

Global 'war on terror' and the battle for a dissenting civil society

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Shortly after 9/11, President Bush announced that “we do not fight Islam, we fight against evil.”

The defeat of communism had left an ideological void and only through the events of 9/11 would a new ideological war be possible. The global ‘war on terror’ provided just this, an open-ended conflict for which to carry out a twenty-first century civilising mission.

Just as Europeans had used the pretext of God as a means to colonise the ‘savages’ of Africa and bring them ‘civilisation’, Western powers have used the war on terror and human rights as the moral justification for exporting capitalism and democracy to those parts of the world Tony Blair once described as lying in “shadows and darkness.”

Almost a decade on and we are still entangled in a ‘war on terror,’ against an evil enemy that has been increasingly difficult to define.

The language used has changed. The war on terror is now a ‘strategic challenge’ or sometimes an ‘overseas contingency operation’ but the consequences remain an inescapable part of our foreign policy and civil society.

Extraordinary rendition, heightened security, greater surveillance, secret interrogations, torture, random police stop-and-searches and political assurances that we remain in a perpetual war against terrorists, have a particular Orwellian feel.

Most will never experience or witness the more extreme counter-terrorist methods used in the global war on terror. This has fuelled a general perception that the war on terror is limited to the Middle East, radicalized youth, bombs and detainees. However, the reality is that the scope and impact of this ‘war’ affects everyone.

Recent cases, such as the [surveillance cameras](#) in Birmingham’s Muslim communities and the police treatment of [amateur photographer Bob Patefield](#), highlight in a more personal and recognisable way, what is at stake in this ‘war’ and that it is not only confined to Guantanamo Bay.

If there is one thing that the global war on terror has accomplished, it is to turn everyone into suspects.

This blog series will be exploring the effects of the global war on terror on civil society. Following [research](#) conducted by the [Centre for Civil Society](#), I will be addressing the key findings and questions raised.

The research shows that Muslim organisations, centres and mosques have both been targeted by the state as 'breeding grounds' for terrorism and paradoxically, incorporated into the state security apparatus as a means to combat the terrorist threat. Despite this, mainstream advocacy groups in Western countries have, for the most part, remained silent on the issue, at least until they themselves have been directly affected. They have preferred to remain diligent and "beneath the parapet" in order to be saved from scrutiny.

This silence is surprising and troubling.

For governments to resort to an ever increasing array of counter-terrorist measures to target an ill-defined enemy, with no guarantee that their citizens will be any safer, is not a successful defence against the terrorist threat. Rather, protecting our civil liberties and fostering better international relations in the world will, in the long run, prove a far greater deterrent against terrorism and 'evil', than an ideological war with no end in sight. Moreover, it will restore a much needed dissenting civil society.

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