

9/11/01

## SO THIS IS WAR?

By Christopher Hitchens

In the post-World Trade Center era, the question “how” is still taking precedence over the question “why.”

At the presidential level, the two questions appear to be either crudely synthesized or plain confused, since George W. Bush has taken to describing the mass murder in New York and Washington as “not just an act of terrorism but an act of war.” This strongly implies that he knows who is responsible; an assumption for which he doesn’t care to make known the evidence.

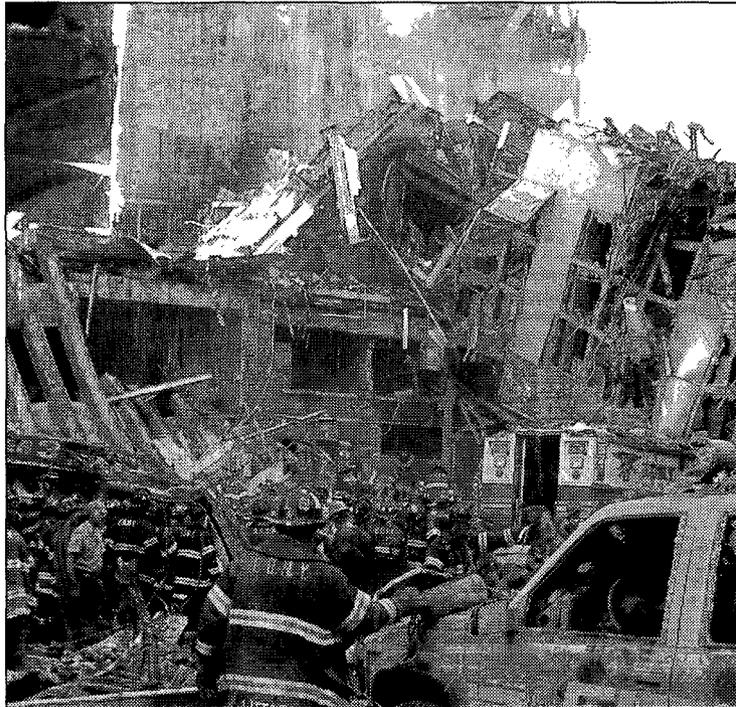
Instant opinion polls show the same cognitive dissonance at the mass level. Most people, when asked if they agree with the president about the “war”

proposition, reply in the affirmative. But in follow-up questions, they counsel extreme caution about retaliation “until all the facts are in.” This means, in ordinary words, that they have not the least idea whether they are at war or not.

Over the years since the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979, the public has become tolerably familiar with the idea that there are Middle Easterners of various shades and stripes who do not like them. The milestones of this—the Marine barracks in Beirut, the Gulf War, the destruction of Pan Am Flight 101—actually include a previous attack on the World Trade Center in 1993. And on that occasion, the men convicted of the assault turned out to have backgrounds in a Western-sponsored guerrilla war—actually a *jihād*—in Afghanistan.

Osama bin Laden had pretty good name-recognition among American news consumers even before Tuesday’s trauma. He has already survived a cruise-missile attack ordered by President Clinton in 1998 (in the same cycle of attacks that destroyed a Sudanese aspirin factory in the supposed guise of a nerve-gas facility). Bin Laden is perhaps unlikely to die in his bed, but his repeated identification as a “Saudi millionaire”—we thought the Saudi Arabians were on our side—makes consistency in demonization rather difficult; the image somehow doesn’t compute.

There have been cases of random violence here against Arab-owned shops, but, on the whole, it has been remarkable to see how such crude response has been kept to a minimum.



EMANUEL DUMONT/ITEMS

The television repeatedly shows film of Palestinian youths applauding the attacks in New York, but instantly “balances” it with a calm and reasoned appeal from the telegenic Dr. Hanan Ashrawi. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s Tuesday evening press conference in Manhattan—one of his very best and almost the first occasion on which any hard information was provided to the public—was notable in the same way. He tersely promised extra police protection to Arab and Muslim citizens, and dismissed any thought of vigilantism.

It probably seems indecent to most people to ask if the United States has

ever done anything to attract such awful hatred. Indeed, the very thought, for the present, is taboo. Some senators and congressmen have spoken of the loathing felt by certain unnamed and sinister elements for the freedom and prosperity of America, as if it were only natural that such a happy and successful country should inspire envy and jealousy. But that is the limit of permissible thought.

In general, the motive of the perpetrators is shrouded by rhetoric about their “cowardice” and their “shadowy” character, almost as if they had not volunteered to immolate themselves in the broadest of broad-blue daylight. On the New York campus where I am writing this, there are a few students and professors willing to venture points about U.S. foreign policy. But they do so very guardedly, and it would sound like profane apologetics if transmitted live. So the analytical moment, if there is to be one, has been indefinitely postponed.

In any case, the question of “how” is for the moment the more riveting one. Did the murderers have accomplices within the airport security systems? Have there been “sleepers” here for years? How did the coordination work? How near did we come to losing the White House? And—more nerve-rackingly—has all the venomous energy been spent in this one climactic assault?

During the Cold War, it was often said that the United States faced an unsleeping foe that was “godless.” I don’t think it’s sufficiently recognized how important this one word was, and how much it is missed. The holy warriors, as these seem

to be, are an entirely different proposition. The United States as a country has no fixed position on Islamic fundamentalism. It has used it as an ally, as well as discovered it as an enemy. It could not bomb Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, even if it found conclusive proof that the hijackers and assassins had actually trained there. So what does the president mean when he says so portentously that "we will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them"? It looks like a distinction without a difference, and gives a momentary impression of being decisive, while actually only confusing the issue.

As I write, fighter planes are the only craft in the sky over New York and Washington, and indeed, the rest of the country. The National Guard is on the streets. The Atlantic and

Pacific coasts are being ostentatiously patrolled by large and reassuring Navy vessels. Not only does this deployment do absolutely no good today (it has about the same effect as the newly imposed ban on curbside baggage check-in at airports), but it would have made absolutely no difference if it had started before the attacks.

Yes, it does give the impression that we are "at war," all right. But being on maneuvers is not the same as warfare, and "preparedness" and "vigilance" are of little value if they contribute to the erection of a Maginot Line in the mind. ■

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9/11/01

## A TINDERBOX IN PALESTINE

By Charmaine Seitz

### JERUSALEM

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip experienced a tinderbox of emotions as the series of hijackings and attacks struck America. Initially, some Palestinians cheered at the strike. Those images were caught on television and broadcast around the world.

But most Palestinians watched the unfolding events in horrified silence. Streets were empty as the sun set in Jerusalem. Some tried desperately to call their families in the United States, afraid of the mass anti-Arab hysteria they felt was overcoming the nation—or afraid that their relatives might no longer be alive.

"Palestinians are like any other people under the sun," said Mahdi Abdul Hadi, 45, lighting a candle with other Palestinians in front of the American consulate. "Despite the current environment between Washington, Tel Aviv and Gaza, people are really seriously shocked to see such a catastrophe. Faceless, nameless people are hurt and no one can explain that kind of anger and frustration."

Others said they prayed that the perpetrators would not turn out to be Arab. Minutes into the attack, international news agencies were reporting that a leftist Palestinian faction, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, had claimed responsibility. A Palestinian reporter moaned when he saw the newscast, saying, "Oh, God. Leave us alone. Don't we have enough problems?"

Local DFLP officials were brought in front of the cameras to deny the accusation, and analysts expressed doubt that the small group had the capacity, money or will to create such devastation. "That is impos-

sible," Palestinian cabinet secretary Ahmad Abdel Rahman said unequivocally when asked if Palestinians might be involved. "No Palestinian could think this way. It is not the Palestinian way to do anything this way. It is too crazy, too stupid, too blind."

Indeed, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was among the first world leaders to publicly condemn the many deaths and express his condolences for the loss of life. Denials of responsibility followed quickly from both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, organizations that have used suicide attacks against Israelis in their strategy of fighting the Israeli occupation.

So why then, were Palestinians pictured celebrating in Jerusalem, in Nablus and in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon? "After the 1967 aggression against the Arabs, the American people in 17 major cities took to the streets, celebrating Israel's victory," remembers Faisal Abu Kishlik, a man in his fifties.

That war was when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip, defeating the Arabs and taking the land that Palestinians now seek as their state. It was the second time that Palestinians had been made refugees by Israel and it was the second, but not the last, time that the United States sided with Israel over the Palestinian population.

"It is time for the American people to see that we are under occupation here in Palestine and what we need is to live in peace and to have our own state," says Kishlik, a graduate of City College in New York. "We want to remind the American people that what they suffered yesterday, we suffer daily.

American warplanes and American missiles are used on [Palestinian] police stations and schools and civilians. We appeal to the American people to do something about it."

And while the vast majority of Palestinians resent U.S. support of Israel, none are celebrating the damage caused by not-yet-proven allegations that this attack was crafted by Arab hands. Local Palestinian media reported a slew of death threats and angry letters sent from abroad via e-mail. The Palestinian Authority spent much of Wednesday doing damage control, repeatedly condemning the attacks and offering help in finding the perpetrators.

In a press release sent out that day, the Palestinian leadership said it was alarmed at the "almost overt jubilation of some Israeli politicians and official figures at what they consider a vindication of their stand," i.e., that Israeli efforts to squelch the Palestinian uprising are part of the fight against terrorism. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak could be heard on several television channels asking Americans to work with Israel in the fight against terror.

Under cover of the media focus on New York and Washington, Israeli forces entered the West Bank town of Jenin on Tuesday evening. Battles between Palestinian fighters and Israeli tanks, F-16 warplanes and paratroopers had left some 12 Palestinians dead, including a 9-year-old girl. Israeli officials said the invasion was necessary to clear out the "nest of terrorists" in the town after a Palestinian man with Israeli citizenship allegedly trained in Jenin blew up himself and three Israelis in the Israeli town of Nahariyya.

Perhaps the most strident Palestinian emotion was that of fear and uncertainty. "The world is totally different than yesterday," Abdel Hadi says. "We don't trust anyone anymore. We don't believe in anyone anymore. And one is even doubtful of oneself." ■