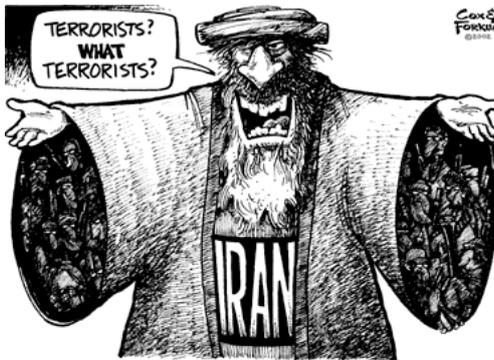


## 10 years after 9/11: Reconsidering dangerous assumptions through the Arab Revolutions

by *Valentina Bartolucci*



The September 11, 2001 events brought with their sorrow also a drastic reconfiguration of international security's top priorities. In the aftermath of the September 11 events the new global enemy was Islamist terrorism, Arab countries were its natural stronghold, and Muslims quickly became the 'risk-group' to be kept under control. The only possible answer to the 'devil of terrorism' was violence and the 'western' victory against it was an absolute certitude. In a very short amount of time, terrorism

came to be seen as the greatest existential threat humanity was facing, Islamist terrorism was the 'new Antichrist', and America the nation that once again would have saved our freedoms and us all (in the 'west').

A (partially) new discourse was recreated in the aftermath of the events – a discourse that soon dictated its deployment virtually everywhere in the world. The extent of the hegemonic power of the discourse on terrorism can be assessed by looking at its almost unchallenged success. The discourse on terrorism indeed has become so pervasive as to be found in popular jokes, designs for tatoos, novels, children books, and television programmes. In reality, a discourse is never completely hegemonic and voices of dissent always exist (Bathia, 2005). In the case of terrorism, however, such dissent has been proved very slow to emerge.

We had indeed to wait 10 years and to witness the revolutionary events in the Middle East and North Africa – the so-called 'Arab Spring'- to have such a discourse challenged in its central assumptions:

1. A decade after the September 11, 2001 events, despite the massive attention (invariably coupled with fear) towards everything and anything associated with Islam/is and/or Arab, it is still common to find terminological confusion and overlapping between 'Arab' and 'Muslim' in their various declinations. The common amalgam that 'all Arabs are Muslims – all Muslims are Arabs' was firstly reinforced in 1995 with the Oklahoma bombings, firstly attributed to 'Muslim extremists' then identified in an Arab American man, and even more so with the 9/11 attacks. The Arab Spring, presenting itself as an Arab revolution but as totally nondenominational, has forced us to reconsider such terminological conflation.

2. The nondenominational character of the Arab uprisings also disproves another very common assumption in political science according to which Arabs are 'exceptional' not ultimately in virtue of the fact that they are moved by ideological slogans along religious or sectarian lines. The revolts on the contrary are non sectarian and not directed at establishing ideologies, but rather fought for basic freedoms and dignity.
3. To the growing astonishment of a number of 'western' observers, Arab countries with their revolutions have been able to demonstrate that they are able to produce something different from terrorism and authoritarianism. For the last ten years at least, Arab countries have been commonly represented in the 'west' as being at best insensitive to democratic change. It was also widely believed that real democracy, as understood in the 'west', can not take root in Arab countries, traditionally more sympathetic to authoritarianism. The recent revolts are in fact popular revolts oriented to have more freedoms and access to basic human rights. The non-violent character of most of these revolts forces 'westerners' also to reconsider the assumed violent character of Arabs.
4. Commonly, Muslims too are intrinsically associated with violence and mayhem. Long before the 9/11 events, a deluge of stereotypes, such as the vision of 'the West' as 'secular', 'advanced' and 'civilised' in opposition to a Muslim or Arab world (often linguistically conflated) seen as 'barbaric', 'uncivilised' and 'hostile to democracy' permeated discussions around terrorism (Ranstorp, 1996). Primary 'western' images of Islam have indeed been for long violence, lust and barbarism (Karim, 1997). With the Arab uprisings, the people presently fighting in North Africa and Middle East – the majority of which are Muslims – are variously presented as 'martyrs', 'rebels', 'fighters for democracy' or 'freedom fighters'. They are also looking strangely similar to 'us in the West', having legitimate aspirations and dreams of a better life.
5. In 2010, Europol reported that «Islamist terrorism is still perceived as the biggest threat worldwide, despite the fact that the EU only faced one Islamist terrorist attack in 2008». Although dismissed by empirical data, the idea that 'not all Muslims are terrorists, but (nearly) all terrorists are Muslims' has become axiomatic in many circles. The Arab turmoils clearly show that Muslims themselves are victims of a certain kind of terrorism (living in a permanent state of fear and coercion) and them too want freedoms, rights and dignity.
6. The governmental security discourse is gradually changing too. A little more attention is registered for what concerns the categorisation of the various actors (e.g. Those revolting in Libya are now called 'rebels' while few time ago would have been called most probably 'terrorists'). The language adopted however remains dangerously hyperbolic (see for instance the name given to the military operation in Libya, «Odyssey Dawn»).

Finally, as confirmation of the quasi-hegemonic status of the discourse on terrorism, it is worth mentioning that the same linguistic constructions adopted by the Bush administration to categorise their enemy number 1 has been re-appropriated by a very old friend of 'the West' now demonised and that lately defines 'westerners' or '*terrorists*, barbarians and monsters'. Such a demonising discourse is indeed easily transferrable. If until very recently, for instance, Gheddafi was respected and honoured, he is now demonised up to the point of being considered him the 'terroriser of his own people', while before was the guarantor of stability – a clear evidence that the word 'terrorism' is more useful to demonise the 'other' (an 'other' changing over time for political convenience) than for anything else.

## **Bibliography**

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