

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Jerusalem, showing a dense urban area with a large plume of white smoke rising from a central area, possibly a site of conflict or destruction. The smoke is thick and billowing, obscuring some of the buildings below. The surrounding city is a mix of residential and commercial buildings, with a prominent road or railway line running through the center. The overall scene is one of urban devastation.

# Explaining the War on Terrorism from an Ontological-Security Perspective

BY NOA EPSTEIN

*Noa Epstein is a Master's Candidate in the Department of International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She may be contacted at [epstein.noa@gmail.com](mailto:epstein.noa@gmail.com)*

- The events of September 11, 2001 compelled the United States to question its role as a benevolent hegemon in the Westphalian international order.
- With U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq as evidence, most international relations scholars attribute America's response to 9/11 as an effort to restore its physical security.
- By examining the Bush administration's actions from an ontological perspective, it appears that the United States' war on terrorism is more precisely governed by a need to protect its sense of identity.

**O**n September 11, 2001, the U.S. suffered the worst terrorist attack in modern history. In a speech to a joint session of the Congress nineteen days later, President Bush declared: "On September 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country." The U.S. response was both physical and rhetorical. It declared war on terrorism, identifying al-Qa'ida in particular, as the new "evil Other," and under the auspices of this war, it attacked Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and is still occupying Iraq. In the aftermath of 9/11, the war on terrorism seemed inevitable. But the U.S. response could have been different. The U.S. could have, for example, framed its response not as a war but as an international police campaign to hunt down the criminals and bring them to justice. What, then, lies behind the U.S. choice to declare war on terrorism?

Satellite image of Manhattan, New York on September 12, 2001. The picture shows a smoke plume spreading over large portions of the city after the World Trade Center attack.

PHOTO CREDIT: NASA

International relations experts maintain a variety of views on what caused the U.S. to react to 9/11 in the way it did. Liberalist explanations argue 9/11 to have been, in part, an attack on values: American, Western, modern. Accordingly, the U.S. response, they argue, was framed as a struggle of good against evil, in which the U.S. has sought to spread the values of freedom and democracy worldwide.

Conversely, international relations scholars in the Realist camp explain the U.S. response as an inevitable, rational, defensive and deterrent measure, perhaps even as revenge, in response to the attack on the U.S.'s *physical* security. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which harbored terrorism and was hence guilty by association, was, according to them, attacked "in order to install a new government that would eliminate the terrorists." Realists also argue that the U.S.'s real objective was to gain control over the oil and natural gas resources of central Asia.

But these explanations do not suffice. They do not explain the rhetorical aspect of the U.S.'s response (the strong emphasis on the U.S. being the world's guardian of freedom in the face of evil) or the choice to frame the response as *war*, assuming that the U.S. could have been satisfied with strengthening law enforcement and destroying terrorist financial networks. Most importantly, if the physical damage alone (the death toll of over 3,000 and the material loss resulting from 9/11) was what prompted the response, then why wasn't war declared on obesity, smoking, and road accidents? By



comparison, about 112,000 adult deaths are associated with obesity each year in the United States; more than 400,000 Americans die every year from cigarette smoking; and in 2001, automobile crashes killed 15 times more Americans than terrorism did.

There seems to be a deeper, underlying explanation for the U.S.'s response to 9/11. It will be argued here that a state's behavior is fundamentally shaped by its identity and need for certainty. In order to achieve a sense of stability and purpose, states struggle to preserve what has been termed, by Jennifer Mitzen of Ohio State University, their ontological security (OS). The U.S.'s response to 9/11 can be framed and understood in such terms, for the resort to the U.S. routine of declaring war on an "evil antagonist," was significantly aimed at restoring the sense of ontological security that had been disrupted by the terrorists. Substantiating such a hypothesis requires: (a) defining the pillars of U.S. identity, (b) analyzing the way in which the terrorist acts of 9/11 attacked the U.S.'s identity and generated a deep sense of uncertainty, and (c) discussing how a declaration of war on terrorism, an attack on Afghanistan, and the identification of al-Qa'ida as an evil antagonist offered the U.S. an opportunity to restore its OS.

## **ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY: THE SECURITY OF IDENTITY**

Ontology is "the branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being."

Sociologist Anthony Giddens, the former director of the London School of Economics, used this term to develop his concept of ontological security, arguing that all human beings seek a secure self (identity), which pertains to having a sense of certainty and stability with regard to the social order, and in this case, the international state system. Only in the past few years have international relations scholars applied the concept to *state* actors on the grounds that like human beings, states are considered rational and *social* actors, such that they,

too, seek ontological security. They seek a stable identity and sense of certainty, and achieve it by turning their interaction with others into routines with desired ends.

In order to grasp what OS means, picture a soldier at war. The soldier's physical security, the security of his body, is constantly under threat by the possibility of being shot or stepping on a landmine. But there is more at stake, for the soldier is not only concerned with his physical survival; he is also driven to preserve his sense of purpose. Being ontologically secure – that is to say, having a stable sense of self – is a fundamental need of the soldier and any other social actor (including states – as corporate social actors). This is because it influences the soldier's ability to act rationally. His ability to act rationally depends on an awareness of his objectives with respect to those of his enemy, an awareness of the challenges he must confront in his particular environment, and an awareness of his role in contributing to the goals of his society. Only in such an instance does the soldier know in fact who he is and what he is fighting for. Without such a sense of awareness and a clear sense of who he is, the soldier is powerless and his efforts utterly meaningless.

To dig a little deeper, one can consider the soldier's identity as comprising two components. The first pertains to his intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute his individuality; his cultural essence, his so-called D.N.A. of values and principles. The second aspect encompasses the soldier's *social* identity, which refers to his role vis-à-vis other actors. Because this aspect is constructed *in relation to other actors* (a teacher is a teacher by virtue of having students, just as a soldier is a soldier by virtue of having at least a potential enemy) it requires recognition by others in order to exist.

Note that ontological *insecurity* (an attack on identity) is generated by a deep sense of uncertainty. This can impede rational action (and since states are considered rational actors – deep uncertainty impedes a state's ability to interact), and because the

social aspect of one's identity is endogenous to the interaction, deep uncertainty affects identity. To return to the previous example, imagine what would happen if the soldier's military was confronted with a situation in which exogenous phenomena forced it to question the principles on which it had forever justified war. Suddenly, the rules of the game have changed. What then, would the soldier's objectives be? How could he operate effectively under such a deep sense of uncertainty?

Consider then, what happened to the U.S.'s identity (conceptualized as a freedom-guarding benevolent hegemon, an economic and military superpower) when a non-state actor (al-Qa'ida) came and attacked the U.S. from within its sovereign boundaries, using box cutters and nail clippers.

Confronted with the condition of terrorism, what seems to have become an even more intractable force than its past foe of communism, the U.S. has had to find a way to restore its ontological security.

In order to reestablish security in the ontological sense, a social actor tends to develop and rely on routines. Routines enable the actor to *act*, and, because part of an actor's identity derives from the actor's interaction with others, routines help to sustain stable interaction, and hence a stable identity. It follows that in a deep state of uncertainty or extreme anxiety, actors will resort to routines in order to retrieve their sense of self, re-establish a sense of certainty, and restore their OS.

## CONCEPTUALIZING U.S. IDENTITY

Going back to the steps through which we can substantiate the OS perspective, it would be necessary to define the U.S.'s identity. What was, after all, attacked on 9/11? Consider below the most dominant long-standing aspects of the U.S.'s identity:

[a] The Supra identity as state-qua-state is the state's identity as constituted by the Westphalian state-system (In 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia established the nation-state system). It is a particu-

larly important aspect of the U.S.'s identity since the U.S. has the self-imposed role of ensuring the state-system's endurance.

[b] The intrinsic aspect of U.S. identity is colored by a sense of *exceptionalism*. This refers to the U.S.'s self-assumption that values and practices are qualitatively superior, that its policy positions are moral and proper, not just expedient, and that it is invulnerable. The values and principles (the American creed) on which exceptionalism is based are highlighted in the American Declaration of Independence. As the first modern democracy, the U.S. was founded on principles of *liberty*, democracy, equality of opportunity, individualism, morality and right to property, and the *American way of life* relates primarily to personal freedom within a liberal democracy.

[c] The social aspect of U.S. identity defines the U.S.'s role as a benevolent hegemon. Embedded in this identity are both U.S. economic and military superiority, and the idea that the U.S. uses its superpower status in ways that also benefit other states. By the late 19th century, the U.S. was already the largest economy in the world. Today it is an industrial power, the most prosperous country in human history, with the highest GDP (purchasing power parity) in the world. In military terms, too, the U.S. clearly surpasses the rest of the world. The U.S. military is the only one capable of leading and fighting a major regional war at a distance from its homeland. The 2005 U.S. military budget was larger than the military budgets of the next 20 biggest spenders combined, and six times larger than China's, which places second. It is through this military superiority that the U.S. helps maintain a world in its own image. Whereas the U.S. is usually considered to have been isolationist during the 19th century, it assumed the role of benevolent hegemon in the aftermath of WWII. Apart from being the leading superpower with a decisive economic and military edge, the U.S. also perceives itself as acting for the benefit of others, as a provider of collective goods and as the leader of the free world. Michael Hirsh

of *Newsweek International* argues that “it is simply not in America’s national D.N.A. to impose a new Pax Romana. The United States is a nation whose very reason for existence is to maximize freedom.” As Jutta Weldes of the University of Bristol explains, the fact that the U.S. sees itself as acting altruistically is confirmed by the pervasive American rhetoric of “burdens of responsibility” and “commitments,” to describe the U.S.’s hegemonic role, because commitments are honored even though they may entail costs.

### 9/11: AN ATTACK ON THE U.S.’S ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

Having laid out the core aspects of the U.S.’s identity, it is important to consider the ways in which the nature of the 9/11 attacks (*what* happened, *how* and *why*), and al-Qa’ida’s characteristics, generated a sense of deep uncertainty for the U.S. and attacked the U.S.’s identity.

The classical game of sovereignty exists to order *inter-state* relations and to prevent and regulate conflicts between them. Al-Qa’ida dealt a serious blow to the U.S.’s identity as *state-qua-state* since it *declared war* on the U.S. despite being a non-state actor in the Westphalian system; moreover, it rejects the modern state system and seeks to remake the world by resurrecting the Muslim Caliphate. Al-Qa’ida also uses unlawful and unlimited violence and threatens state security *from within* the state’s sovereign borders.

The *intrinsic* aspect of the U.S.’s identity, too, was attacked on 9/11. Firstly, the U.S.’s sense of exceptionalism was attacked as al-Qa’ida shattered “U.S. grandiose fantasies of invulnerability” through an unprecedented massive attack on the U.S. homeland. Secondly, on September 12, 2001, Bush declared terrorism “a threat to our way of life.” The 9/11 hijackers restricted the freedom of Americans. The hijackers grounded the civilian air fleet, shut down Wall Street, and caused many Americans to cancel their flights due to a strong sense of insecurity at home and abroad. Security

has become an ever-present worry for Americans, a fact that, in some sense, reflects al-Qa’ida’s success in restricting their freedom. Some hold that if liberty has been the casualty of 9/11, then it will be more a result of friendly fire, namely U.S. anti-liberal policies in the name of homeland security, than of the assaults of al-Qa’ida. In either scenario, however, the end result is an attack on the U.S. (liberal) way of life. Thirdly, al-Qa’ida struck at the U.S. by exploiting those characteristics that are central to its identity; taking advantage of U.S. liberty, economic and communicational interconnectedness, cultural diversity, and respect for privacy. For these characteristics were precisely what ended up boomeranging against the U.S. itself.

The *social* aspect of the U.S.’s identity was powerfully attacked on 9/11 as well. As Osama bin Laden declared: On September 11th, the “real targets were America’s icons of military and economic power.” The Twin Towers and the Pentagon represented the U.S., as understood by Americans: an exceptional, potent economic and military superpower. Therefore, by crashing into and toppling these towers as well as the nation’s military hub, al-Qa’ida attacked U.S. identity as an economic and military superpower. Al-Qa’ida’s ability to cause the economic damage that it did illustrates the vulnerability of the U.S., despite its being an economic superpower. The stock markets remained closed until September 17th, and stocks lost \$1.2 trillion in value for the week. The air travel industry suffered substantial losses, and the attacks were estimated to have cost the U.S. economy 1.8 million jobs. According to the property consultancy, Jones Lang Lasalle, “The attacks destroyed over 12% of the entire down-town office market” “and nearly crippled [New York’s] economy.” Moreover, the *means* employed by al-Qa’ida on 9/11 attacked U.S. identity as a military superpower. The mightiest military in history had failed to protect the heart of U.S. power from a band of 19 men brandishing box cutters.

Not only did 9/11 remind the U.S. that it is not

omnipotent; it also suggested that U.S. power could, perhaps, be considered to have become a part of the cause of terrorist enmity and even a source of U.S. vulnerability. Bin Laden's 1998 fatwa (declaration of jihad) illustrates al-Qa'ida's perception of the U.S. as an occupier, criminal, and oppressor, driven by economic and religious neo-imperialist goals. This pejorative depiction stands in sharp contrast to the positive light in which the U.S. sees itself: an exceptional, benevolent superpower. Despite the international support and sympathy the U.S. received immediately after 9/11, there was a widespread international sense that the U.S. either deserved or in some way provoked an attack such as 9/11. From an ontological security standpoint, this mismatch of subjective identity and socially recognized role became unstable; thus was an attack on the social aspect of the U.S.'s identity, which can only be preserved if other states continue to share with the U.S. an understanding of its role in the world.

In successfully generating terror, 9/11 brought about a deep sense of uncertainty. The phenomenon was best described by former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld: "[The post-9/11 U.S. challenge is] to defend our nation against the unknown, the uncertain, the unseen and the unexpected." Although terrorism itself is not new, the world had never seen a terrorist attack that killed so many people, and prior to 9/11, U.S. strategic thinking lacked a coherent framework through which to understand contemporary terrorism.

Moreover, the U.S. found its longstanding system of deterrence unable to generate a sense of stability so well achieved in the past, for successful deterrence presumes rational actors. The harsh reality is that it is extremely difficult to deter suicide terrorists, since they are willing to give up their own lives. Deterrence by threat of retaliation is not viable since al-Qa'ida lacks a return address and its members are not daunted by the threat of death. Deterrence by denial, too, is problematic since al-Qa'ida operates from within the sovereign



**A helicopter flies overhead as smoke pours from the southwest corner of the Pentagon Building located in Washington, DC, minutes after a hijacked airliner crashed into the southwest corner of the building during the 9/11 terrorist attacks.**

**U.S. NAVY PHOTO BY JO1 MARK D. FARAM.  
RELEASED TO PUBLIC.**

boundaries of the state under attack. It used jet-planes (hijacked and used as ballistic missiles), cell-phones, and rental cars, which were integral parts of the targeted society and not developed exogenously. How can a state "balance" against a power base that is very much part of its own post-industrial fabric of society?

Like a cancerous tumor, al-Qa'ida's *transnational network* character has made it very difficult to contain or eradicate, and this generates a deep sense of uncertainty. As a prototype of New Terrorism (which has developed since the end of the Cold



War) al-Qa'ida is decentralized and amorphous, comprising autonomous or semi-autonomous internationally dispersed cells. Removing bin Laden might *disrupt* the network but is unlikely to *destroy* the fanatical beliefs that drove the 9/11 terrorists to attack the U.S. Al-Qa'ida has a complex, robust, and resilient money-generating and money-moving network. Its financial infrastructure spans the globe, with various types of accounts and financiers in approximately 100 countries, and it operates in secrecy, both within the network and vis-à-vis state authorities. How can such an enemy be contained or eradicated, even if one possesses all the military might in the world?

### **WAR ON TERRORISM: AN ATTEMPT TO RESTORE ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY**

The 9/11 attacks and the nature of al-Qa'ida undermined the U.S.'s ontological security. The U.S. response was, in part, a resort to routines that would restore its sense of identity and generate a sense of certainty. In light of previous American foreign policy strategies, framing the response to 9/11 as a war might be considered to some extent a resort to an American *routine* of declaring “a war on \_\_\_\_\_,” as with Wilson’s “War to end all wars” (WWI), which can be understood as a war on wars, and to a greater extent Johnson’s War on Poverty and Nixon’s War on Drugs. Bush’s War on Terrorism, likewise, is a war with no visible end, on an idea too vague and broad to pursue effectively, which by definition ensures that it can last almost indefinitely. Bush himself stated that this war is “of uncertain duration” (letter accompanying the National Security Strategy [NSS]). Since the officially stated purpose of the war, eradicating terrorism and evil, is a literal impossibility due to terrorism’s nature, the war on terrorism might qualify as an unwinnable war, which ensures its indefinite duration, thus, paradoxically, creating a kind of certainty. The U.S. knows who it is and whom it is against: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

Unable to strike against an al-Qa'ida *state*, the U.S. attacked the main state that harbored al-Qa'ida: Afghanistan. It continued by linking Iraq to the broader terrorist threat, thereby paving the way for another attack on a *state* in an attempt to restore and solidify the shaken rules of the Westphalian order (over which the U.S., as the sole superpower, has a self-imposed role of guardian), thereby strengthening U.S. identity as *state-qua-state*. In the eyes of the U.S. administration, the advent of Islamic terrorism posed the gravest threat to the established international order. Prior to the attacks, U.S. strategic thinking remained cast in a strongly realist mindset that emphasized interactions between *states*, and focused in particular on strategic defense against possible missile attacks by rogue *states*, such as North Korea (hence the National Missile Defense Program). But even rogue states can be deterred more successfully than suicide terrorists, because their state identity influences their payoff structure; for example, they have a defined territory and population at stake, as opposed to suicide terrorists who have nothing that they value that can be held at risk.

The U.S.'s identity as an economic superpower was affirmed by its response, for to take on the role of guardian and advancer of freedom, a state must have the material wealth to back up its ambitions. Only an economic superpower could spend enormous amounts of money on the overwhelming force that was used in Operation Enduring Freedom. Furthermore, U.S. wealth depends very much on open markets and free trade. It can be argued that using the war on terrorism to safeguard a new era of global economic growth, through the expansion of open markets and free trade, constitutes a further attempt to reassert the U.S.'s identity as an economic superpower.

*Declaring war* on terrorism also affirmed the U.S.'s identity as a military superpower. The title: “War” gave legitimacy for using extraordinary military means. Under the drama of a war, there was greater leeway for expanding the U.S. military

budget, using incommensurable force, mobilizing domestic and international support, and hence reaffirming U.S. identity as a military superpower.

Furthermore, framing the response as war also permitted the affirmation of the U.S. role of a benevolent hegemon. It allowed President Bush to invoke WWII images, as when he drew parallels between 9/11 and Pearl Harbor, and between the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of the Afghan economy. This type of rhetoric, which has emanated from Washington since the war on terrorism commenced, has emphasized the U.S. image of a benevolent hegemon. The NSS defines the presence of American forces overseas as a “profound symbol of commitment” to U.S. allies and friends. When Operation Enduring Freedom commenced, President Bush declared that the U.S. “did not ask for this mission, but will fulfill it” due to the U.S. commitment to defend “not only our precious freedoms but also the freedom of people everywhere.” Such statements clearly construct and enhance the image of a responsible, altruistic, and benevolent U.S., in an attempt to reaffirm the social aspect of the U.S.’s identity challenged by al-Qa’ida.

### AL-QA’IDA: THE U.S.’S “EVIL OTHER”

The defining aspect of the U.S. government’s rhetorical response to 9/11 was the construction of al-Qa’ida as its new major antagonist, a new “evil Other.” This can be seen as a resort to the routine of producing U.S. identity by differentiation. The U.S.’s identity was initially forged as a counter identity to an “Other” called Europe, and during the Cold War, the U.S. constructed its identity as a counter identity to communism. Today, it appears that terrorism (and, in particular, al-Qa’ida) has become the new “evil-on-duty.” The U.S. has a definite aim to restore its identity as *the* advancer of freedom and liberty, indicated by the fact that the root “free” or “liberty” is used 79 times in the NSS. The U.S.’s rhetorical response to 9/11 has served this aim: It affirmed the U.S.’s identity as being everything that the evil al-Qa’ida is not. The Bush

administration has repeatedly referred to al-Qa’ida as “absolute evil,” “enemies of freedom” who “brutalize and repress their own people [and] threaten [the American] way of life.” By differentiating itself from al-Qa’ida, the U.S. affirmed its identity as an exceptional, benevolent guardian of freedom.

### COMING FULL CIRCLE

The U.S.’s policy towards al-Qa’ida in response to 9/11 is difficult to understand if the U.S.’s only objective was to retaliate against al-Qa’ida and make the U.S. more *physically* secure in the face of further terrorist threats. The explanation from the perspective of ontological security is proposed not to replace but to complement the array of existing explanations. The collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11 astonished millions throughout the world. But with it, less visual, but no less daunting, came a severe challenge to the U.S.’s identity and sense of certainty. In order to restore its ontological security, the U.S. chose to respond in a way that reinforced its identity and alleviated uncertainty.

Because states constantly seek ontological security, they tend to become *attached* to the routines that safeguard a stable identity and provide a sense of certainty. While an attachment to dangerous routines might enhance a state’s ontological security, it may hinder its physical security. Indeed, the U.S.’s response to 9/11 may be regarded as an attachment to dangerous routines (namely, declaring “War on \_\_\_\_\_”), which possibly generates a self-fulfilling prophecy that in turn poses a threat to the U.S.’s *physical* security. It seems that the U.S. is beginning to understand that applying the Westphalian perspective to fight its “war on terror” might not be prudent after all, evident by the fact that it is reforming its military into one that is adept at fighting small guerilla forces. It remains to be seen how the U.S. will manage to ensure both its ontological and physical security, without having one satisfied at the expense of the other. **IR**

*Noa Epstein’s piece was awarded Second Place in the MITIR Writing Contest.*