, can we figure out why that is? But that takes us away a little bit from your book and your question. We have about three, four minutes left. Irfan, is there something more, like maybe the conclusion of the book, that you would want to share with us, or one of the most important concepts that you think people should take away from this talk?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so quickly, I'll make two points. One is, the book is also a critique, especially in the preface, of Agamben, who is a major philosopher and political theorist. So during COVID, he said that the scaling of the state of exception, which is a key term for him—so he said that actually COVID, or the viral threat, has replaced terrorism as a ground for intensifying the state of exception. And my point is that, no, it has not replaced terrorism, okay? Because terrorism, by the way, itself is also sometimes described as a virus epidemic, right? So unlike Agamben, who talks about replacement of terrorism as a ground for a state of exception by the viral threat, I say that, no, they coexist. That is one point.

The second point about conclusion, let me say this: actually, the book has a conclusion which is titled "Anti-Conclusion." And I had some problems with the reviewers and publisher also. They were saying that, no, we cannot have a conclusion which is called anti-conclusion. And the reason for me to title that chapter as anti-conclusion is this: how can we conclude about a phenomenon which is far from over? Because the war on terror is not over, right? So it is continuing. Okay, so can we conclude about a phenomenon which is not even over? But even about those events in history which are concluded, for example, the French Revolution, there is no definite conclusion. People continue to revise, rethink, and so on and so forth.

So therefore, it is anti-conclusion. But I also have a gender dimension here, because if you think that conclusion is connected to decisionism, okay, you want to conclude something. And in our time, in bullet points, so these power elites, they are not interested in the details. They just want some bullet points, like, okay, these are the conclusions, right? So this is connected to decisionism from the perspective of the people, and that is where the gender dimension comes. Deborah Tannen, who was an anthropologist based in the U.S., she made a very interesting study that there is a

fundamental difference, according to her, in the ways in which men talk and the ways in which women talk.

And she made this distinction between report talk and rapport talk. So when men talk, their mode of talking is like reporting, whereas when women talk, they talk as if they want to establish a rapport, a connection, right? So it is possible, given the fact—I'm just imagining—suppose if you have a wife and kids, and somehow there is a heavy rain and there is a seepage, and you are not at home, okay? And you come back and your wife tells you that, look, I had so much of a problem. My child was—our child was not sleeping for three hours. I was awake. I had to do this and that. And you, as a husband, you say that, okay, no problem. I will fix it, okay? Now the woman, or your wife, is not simply interested in getting the problem fixed.

She's also trying to share the whole experience of what has happened to her in your absence. So the gender dimension is that the building of rapport, as opposed to reporting, which is connected to decisionism. And it is also a question of power, that reporting and taking policy-kind of decisions. So my point is, one doesn't have to see always in terms of reporting and report-making or rapport-building. It is also possible to combine them, okay? And this synthesizer of this, if you take it as a man's perspective versus woman's perspective, this is possible if we really reformulate our assumptions, revise our assumptions, and try to understand terrorism not from a securitized perspective, but from a humane perspective, right? And

#Pascal

Sorry, I just think this is very, very important to rehumanize the entire discourse around it. And sorry, because I think we should wind it down at this point. I just want to show your book here, "Terrorism in Question: Decolonizing Anthropology and the Study of Islam." I recommend everybody to go and get yourself a copy. I will put links in the description below. Irfan, I cut you off. Do you want to add what you wanted to say just a moment ago?

#Irfan Ahmad

Yeah, so one final thing I would say is that this depiction of terrorism as the ultimate enemy or the evil is actually also, in some ways, the limits of Western discourse or liberal thinking, in the sense that something which you are not able to comprehend or something which you are not open to understand, so rather than revising your own assumptions, your own vocabulary, you find an easy way to dub it as terrorism. So this is actually limiting imagination, blocking your horizon of thinking. And my point would be that, no, we should not be doing that as intellectuals, as thinkers, but allow ourselves to face challenges in thinking and look at things in an alternative way rather than repeat the doxa which the power elites supply day in, day out.

#Pascal

That's a beautiful final word, and one that I couldn't support more. Terrorism as a phenomenon is a stupid category, so let's get rid of it and try to understand what motivates people to do what they do. Again, go get *Terrorism in Question: Decolonizing Anthropology and the Study of Islam*. Go and buy one. Go and find it, and also find Professor Irfan Ahmad. I will put links to his profile in the description box below. Irfan, thank you so much for your time today.

#Irfan Ahmad

All right. Thank you, Pascal.