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## 9/11 AS A TRIGGER FOR LONG-TERM SHIFTS IN WORLD PUBLIC OPINION

Jaap van Ginneken

**Abstract** / Over the last few years, there have been all sorts of public opinion polls concerning the 'war on terrorism': in the US and the EU, but also throughout the Islamic and rest of the world. Some of the reported results are disheartening. They suggest that many of the reactions of western leaders to 9/11 and subsequent attacks have in fact been counterproductive. Insofar as they tended to reduce the varied and complex identity of another culture to only one aspect of threat and fear, and thus further contributed to polarization. They reinforced stereotyping and discrimination, albeit mostly unintentionally, and led significant parts of well-meaning mainstream Muslim populations to sympathize with some of the terrorists and their actions. Only recently has there been a change in approach. But the question is whether it is not 'too little, too late'.

**Keywords** / anti-Americanism / collective behaviour / critical events / forecasting / Islam / public diplomacy / rapid shifts / terrorism / tipping point / world public opinion

No one foresaw 9/11. Yet it decisively changed the course of world history. Many such events do. That is one reason why we should always make forecasts or even scenarios about the future, but never really believe they will come true. Because if one takes a closer look at the military, political, social, economic and technological events of the recent and distant past, it turns out they often introduced completely unexpected turns, and triggered a drift in previously unforeseen directions (van Ginneken, 2003: Ch. 11).

Not only in how they affected the material world, but also (and maybe even more) in how they affected the *mental* world of everyone concerned, our frames and references. Because we do not directly live in the real world, but in representations of the real world. They made us look radically differently at the same old reality, and thereby fundamentally changed our course of action. In line with the famous theorem of American sociologist William Thomas: if men define something as real, it is real in its consequences. For instance because it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, a notion elaborated by American sociologist Robert Merton. Today, this seems to be happening to the 'clash of civilizations' proposed by Samuel Huntington – relabelled the 'clash of villain-izations' by some.

Psychology has shown how we tend eagerly to embrace simplified, self-flattering and misleading views of others, and exonerate ourselves, whereas sociology has shown how many of the actions deriving from them may have unintended consequences, even leading to completely opposite results. I propose to consider one particular subcategory, that of the 'sorcerer apprentice' syndrome, and apply it to the reactions to 9/11, as well as the subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

During the 1980s, the US and their local Saudi and Pakistani allies were entirely focused on turning Afghanistan into 'a Russian Vietnam'. It worked well and contributed significantly to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact thereafter. Billions of dollars were spent to set up, train and equip a vast network of Muslim fundamentalist volunteers – mostly recruited from Sunni countries everywhere. But in the end, it also helped produce the Taliban and Osama. The US could not possibly have realized that they would turn against them a dozen years later, with Osama's attacks on the World Trade Center.

This article intends to take a close look at the evolution of world opinion since the subsequent American-led invasions in Afghanistan to try again to get rid of the Taliban and Osama, and in Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein. The article feeds on the two main strains in the author's previous academic work. One is related to mass psychology and the oft-capricious nature of public opinion, which may alternately show radical overnight shifts and stubborn decade-long immobility (van Ginneken, 2003). The other is related to stereotypical representations and images of non-western cultures, which unwittingly guide many major western media and policy-makers thinking of themselves as enlightened and cosmopolitan (van Ginneken, 1998, in press).

The rest of this article therefore reviews the results of relevant opinion polls and similar representative data of the last few years. (I have used the American overseas *International Herald Tribune*, published by *The New York Times*, as the prime journal of reference in this context.) The results shed some light on the complexity and dynamics of public opinion, resulting from the unexpected turnaround of the fundamentalist networks. Opinion has shifted throughout the world as a whole, but also in various relevant countries and blocs; among general populations but also among professional elites. It turns out the drift is indeed largely an 'unintended consequence' of earlier policy gambles, and cannot easily be corrected through mere public relations exercises (as some policy-makers seem to think). One such unintended consequence is the renewed rise of anti-Americanism around the world.

## The Renewed Rise of Anti-Americanism

Over the last 65 years, the US has de facto been at war in one form or another for all but 14 years, and the influence of the wide-ranging military-industrial complex on the major candidates, parties and administrations there (that General and President Eisenhower already warned against) is stronger than ever. There is hardly a country in the world where its covert operatives have not meddled over these same years. It is not entirely surprising, then, that there is widespread anti-American sentiment abroad. But it has got worse in recent years, particularly because of the

ill-considered and unnecessarily confrontational policies of the Bush administration towards the Muslim world as a whole.

For a number of years, the Pew Center (financed by the Pew Foundation) has held ongoing surveys on *Global Attitudes*. In the last round, almost 17,000 people were interviewed in 15 countries throughout spring 2006, with the first results released in the early summer. It found a surprising one in four Americans had still not heard about the abuses in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo at that time, whereas only one in 10 Europeans or Japanese had not. Good will towards the US turned out to have further declined in the vast majority of these 15 countries over the previous year. Even in its closest ally, Great Britain, it declined from 75 percent before the Iraq War to a mere 56 percent.

India, Nigeria and Russia were exceptions to some of these trends, as they have their own persistent problems with Islamic extremists. Only in India and Nigeria did majorities still express confidence in Bush at the time. In Spain only one in 14 people did, whereas in Turkey it was a low one in 33. Only India and Russia still had majorities unequivocally backing the 'war on terrorism', whereas support completely collapsed among close allies such as Japan and Spain.

The Pew Center study also showed that vast majorities in 12 out of the 15 countries felt the war in Iraq had made the world a *more* dangerous place rather than a safer one. Apart from the US, the only exceptions were again India and Nigeria. All countries except the US and Germany saw the US presence in Iraq as posing a 'greater threat to world peace' than Iran with its uranium enrichment programme at that point in time. True, the percentage of people in Britain, France and Spain who viewed Iran and its possible future nuclear bombs as a threat almost tripled over the last three years. But Iran retained the strong support of most Muslims: both in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Support for the NATO alliance among Europeans had fallen to a small majority of 55 percent by 2006 (as opposed to a robust 69 percent only four years earlier). These data are drawn from *Transatlantic Trends*, an annual overview of relevant polls made by the German Marshall Fund in the US.<sup>2</sup> (Even in Poland, support fell to a mere 48 percent as opposed to the earlier 64 percent.) By contrast, support for a more independent European approach to security and diplomatic affairs rose to 55 percent (from 50 percent) over this same period.

Turkey appeared to be a particularly interesting 'in-between' case, as a largely Muslim candidate for the EU that feels increasingly rebuffed by its western partners. 'Warmth' towards the US declined to only 20 degrees on a 100-point scale (from 28 degrees two years earlier). Warmth towards Iran, on the other hand, further increased to 43 degrees (from only 34 over the same period). Support for NATO (of which Turkey used to be a staunch supporter) dropped to a minority of 44 percent (from a majority of 53 percent two years earlier). Positive feelings towards Europe also plummeted to 54 percent (from 73 percent two years earlier).<sup>3</sup>

The American lobby group Business for Diplomatic Action (BDA) held a survey among teenagers in 13 countries, and found that anti-Americanism might already be hurting trade. Respondents no longer mentioned US brands among their top three favourites.<sup>4</sup>

## US Opinion

Now let us take a closer look at opinion in the US, from the top policy-makers in Washington down to the Muslim minority. The Center for American Progress held a survey among the top foreign policy elite, resulting in a 'Terrorism Index'. It interviewed more than 100 well-respected top-level foreign policy and national security experts, including a former secretary of state, a former assistant secretary of defence, a former national security adviser and a former CIA chief.

The vast majority felt the Bush administration was on the wrong track. A stunning 86 percent also said that the world was becoming *more* (not less) dangerous for Americans, 84 percent that the US was *not* winning the war on terror and 80 percent that an attack on the scale of 9/11 'was likely within the next five years'.<sup>5</sup> The uncovering of a supposed plot to blow up simultaneously 10 passenger aircraft over the mid-Atlantic was said to have been a close call.

Meanwhile, both lower-level politicians and citizens in the US seem to have been slow at becoming aware of this situation. A sizeable portion of public opinion long continued to believe that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and was behind Al Qaeda and the attacks of 9/11 on the World Trade Center. Most citizens largely depend on the evening news of the television networks for their information nowadays; but their everyday coverage of foreign affairs and the number of fully staffed overseas bureaus have shrunk to an all-time minimum, as their corporate owners increasingly think entertainment is more profitable than (background to) the international news.<sup>6</sup>

Yet reality eventually caught up with the American public as well, and the year 2006 seemed to be the watershed. Just before the fifth anniversary of 9/11, CNN held a poll showing that only one in four citizens felt the US was winning the war in Iraq, whereas almost one in eight felt the insurgents were winning instead.<sup>7</sup> The Pew Center conducted a poll showing that 45 percent now felt *decreasing* (rather than increasing) the military presence abroad would reduce the threat of terrorist attacks.<sup>8</sup> Upon the first anniversary of the attacks four years earlier, this figure had been only 29 percent.<sup>9</sup> At the approach of the midterm elections, Bush felt increasingly pressured to have authoritative outsiders review the options. They counselled a radical change of course. But after the elections were over, Bush still reverted to a policy of 'more of the same'.

Now what about the Muslim minority in the US, meanwhile? Were they won over to join the majority, or pushed into sympathizing with troublemakers by Washington policies? There are some 3 million Americans of Arab descent. A sample of Arab-Americans (and also of the law enforcement personnel, both federal and local, that confronted them) was interviewed by the Vera Institute of Justice (a non-profit policy research centre based in New York), for a study funded by the National Institute of Justice (a research agency of the US Justice Department).<sup>10</sup>

The Arab-Americans reported widespread victimization, suspicion and surveillance threatening their civil liberties, as a result of the 'Patriot Act' and the 'Special Registration' programme (which had fingerprinted, photographed and questioned no less than 80,000 immigrant men – mostly Arabs and Muslims). The study reported that 'these measures threatened to harm decades of work by police departments

to build trust in their local communities, especially among immigrants'.<sup>11</sup> This severely reduced the effectiveness of the agencies in infiltrating and isolating radical groups.

## An Aside on Youngster's Information Levels

One reason why so few US voters have a realistic appraisal of the effects of American foreign policy seems to be the following. Voters in this country with by far the largest presence and the greatest power in the world do often lack the most basic knowledge about that same world. This is particularly true for young Americans of military age, 18 to 24 years old, that is to say particularly those who are sent to overseas battlefields. This fact is consistently reported by the Geographic Literacy Surveys that the Roper agency does for the National Geographic Society.<sup>12</sup>

After five years of almost daily television coverage, a stunning 88 percent of this group were reported as unable to even locate Afghanistan on a world map, and 63 percent could not find Iraq. After seeing hundreds of dramatic news items filled with explosions and blood, they still did not have the faintest idea of the languages spoken or the religious beliefs held there, or even the general nature of the societies. In a previous version of the survey, far more people were reported as knowing that the 'reality' television show *Survivor* was made in the Pacific than could locate even the closest American ally in the region, Israel, on a map. Africa's largest country and major Islamic trouble spot, Sudan, was placed in Asia by 20 percent of the respondents and even in Europe by 10 percent.

The previous version of the survey also compared Americans with youngsters from eight other countries.<sup>13</sup> Americans and Mexicans turned out to be the least informed of them all. Almost one-third of the Americans believed that the US has between 1 and 2 billion inhabitants (rather than a mere 300 million)! Three-quarters believed English was the most widely spoken native language in the world (whereas Mandarin and Hindi obviously are). Only one in seven believe speaking another language fluently is a necessary skill. Only 22 percent currently held a foreign passport and only 20 percent had travelled abroad over the last three years – including to Canada or Mexico. Even Bush himself had hardly set a foot outside the US before he was elected. In the three European countries surveyed (apart from Britain and France), by contrast, 70 percent had travelled abroad over the last few years and the majority spoke at least one foreign language.<sup>14</sup>

Since so few American students are even vaguely familiar with a truly global perspective, this profoundly affects the (in)effectiveness of government institutions in dealing with Muslims. It is true that the US has a few of the best universities and scholars in this field. But outside a small community of academic insiders, general knowledge among professionals and within bureaucracies is extremely sketchy. This holds for police departments, even within the major cities and the federal agencies. It even holds for average staffers at the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies.

They often share a comic strip image of 'good guys' vs 'bad guys', and have very little comprehension of strange cultures, let alone be able to place themselves

in their shoes. Cultural analysis and 'human intelligence' (from infiltrators) have withered away in recent decades, even within the CIA, only to be replaced by 'signal intelligence' (through electronic surveillance) by the National Security Agency (NSA). At key moments, it turned out there were not enough Arab speakers around for interrogation and monitoring. Hence the consistent misappraisal of the popular support for the Ayatollahs, the Taliban, Hamas, the Hezbollah, and recently even for Islamists in such a marginal country as Somalia.

## Europe and 'the Rest of the West'

The increasing polarization is fed by constant and rather disproportional fear-mongering: in the US, Europe and elsewhere. The previous round of the Pew Center *Global Attitudes* project<sup>15</sup> had already shown that people throughout the West worried about the rise of Islamic terrorism in their own countries: ranging from 'only' 56 percent in Canada to some 70 percent in the US, from 'only' 36 percent in Poland to some 84 percent in Germany. The Netherlands was in-between with more than three-quarters worried. At that point in time, soon after the killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic fundamentalist, the Netherlands was the only country with a majority that was entirely negative about Muslims and their immigration. As many as nine out of 10 people said Muslims had (too much of) a strong identity, and thus failed to integrate.<sup>16</sup>

Contradictory forces seem to be tugging at Muslim residents within the European Community itself. The latest Pew Center project took larger and special samples of Muslims living in Britain, Germany, France and Spain. It found that they did indeed think of themselves first as Muslims, and only then as a citizen of their country (81 against 7 percent in Great Britain, 46 against 42 percent in France). Yet this seems to be a logical outcome for immigrants clinging on to their cultural heritage in a strange environment. By contrast 'natives' first thought of themselves as national citizens, and only then as Christians (59 against 33 percent in Germany, 60 against 14 percent in Spain). Only the US was significantly more religious than the 'rest of the West' (48 against 42 percent).

But the survey also found that the majority of European Muslims were willing to change. They did 'show signs of favouring a moderate version of Islam' and welcomed 'the entry of women into modern roles'. The majority is 'generally positive about conditions' in their countries of residence, and do not even see 'many or most Europeans as hostile toward Muslims'. Yet a considerable minority said it had had a 'bad experience' (with discrimination) over the last two years, attributable to their 'race, ethnicity or religion': ranging from 19 percent in Germany to 37 percent in France. This created considerable hostility. So significant numbers did still side with the radicals; in Great Britain some 15 percent (or almost one in six) said that violence against civilian targets could 'sometimes' be justified.<sup>17</sup>

Just before the first anniversary of the tube and bus attacks in London on 7 July, the online news service of *The Times* concluded that more than one in 10 British Muslims believed the bombers should be viewed as 'martyrs', and 7 percent felt that suicide attacks on civilians were justifiable.<sup>18</sup> The Netherlands was completely

taken by surprise by the killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who had his throat cut in broad daylight, on the streets of Amsterdam. In an earlier study, I analysed in detail how the killer and the so-called 'Hofstad group' of young Muslim immigrants had psychologically evolved from mere dissatisfaction to terrorist violence (van Ginneken, 2006).

## The Muslim World

So far we have primarily looked at various components of public opinion in the US, the EU and 'the rest of the West'. But what about the Islamic world itself? It is crucial to look at how the supposed 'clash of civilizations' is perceived there: by elites and masses, by men and women. It turns out western policy-makers have long nourished illusions about how the 'war on terrorism' is experienced there: both by those supposedly at the top and those supposedly at the bottom of the social ladder.

In 2005, the American Council on Foreign Relations therefore reported on a major qualitative survey among elites in the western-most, central and eastern-most countries of the Islamic world: namely Morocco, Egypt and Indonesia (Charney and Yakatan, 2005). It had 14 focus groups of university-educated people talk about relevant subjects. The report noted surprise at how deep the anger against the US ran. American media for the Arab world, which had been specially set up to turn the tide – such as Sawa radio and Al Hurra television – turned out to have been completely ineffective, contrary to what had previously been thought.<sup>19</sup>

The yearning for western-style democracy in the Islamic heartland turns out to have often been greatly overestimated as well. The Internet search engine Google, for instance, was asked about how frequently people in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia had been looking up the key word 'democracy' – in order to see what it meant in present-day western theory and practice. The answer: 'Your terms – democracy – do not have enough search volume to show graphs'.<sup>20</sup>

But what about emancipation and gender equality, then? Another authoritative pollster, The Gallup Organization, held face-to-face interviews with no less than 8000 women, in eight predominantly Muslim countries, for a study on 'What women Want: Listening to the Voices of Muslim Women'. The report concluded they 'did not see gender issues as a priority, because other issues were more pressing' (i.e. political, social, economic ones). To the surprise of the researchers, the answers to the open-ended questions never mentioned the *hijab* (head scarf) or *burqa* (covering garment) as a problem, even though they are widely seen and presented as a 'sign of oppression' in the West. By contrast, the majority said it 'did not think adopting western values would help', as it associated them with 'moral decay' and 'pornography'.<sup>21</sup>

## Iraq

Now let us take a closer look at the evolution of public opinion in Iraq itself, which is at the heart of current events. Sampling and interviewing in such a country at

war are notoriously difficult, and some results are treated as highly confidential, but WorldPublicOpinion.org was able to hold and publish a poll in early 2006.<sup>22</sup>

The good news was that two-thirds thought the country was now headed in the right direction at that point in time. (Even though investors already seemed less convinced, and the Baghdad stock market index had already lost almost two-thirds of its value between the spring of 2005 and 2006.) But the bad news was that 80 percent of the public were convinced that the US sought permanent military bases (as it did) and 70 percent were adamantly opposed to this and instead wanted complete withdrawal of US forces within no more than two years. This was particularly true for the Sunnis, who have lost control to the Shiites throughout much of the country. No fewer than 88 percent of them said they supported violent attacks on US troops.<sup>23</sup> Since then, violence between the Sunnis who used to control the state and the Shiites who have taken over, has escalated into a near civil war.

Three-quarters also said that ousting Saddam had been worth it, but overseas many in the western and non-western world questioned the fairness of his trial in Baghdad. An early 2006 international opinion poll conducted by the authoritative Ipsos agency<sup>24</sup> in nine different countries around the world found that although three-quarters of Americans felt Saddam Hussein was getting a fair trial, fewer than half of the French respondents did, and a third or under in developing countries ranging from Mexico to South Korea.<sup>25</sup> This sentiment persisted after he had been executed.

Among the American troops on the ground, too, widespread doubts began to surface. This was shown in an exceptional survey on the question of 'How long should US troops stay in Iraq?' among almost 1000 soldiers there. The study was done by Zogby Polling and Le Moyne College, and published in the early spring of 2006.<sup>26</sup> Almost three-quarters said that US troops should be pulled out within a year, and almost one-quarter even said 'immediately'. But nothing of the kind happened.

The majority also felt the insurgency they confronted did not so much depend on foreign fighters (as they had originally been told) as on discontented native Sunnis. It could therefore only be contained by a doubling of the ground forces and the air attacks, they felt – which seemed to be completely out of the question.<sup>27</sup> Around that same time, a poll in *The Washington Post* said that half of the American public also felt the US should begin withdrawing troops, whereas one-third already felt a civil war in Iraq was 'highly likely'.<sup>28</sup> Since then, the situation has deteriorated further.

## Mirror Images

The oft-ignored discipline of 'polemology' or conflict studies (partly revived under the heading of 'mediation') had long explained how such confrontations between nations and religions, ethnicities and cultures, tended to go from bad to worse. One party has grievances, and attacks the other. The other responds, but just slightly more, in order 'to teach them a lesson' and because 'they only understand violence'. Soon, the escalation spiral can no longer be stopped. It is accompanied

by increasingly stereotypical 'enemy images', some of which do surprisingly show a near-identical pattern on both sides.

The Pew Center project, for instance, revealed that some of these so-called 'mirror images' play a considerable role here.<sup>29</sup> Among those who said Muslim–Western relations were bad, for instance, vast majorities in Muslim countries blamed the West, whereas westerners of course blamed Muslims. Nigeria once again turned out to be evenly divided: Muslims there blamed the West, whereas Christians there blamed the Muslims.

Muslims outside Europe also consistently claimed the West was violent and immoral, whereas westerners feel Muslims are. (Muslims in Europe were in-between.) One particularly revealing question about 'values' was: are Muslims [or westerners] 'respectful of women?' Considerable majorities in the US and among Western Europeans claimed that Muslims were not. Considerable majorities in the major Muslim countries, by contrast, claimed that westerners were not. Only Nigeria, Turkey and Muslims in some European countries were more evenly divided.<sup>30</sup>

The whole 'clash of civilizations' therefore does indeed seem to have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many of the issues involved are complex and ambiguous by their very nature. Who started the clash, where do you 'cut off' the previous relevant history? At the Crusades? What is the 'minimal meaningful context' of the current problems? Does it include colonialism and ongoing discrimination in the West? Who can be held responsible on either side? Just some isolated leaders or entire civilian populations?

It is important to see that such 'definitions of the situation' are highly arbitrary and changeable. They depend on the organization of perception and experience, on key references and filters. If you put on rose-tinted glasses, it seems they can only be resolved through massive and consistent violence against 'threats' (too) broadly defined. If you take them off, it turns out they may be better resolved through tenacious and widespread attempts at dialogue with well-meaning majorities. What is needed is a strenuous effort to really reach out and build bridges with them, while isolating and combating the real enemies. Superficial exercises in mere public relations will not do.

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