



## Sources of Resilience in Political Islam: Sacred Time, Earthly Pragmatism, and Digital Media

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Patience.

[The member] should have plenty of patience for enduring afflictions if the enemies overcome him. He should not abandon this great path and sell himself and his religion to the enemies for his freedom. He should be patient in performing the work, even if it lasts a long time.

*Military studies in the jihad against the tyrants* p.18.

### Abstract

The essay contrasts the relationship of time and temporality as expressed through the historical arc of Western modernity, with that of political Islam, which derives a very different concept of time from the Quran. The effect, the essay argues, is an asynchronicity between the West and political Islam that goes some way to explaining the persistence of the present conflict—with political Islam deriving forms of media-inflected ‘resilience’ from its ‘sacred’ time; and the West, paradoxically, becoming trapped in a ‘fetishism of efficiency’ whereby technological acceleration and media communication shapes its attitude to warfare. The primary consequence of this for the West is a logic that militates against a resilience of its own, and with it the diminishment of a cultural capacity to fight the ‘long war’ against the terrorism of the most radical elements of political Islam.

### Introduction

Notwithstanding the collapse of the ISIS caliphate project in 2017, a question remains: what is the sustaining basis for what Martin Rudner (2013: 954) termed

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the ‘remarkable agility and adaptability’ of Al Qaeda, ISIS and affiliated jihadist group since the late-1970s? And to turn the question around somewhat: what is it that inhibits the western democracies from adopting coherent and *long-term* strategies, military and political-economic, sufficient to defeat and destroy an infinitely technologically inferior enemy?

One answer to the first question might be of the ‘blowback theory’ kind that originally emerged in the 1950s to account for the ‘unintended consequences’ of CIA interfering in Iran and elsewhere (Johnson: 2000). The idea re-emerged after 9/11 and was widely articulated across the political/opinion spectrum in the US and Western Europe, from Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali, to Republican Representative Ron Paul and British MP George Galloway. Blowback was supposed to be the inevitable effect of an innately imperialist West, primarily the US, that keeps provoking subaltern populations into desperate actions of self-defence (e.g. Johnson, 2001; Chomsky, 2005). A possible answer to the second question we find deeper inside political philosophy, in Hannah Arendt’s 1958 *The Human Condition*, which questions the nature and efficacy of the (Western) public sphere that she believes subordinates the need for *determined action* to the numerous perspectives and interminable debates that characterises liberal democracy. She writes:

...the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised...everybody sees and hears from a different perspective. This is the meaning of public life... (p.57).

Putting these questions and answers together, and at the risk of a crude reductionism, it could be construed that the terror and violence of political Islam was something that the imperialist West ‘asked for’, and when it came, was too indecisive to do anything determined enough to bring to an end. However the resilience of violent jihad that is directed not only outward to the ‘Far Enemy’ that is the secular West, but also inwards toward its own community, the ‘Near Enemy’ conflict between Sunni versus Shia, moderate versus radical Islamists, as well as Western-oriented tyrants and unbelievers, suggests that simplistic answers to urgent questions will no longer suffice. That is not to say that these theories do not have certain descriptive logic and resonance. Imperial blowback and democracy’s vacillation-inducing ‘innumerable perspectives’ play a role in the reality of the West’s conflict with Islamism. They do make sense at one level. However, the reality of violent jihad is bounded in these perspectives by circular arguments, which feed into policy and analysis that create a stasis of theory that allows for hardly any evolution of, much less solution to, the problem.

This essay takes the problem of political Islam and its ongoing confrontation with secular Western democracy to another direction and level of theorization. It



suggests that by looking at the problem from the perspective of *temporality*—the cultural relationship with time—we more readily see certain contradictions that illuminate the present crises. Moreover, the insights offered here give a new angle, and better explanatory power, to Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis from the immediate post-Cold War era. The temporal approach, however, reframes Huntington’s idea of a clash between ‘the West and the rest’ (1993: 192). The ‘clash’ today is between the form of time that drives the technological arc of modernity, especially its ‘late’ modernity that is shaped and sustained by networked economic and media systems, and a sacred and ‘timeless’ relationship with time held by Muslims and mandated by the Quran. This ‘clash of temporalities’—and the human relationship with time is deeply cultural—has, in our late-modernity created a global *impasse*: a war the West cannot lose but cannot win; and a war that political Islam sees as preordained in time by God with his ‘vice regents’ (the soldiers and martyrs of Islam) having an infinitely flexible and adaptable role in bringing the predestined victory about.

The argument develops in the following way. Firstly, I will analyse how technology, capitalism and the *logic of efficiency* colonized not only economy, culture and society—but also the logic and conduct of war. This logic is expressed even more ‘efficiently’ today through advances in automation and computerization, with the pilotless drone being the acme of the two hundred year-old interaction between capitalism, time, technology and warfare. The logic shows also how, and with what effect, the West is locked into a particular relationship with a form of temporality that valorises speed and efficiency above all else. The section following that contrasts this with the sacred time of Islam. The Quran teaches that time belongs to God and that everything is already preordained in the life of individual, right down to the moment of his death. Faith thus has the potential to release the individual and community from the materially produced pressures of modern clock time. This has obvious advantages in the context of an insurgent political Islam. There is no pressure for the jihadi to ‘finish it quickly’ and defeats are not only made positive through martyrdom, but are seen as a stage to the final triumph that has already been willed. Moreover, the asymmetrical warfare that disadvantages the jihadist is countered by an active ‘asynchronous warfare’ where radical interpretations of Islamic doctrine encourages use of the space and time shrinking media technologies of the Internet to connect the faithful, recruit to the cause, and pursue unending jihad.

The dynamic ‘clash of temporalities’ is discussed in the final section. Here it is argued that the West is stuck in a cultural and technological trap of its own making. It cannot fight conventional long wars because of its technological cult of ‘solutionism’ (Morozov, 2013) whereby every problem in human affairs, and especially military ones, are seen as technological ones, problems that machines are designed to solve as quickly as possible. This orients the West toward automated (cyber) warfare, and to develop a parallel allergy towards any solution that require



many 'boots on the ground' and many years of post-conflict 'nation building'. Political Islam has no such problem with time because time for the jihadi is a weapon.

The essay concludes with a consideration of what temporal asynchronicity means from the perspective of the West. After 9/11, advocates in the West for the 'long war' were always marginal, and are today comprised of a range of mainly right wing and military focused solutions. Their conception of time is normative and unproblematic, and is therefore unable to fully appreciate the contradiction that is the 'clash of temporalities'. The essay ends by arguing the West *needs to be prepared and able to fight the long war* against Islamic terrorism, but to do that effectively, it must first recognize the constricting nature of time that Western secular culture produces.

### **Secular Modernity and War as a Technological Problem**

As justification for war, the idea that 'God is on our side' has been common since the very beginnings of the Abrahamic religions. *Bellum sacrum* or *jihad* has been used as absolution for human responsibility for countless atrocities and numberless deaths. The modern era of Enlightenment, of course, did not see this come to an end. During the world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, every German soldier had the words 'Gott mit uns' stamped on his belt buckle. And chaplains had long been attached to the allied armies, conducting large-scale religious services in battle areas to seek God's blessing for what they were about to do.

However, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the *logic* of warfare in the West had already been transformed. Modernity had made deep inroads into the conduct of conflict. Protagonists had moved far beyond the need to emphasise the religious element. This had become more a propaganda adornment as opposed to anything central to the prosecution of war. What William H. McNeil (1982) termed 'the industrialization of war' had by 1914 evolved into a world-scale mode, with well-established industrial, governmental and military links in the major economies that connected the factory to the front. This is, however, as Edgerton (2006:139) reminds us, the 'conventional story', one where industrial war meant more machines, and more lethal machines, which in turn meant much more killing. Of course this is true, but it is only one aspect of the process.

It is necessary to view the route from factory to front not simply as one of technological development. Industrialized war was an integral and often leading element of the general arc of modernity, or what Lewis Mumford termed 'machine civilization' (1955 :109). This arc oriented toward such things as *efficiency* and *speed* through the growing machine culture that emerged from the capitalism that was at the core of modernity. As Marshal Berman (1983:16) puts it:



The maelstrom of modern life...transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creating new human environments and destroying old ones, it speeds up the whole tempo of life.

In industrializing and modernizing societies, technology transforms economy, culture and society 'locking in' the speeding up of life and, as Andrew Feenberg (1999:96), observes, creating a corresponding 'fetishism of efficiency'. Superior speed and efficiency (through technology) have long been recognized as key elements in defeating an enemy. Sun-Tzu's *Art of War* has influenced strategists for over two thousand years. And Sun-Tzu's emphasis upon speed was reiterated by the contemporary philosopher Paul Virilio, whose social analysis of speed, what he terms 'dromology', from the Greek *dromo* for 'to race', has been useful for giving insight into the military relationship with technological speed. For Virilio, in war movement is everything and 'stasis is death', and the modern war machine is both a 'producer of speed' and a 'machine of attack' (1986:15 and 3).

Virilio's insights may seem obvious, but his dromology connects these back to the deeper relationships that humans have with time and industrial technology. Seen from this temporal perspective, technology deployed with the objective of killing the enemy has a paradoxical effect that is only now becoming salient. The physical speed of machines, of tanks and planes and rockets and so on, necessarily leaves humans in their wake. So much so that bodies become *obstacles to speed* and to efficiency. Infantry could not keep pace with the rapid movement of machines and so an always-reducing number of humans acting as drivers and pilots and target plotters become the key human element in industrialized warfare. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare has become much more 'technological' and as technology-reliance grew, then the dominant logic propelling the conduct of war became not so much religious, or even ideological-political, but that of the efficiency and speed-promoting elements of technology itself.

In his 1964 book *The Technological Society*, philosopher Jacques Ellul stressed the defining significance of technology (technique): 'No social, human, or spiritual fact is so important as the fact of technique in the modern world', and moreover, '...today, no human activity escapes this technical imperative' (1964:21). Ellul was predicting a form of domination by technology that we see evidenced in our computer age. He writes: 'Technique has become autonomous; it has fashioned an omnivorous world, obeys its own laws and has renounced all tradition' (p.14). Technology, in other words, begins to fight its own wars. We shall return to Ellul later. But to take up the point of autonomy: in history, warfare was characterized by people fighting people with weapons in between them, this was its tradition; now, renouncing this, war is dominated by technology fighting technology with people in between them. Computer technology is the zenith of autonomous technology. Its *raison d'être*, from the work of the Victorian computer theorist Charles Babbage, to Norbert Wiener whose 1950s work on military cybernetics presages the commercial Internet, was the replacement of humans (as obstructions to efficiency and rapid



mobility) as the guiding logic (see Author, 2016). And functioning as an autonomous logic (the combination of automation and market forces) network computing, as demonstrated in the growing application of pilotless drones by Western militaries, takes warfare to what is the logical expression of the imperatives of efficiency and speed that stretches from the high-tech, highly automated factory, to a video-representation of a front that can now be at any coordinate on the planet.

This suffusion of machine and computer technology in our late-modernity requires an accounting that is wider than the industrial and the military. It is the logic of capitalism that is at the root of modernity as a cultural and political project (Harvey, 1989). Today we live in what Steven Bertman (1998) calls a ‘hyperculture’, a culture of speed. More recently Hartmut Rosa has theorized contemporary life as characterized by what he terms ‘social acceleration’, a high-speed society tied directly to the modern relationship to industrial technology, indeed is ‘the core of the modernization process’ and the *culture* of modernity itself (2015: 35-40).

The culture arises from the economy and polity—and this flows into the shaping of military culture. So for example, that ‘time is money’ has been understood at a very deep economic level since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is the logic underpinning industrial-technological development from the steam engine to the supercomputer, and in western culture this has led to the largely unreflective acceptance of the idea that ‘faster is better’ and that this in turn is coterminous with progress. In other words, if machine processes can’t continually be accelerated, then it constitutes a problem—both for capitalism as an ‘efficient’ and competitive system, and for the Western-derived arc of human ‘progress’ that supposedly has no end-point (Gray, 2004:17-72). The culture of speed permeates western political processes too. Taking its signal from a regnant neoliberal globalization, Western governments (indeed almost all governments) increasingly find that they must ‘act with despatch’ (Scheuerman, 1999:27) in order to keep up with the pace of developments, usually crisis-management, and can only be fully effective if conducted at the executive levels of political power (Scheuerman, 2004:187-225).

With ubiquitous networked computing driving ‘machine civilization’ ever more quickly in its economic, political and military articulations, the West finds itself in a time-trap. This means that major conflicts have major time constraints. Short-termism in the corporate world replicates in the political culture, and the inevitable political pressure upon the military to ‘finish it quickly’ leads to an over-reliance on technological solutions that promise rapid results and the political dividends that supposedly will flow. For example, the US’s first major confrontation with political Islam after 9/11 saw the rapid implementation of what was called the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) doctrine that stressed computer-based communications and weapons systems as opposed to mass armies. US defence spending soared from \$293 billion in 2001, to \$1 *trillion* in 2008 (Rashid, 2009:L). This was led by ex-corporate CEO Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary



of State for Defense, who in an essay titled *Transforming the Military* argued the need for ‘rapidly deployable, fully integrated joint forces, capable of reaching distant theatres quickly and working with our air and sea forces to strike adversaries swiftly and with devastating effect’ (2002, p.27). Rumsfeld’s influential *Foreign Affairs* essay, which became the cornerstone for the so-called Rumsfeld Doctrine, drips with temporal terms that emphasise immediacy and the strategic imperative to act now and to seize the moment—yet it is sub-headed ‘riding to the future’. However, as we see in retrospect, little thought then or now was given to the future and how it might be created positively for the US—or for Afghanistan or Iraq.

This transformation of the military was a reflection of wider cultural changes in the economy and the polity in the US and across the wider secular West. War, like business, is technology-led and ‘solutions’ oriented. It was inevitable that little thought was given in 2003 to post-war Iraq because technological direct action would trump the ‘innumerable perspectives’ of liberal democracy. Except that it didn’t. The result is the worst of both worlds: direct technological action (increasingly through drones) that is highly problematic, and ‘innumerable [political] perspectives’ that are too weak and fractious to be decisive. And so we live in what Andrew Bacevich (2010) calls a state of permanent ‘semiwar’—ongoing war led by technology, that has diminishing capacity, political and military, for ‘boots on the ground’ or ‘nation building’ or ‘democracy building’.

### Islamic Time and Political Islam

In his critique of the Western idea of the Middle East, Edward Said argued that a common trope amongst French and British scholars, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century at least, was that ‘the essence of the difference between East and West is between modernity and ancient tradition’ (1978:269). Such ideas implied the superiority of the West through the experience of indigenous Enlightenment and industrialization, whereas the Middle East continues to be held back by an essential ‘Oriental backwardness’ stuck in the grip of Islam or tyrants (p.206). The concept of the ‘other’ is resurgent today with reference to Islam, and the ‘difference’ between West and East, real or confected, is gaining salience in some unanticipated realms. The Islamic concept of time is one such point of difference that the present conflict brings into focus.

The concept of time in Islam could hardly be more different to the Western perception. Time in Islamic thought is viewed ‘as a series of predetermined events binding divine omnipotence to the certain occurrence of each instant of a person’s life span’ (Böwering, 1997:58). Time belongs to God, and time has no real existence in Islam apart from God; indeed Arabic grammar, as Gerhard Böwering tells us, lacks proper verbs for ‘to be’ and ‘to become’—because all is already fated (p.60). This may seem a recipe for political passivity, a theological warrant for nonparticipation in the impiety of worldly affairs, because all is anyway *Insha’Allah*. And indeed for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Islam was politically quiescent. However,



as Gilles Kepel (2003:23-43) shows, the emergence of modern political Islam was a ‘cultural revolution’, one that would lead to the ‘clash of civilizations’ and to the ‘clash of temporalities’ that, I will argue presently, are important aspects of the present conflict.

Tracing its roots in Greek philosophy, Böwering identifies a form of ‘dynamism’ within the concept of time in Islam that expresses a potential whereby the omnipotence of divine time can combine with the *practical activity* of the individual and group. In Islam: ‘Eternity belongs to God alone, but God’s creature *participates* in the present moment’ (p.62). Here we find an interpretive gap between the irreversible destiny of the individual on earth, and the potential freedom contained in the ‘immensely practical aspects of Muslim thought’ (Böwering, 1997:62). Interpretive flexibility presenting as doctrinal purity was a talent expressed in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a founding influence in political Islam. Writing within the vortex of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Arab nationalist movement that threatened to engulf Islam as a cultural force, Qutb saw practical political action (an Islamic revolution) as the only way to preserve Islam from the growing depredations of the secular state. Whilst in prison in Egypt Qutb wrote a commentary on the Quran titled *The Shade of the Quran*, which he finished just before he was executed after being convicted for allegedly plotting to assassinate Gamal Abdel Nasser. Citing the Quran Qutb noted that God had made men his ‘vice-regents’, or representatives on earth. This idea leads to reflections in a later chapter in the book titled ‘Man in Charge of the Earth’ where Qutb writes: ‘Man is specifically taught and directed to study the world around him, discover its potential and utilize all his environment for his own good and the good of his fellow humans’ (Qutb, nd, p.50). And so in Qutb’s eyes at least, Muslims have the duty (through jihad) to use whatever God has provided on the earth, material and technological, to free themselves from encroaching barbarism.

### **Vice Regents and Digital Media**

In 2015, at the height of their power and influence, British Prime Minister David Cameron described ISIS as a band of ‘medieval monsters’. Monstrous killers, yes, but definitely not medieval. Militant jihadis of every stripe have no hesitation in utilizing their technological environment to the fullest extent possible. For example, Osama bin Laden argued that obtaining chemical weapons was a religious duty in the struggle against the West; and if they could, violent Islamists doubtless would, launch immediate and incessant drone attacks against New York or Paris or London. The killing and mayhem in the clash of civilizations that we see before us today is essentially the violent expression of an underlying clash of political ideas. In his consideration of how to be successful in the battle of ideas, French philosopher Régis Debray laid stress upon what he termed ‘the material forms and processes through which [political] ideas were transmitted—the communication networks that enable thought to have social existence’ (2007:5). In other words, the forms and processes of media.





Through its innovative use of digital media, ISIS has pioneered methods of how to give practical expression to jihadist ideology. Consider the audacity contained in the theological interpretation that gives political Islam such a powerful weapon: time belongs to Allah who preordains everything, right down to the time and place of one's death; yet jihadi media networks *shrink* Allah's time and space, to effect a *practical control* over these dimensions. The idea of the caliphate, for example, was obscure prior to 2014. But extensive use of media technology in the dissemination of a radical idea in order to cultivate support for it, created the basis whereby the idea actually achieved 'social existence' in Debray's phrase, in a few short months of feverish ISIS activity in Iraq and Syria that astonished the world, and brought it financial, ideological and physical support (up to 30,000 volunteer fighters from 86 countries) (see Soufan Group estimates, 2016).

It was noted earlier that the 1970s emergence of political Islam was a 'cultural revolution'. But it's more than that: evolving in tandem with neoliberal globalization and the information technology revolution, political Islam is also the actualization through digital media of a set of radical ideas. So in that respect, political Islam is more than a *mélange* of groups or sects or shape-shifting alliances—it's all of these—but it is also a *network* in the ideological sense, and more importantly a network in the *technological* sense. The Internet was created to be a distributed communications network as opposed to a centralised one, a network that would survive attack in time of war. The Internet could have been tailor-made for political Islam and the violent jihad it espouses. Writing just as the caliphate project of political Islam was at its zenith, James Meek (2015:6) gives a good description of what the network means for the survival of a mediated idea:

Western governments have mistaken a super-decentralised network, somewhere between a franchise and an ethos, for an agency with a postal address. (...) It is useful for an ISIS aspirant to have a Raqqa to go to for training, for battle experience, for validation by a set of jihadi peers. But for a mobile terrorist franchise like ISIS or al-Qaida, Raqqa is a concept, not a place. Once Osama bin Laden's Raqqa was in Sudan. Then it was in southern Afghanistan. It could be in Pakistan, in Somalia, in Yemen, in northern Nigeria, in the Russian Caucasus, or all these places at once.

The world wide web that sits atop the internet evolved from the idea of 'packet switching': the idea developed in the Cold War that the USA's communication system should be able to withstand a devastating nuclear attack. Possible only in digital form, different 'packets' of information from the same original transmission travel to their destination via different routes, thus assuring, through dynamic networks, that the information cannot be destroyed by means of a single attack. The network thus becomes decentralised. In a material sense, digital media technology has enabled political Islam to survive the defeats of 2016-17 in Iraq and Syria. ISIS remnants, likely the media savvy 'virtual entrepreneurs' who managed to survive the fighting, should be expected to fall back upon the



decentralised networks of the WWW, and redouble their efforts around online propaganda and instruction on methods of attack in the West—and against also the ‘near enemy’ in the Middle East, and further afield in Southeast Asia, or wherever opportunities for fresh recruitment arise (see Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2018). In the ideological sense, digital media networks also serve as channels for the propagation of ‘keeping the faith’ in the face of the shattering setbacks for ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In a related observation that illustrates this, terrorism researcher Thomas Hegghammer made some fascinating connections between digital media, or ‘high-tech media jihad’ to use a phrase by the journalist Alex Marshall (2014), and the devotional nasheed music that is so popular with jihadis across the Middle East. Hegghammer argues that this relationship ‘is one of the last major, unexplored frontiers of terrorism research’ (2015:1). As Hegghammer notes, listening to nasheed on MP3, on YouTube, or on cell phones, is seen by jihadi strategists as a powerful cultural practice that serves to ‘inspire the Muslims and demoralize the disbelievers’ (2015: 9). Such examples in the context of the clash of both civilizations and temporalities, indicates strongly that the West has no comparable weapon that combines morale, technology and worldview into a single media and military process.

### Clash of Civilizations

In the 1990s Samuel Huntington argued that the post-Cold War world was entering a new phase of struggle where ‘the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations’ (1993, p.22). Why ‘civilizations’—and why is this an important appellation? For Huntington, the designation is pivotal. He writes that: ‘civilization is a cultural entity’ (1993, p.23). But to define civilization, as Huntington himself is at pains to explain, is a difficult task, as the term has many cultural, political, linguistic and other elements. However, if we consider the temporal aspect as important, if not primary, in our fast-paced modern world, then the idea of a ‘clash of civilizations’ or the *clash of temporalities*, that I wish to focus upon, becomes a more readily identifiable fracture in contemporary world politics, and allows us to understand the war between Euro-American modernity and modern jihad in a different way.

Politics and its conduct are a key part of Western culture and its relationship to time. In her *Time, Memory, and the Politics of Contingency*, Smita Rahman observes that ‘Secularism as a political doctrine carries within it a particular time-image. It articulates a concept of time that became the time of the political—a homogeneous, sequential and linear concept of time, structured by progress...’ (2014, p.106). In the quest for progress through the idea of efficiency oriented toward production and profit, the secular West is pulled along, ever more quickly, in the wake of a culture of machine-driven acceleration. With the clock (and now the Internet) at its core, this relationship with an abstract form of time produces a disciplining time consciousness, as EP Thompson (1967) argued, where to an increasing degree we are compelled to synchronize (or try to) with its quickening



rhythms. The colonization of time consciousness began with the imperatives of 18<sup>th</sup> century Western industrialization to the point where today it suffuses all areas of life to become a largely unreflected upon and normative aspect of existence.

Benjamin Franklin's aphorism 'Time is money' suggests that in a culture of efficiency, we place immense emphasis and trust in machine technologies to save time wherever possible. However, as the preeminent technology creators and users, the West loses sight (and control) of the trajectory of technological development itself. Instead it is the imperative of abstract efficiency that shapes the tools that we make, in car making as much as in war making. So, we create societies and cultures whose main *raison d'être* is to regulate and make time 'efficient', but through technologies we little understand or control. As Jonathan Crary (2014:39) notes:

...the particular operation and effects of specific new machines and networks are less important than how the rhythms, speeds, and formats of accelerated and intensified consumption are reshaping experience and perception.

Human 'experience and perception' have been oriented in a particular direction for two hundred years: nowadays we routinely accept that if it's faster it must be better, must be progress. But what of the effects beyond the narrow instrumental goal of developing anything from a clever dating app to a pilotless drone? Well, we tend not to consider the wider implications when there is economic competition or military conflict involved. But if we take up Crary's point again about the reshaping of human experience and perception through accelerating and increasingly autonomous machines, we can return to the insights on the nature of machine technology provided by Jacques Ellul.

New technologies, some utterly revolutionary like the computer, are developed and introduced as a matter of course in modernity—this is what modernity does. But as Ellul (1990) points out, ordinary people as well as many experts, are so removed from a questioning of the effects of technology, we no longer ask: 'what price do we [in the West] have to pay for economic progress?' Instead we embrace technology that promises a more productively efficient life, and a more efficiently defeated enemy. Ellul (1990) conjectures that modern society has created a problematic relationship with modern technology—and with technologically produced time:

In technological society, traditional human wisdom is not taken seriously. Technology obliges us to live more and more quickly. Inner reflection is replaced by reflex.

Ellul gives the example of driving a car at 160kmph. If we thought about what we were doing, we would crash the car; we drive without thinking. Similarly, life dominated by computers no longer requires us to reflect—the speed of this life nullifies reflection—but to live by reflexes.



To be efficient in war, to have the aim and capacity to finish it quickly necessitates, since the time of Sun Tzu, a mastery of speed and of the effects of speed. However, humans are the weakest link here; we can only move so fast and think so fast until our part of the interaction begins to break down. As with the factory, so with the front—machines and systems promise to make production and destruction more efficient by supplanting muscle and mind with hardware and software. The military drone represents the cutting edge of the logical trajectory of the approach to war by Western modernity. It replaces the weakest link with the supposedly efficient technological force. However, by articulating a new way to conduct industrial warfare, it reduces yet more the capacity of the West to deploy troops, which has become even more politically and culturally unpalatable, and makes more difficult any post-conflict presence by the West with the task of ‘nation building’—to invest time and money and expertise in stabilizing zones and peoples in long-term and thought-out ways that dissipate tension and hostility. Who will rebuild Mosul, or Aleppo, or Raqqa?

Considering drones, these may be controlled remotely from the ‘factory’ of their underground bunkers, but the West cannot control their social and political consequences or calculate their cost at a ‘front’ that is not simply virtual space on a computer screen, but a real place with real people. Drone war is the technological articulation of a *culture-wide reflex action* as opposed to war steered through the wisdom and prudence of reflection. It is telling that President Obama ordered his first drone attack just three days after his inauguration in 2009. The assault was supposed to be upon a Taliban hideout in Pakistan, but instead killed a local tribal elder and four members of his family (Benjamin, 2012, p.7). President Obama routinely expressed public anguish at having to resort to this ‘solution’, and perhaps this constrained the scope and effects of the US drone war. However, the *New York Times* reported that the Trump administration ‘is preparing to dismantle key Obama-era limits on drone strikes...outside conventional battlefields (Savage and Schmidt, 2017).

It is significant that the West’s adversary in this clash of civilizations has been rising to battle in its own time. The original idea of the civilizational clash between the West and Islam came from Bernard Lewis, who in an essay titled ‘The Roots of Muslim Rage’ for the *Atlantic Monthly* in September 1990 argued that:

In the classical Islamic view, to which many Muslims are beginning to return, the world and all mankind are divided into two: the House of Islam, where the Muslim law and faith prevail, and the rest, known as the House of Unbelief or the House of War, which it is the duty of Muslims ultimately to bring to Islam.

For Lewis, as much as for Huntington, the ‘classical Islamic view’ was one that expressed a culture and well as a civilization that was beginning to ‘clash’ across a global context as never before. This was Islam’s ‘cultural revolution’



attaining a global consciousness that grew, for instance, in the wake of the Salman Rushdie fatwa in 1989, and in the question of the veil in Western Europe around the same time. This was the beginnings of what Kepel identifies as a 'grassroots mobilization and international action seasoned by the threat of terrorism' (2003, p. 187).

In the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the caliphate project, political Islam is in flux, and its ISIS fighters in a phase of 'dispersion and reorientation' (Mühlberger and Ruohomäki, 2017: 8). These fighters and their supporters and affiliates represent only a tiny fraction of the 1.6 billion *ummah* (Jones, 2014:26-27). Nonetheless both *ummah* and fighter reach to the same texts and traditions to make sense of time in their world. The concept of time is here mixed into the clash of civilizations as a 'clash of temporalities'. With the development of modernity, time becomes a technological problem for the West, whereas it constitutes an opportunity for political Islam—a powerful weapon the West does not and cannot possess in its present form. Islamic time, perhaps counter-intuitively, can thus be seen as a kind of freedom for the furtherance of jihad: there are no political or military deadlines, nor can there be, when God has already pre-ordained every detail of every life.

We see this freedom in the currently fashionable idea of 'resilience' in Western thinking on the effects of Islam-inspired terrorism. The quality is analysed and developed as trope in a collection edited by Leena Malkki and Teemu Sinkkonen (2016). The editors, in their introduction, argue that the West must acquire forms of 'political resilience' that are able to recover from and adapt to adversity stemming from terror attacks. 'Negotiating the flux without succumbing to it' as they put it (p.285). There seems little likelihood of the West 'succumbing' to suicide attacks by small and organized groups of jihadists or by lone wolf or freelance operations. However, Europe especially is being pulled this way and that as it responds, usually by reflex, to such attacks. The unilateral declaration that 'France is at war' by President Hollande after the Charlie Hebdo killings in 2014; the Bataclan massacre in Paris, the coordinated attacks in Belgium in March 2016 which convulsed the country, and closed Brussels airport for twelve days; the hijacked truck that slaughtered eighty-six people in Nice; the ongoing atrocities in Manchester, London, Berlin, Barcelona, and whatever comes next, and the Europe-wide rise of Islamophobia that is fuelling a resurgent far-right in politics, are all indicative examples that show that just as the West can no longer conduct conventional long war, in the wake of the disaster of the invasion of Iraq, neither can it be said to exhibit 'political resilience' in any meaningful sense. Arendt's 'innumerable perspectives' as characteristic of the liberal democratic public sphere is pertinent to Europe today, and the continent's fragile and paranoid political composition is antithetical to the singularity of purpose that a Europe-wide, or more fully Western 'political resilience' requires.



ISIS has a motto that proclaims that it will ‘endure and expand’. What this means, in essence, is recognition of the importance of time and space: to ‘endure’ over time and ‘expand’ through space. In the Western conception, what David Harvey terms ‘time-space compression’ (1989, p.240) generated by communications technologies, acts as a determining logic that modernity imposes upon industrialising societies, compelling them to move ever faster to synchronise with the imperatives of production, consumption and profit. Reflex dominates. For political Islam, enduring and expanding can be actualised through its Qutbist doctrine of exploiting media and military technology to ‘utilize his environment’ in order to actualize what God has already pre-ordained. The jihadist thus gets the benefit of both the secular and the sacred worldviews: they can act through reflex by eager use of communications and military technologies; and act through reflection afforded by the belief that God has designed their fate and so the duration of war, brief or long and drawn out, makes no difference to the guaranteed outcome. ISIS itself may well be unable to ‘endure and expand’, but the particularities of its conflict with the West suggest that the *ideas* of political Islam—the consequences of history, of religion, of ‘blowback’, of the techno-logic of liberal democracy—engender a form of techno-sacred resilience that the West cannot easily eradicate.

### **Some Conclusions:**

In what George W. Bush described in his memoirs as ‘the most important speech of my young presidency’, given in a broadcast on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, he declared:

War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder. This nation is peaceful but fierce when stirred by anger. This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing (cited in Bennett, 2013, p.59).

The temporal significance of these much-quoted sentences has been overlooked. Bush acknowledges that ‘timing’ was important in that it gave to Al Qaeda the critical advantage of surprise. However, US military might ‘stirred by anger’ would take back the temporal initiative and deploy it reflectively to ensure that the war would end on their terms. The implication was that the US was not going to be hostage to fortune or to time, but be in control of the nation’s destiny. However, the Rumsfeld Doctrine of rapid and devastating computer-assisted high-technology warfare was about to get underway, and not just in Afghanistan where Al Qaeda was hiding, but across what would become a much wider sphere. The Rumsfeld Doctrine was, as I have argued, the logical instrumental-rational consequence of the historical arc of Western modernity. The effect, which we see today, is that politically, culturally and militarily the US, as spearhead of Western modernity, is unable to control time in the way that Bush had hoped, or that any reasoned and reflective approach to war would warrant. Western troops and long



term Western commitment to war and its aftermath in Afghanistan and Iraq may have ended according to a schedule of Western choosing, but it was not in the way it's leaders would have chosen; withdrawal was a reflex-action in response to an earlier reflex-action—and a victory for political Islam.

The West continues to be historically driven by technological solutionism, and continues to perfect its military reflex-action, now, principally through drone war and conventional air war. The clash of civilizations is still a war of timing, but is one where the West is made vulnerable by its modern relationship to time. The West's technological and military advantage—so-called asymmetrical warfare—is countered, if not nullified by the advantages of asynchronicity enjoyed by political Islam. At some level of understanding, political Islam realises this, and consciously and continually provokes Western retributive responses that *can only be reflex-action* (Pemberton, 2011:251).

Of the 114 *surah* in the Quran, 43 praise the quality of 'patience' in the believer; this is substantial, and is more than half of the number that speak of the obligation of jihad (74) and slightly less than those *surah* devoted to the necessity of prayer (50). For example, *surah* 7:126 reads in part: 'Oh Lord pour upon us patience, and let us die as Muslims in submission to you'. A Qutbist rendering of the Quran's *surah* on patience appears at the beginning of this essay and comes from the so-called *Al-Qaeda Manual* relating to the 'Declaration of jihad'. This document also quotes *surah* 8:30, which states: 'Remember how the unbelievers plotted against you. They sought to take you captive or kill you or exile you. They planned—and Allah also planned—Allah is the best planner of all'. Time is thus immensely important for political Islam. Patience and planning coupled to the belief in the sacred time of God and the worldly benefits of manipulating God's time on earth, has given political Islam a political culture that is expressed through a resilience that shows no sign of waning, notwithstanding the constant assassinations inflicted upon its membership, wherever drones and fighter-planes and bombers can find them (Cockburn, 2017).

Since 2001 there has been no shortage of people, in government, in think tanks and in the media, who have called for the need to prepare for a 'long war' against political Islam. Officials in the Bush and Obama administrations have made explicit, as Glenn Greenwald (2014) notes, that 'the war will last at least a generation', or quoting Obama's Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, will be a 'thirty-year war'. However, as the logic of the argument suggested here would indicate, this is not, as Greenwald goes on to argue, an old-style military-industrial complex 'state of endless war [that] justifies ever-increasing state power and secrecy and a further erosion of rights' (ibid). Rights may be eroded, but not through any increase in state power over foreign wars. It is the power of states to control its destiny that is being eroded. It is eroded by the continuing evolution of modernity that sees war as a technological problem, whose logic gives licence to the pursuance of the solutionism of drone and cyber war.



The West thus confronts war through means and through understandings that Western culture produces. A particular relationship with time is at the core of Western culture, but it is a relationship that has become imprisoned in the logic of a capitalist ‘machine civilization’ that permeates all registers of Western society, including its capacity for war. This culture is pitted against a violent form of political Islam that has no such constraints; no need for the obsessive pursuit of technological ‘efficiency’ or for wars to be conducted ‘efficiently’ through technological means. Political Islam uses time both as a gift from God, and as a jihad-inspired obligation to use all technological means available (from the sale of smuggled oil and the AK-47, to the execution videos and Twitter feed) to bring about divine predestination.

What this means is that until clock and Internet time is viewed as more than a normative aspect of Western culture, and is recognized as something constraining and debilitating for culture and society, then ‘blowback theory’ will be the default position for rationalizing the rise of political Islam. And perhaps worse, the ‘innumerable perspectives’ of the liberal democratic public sphere will continue to assert itself to ensure that ‘everybody sees and hears from a different perspective’ (Arendt, 1958:57), thereby rendering the West indefinitely incapable of moving beyond the present *impasse*. And the vista from the *impasse* today is that the war between the West and political Islam has no end in sight, notwithstanding the eclipse of the caliphate project, because in this asymmetrical war with its asynchronous clash of civilizations, no side can prevail.

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