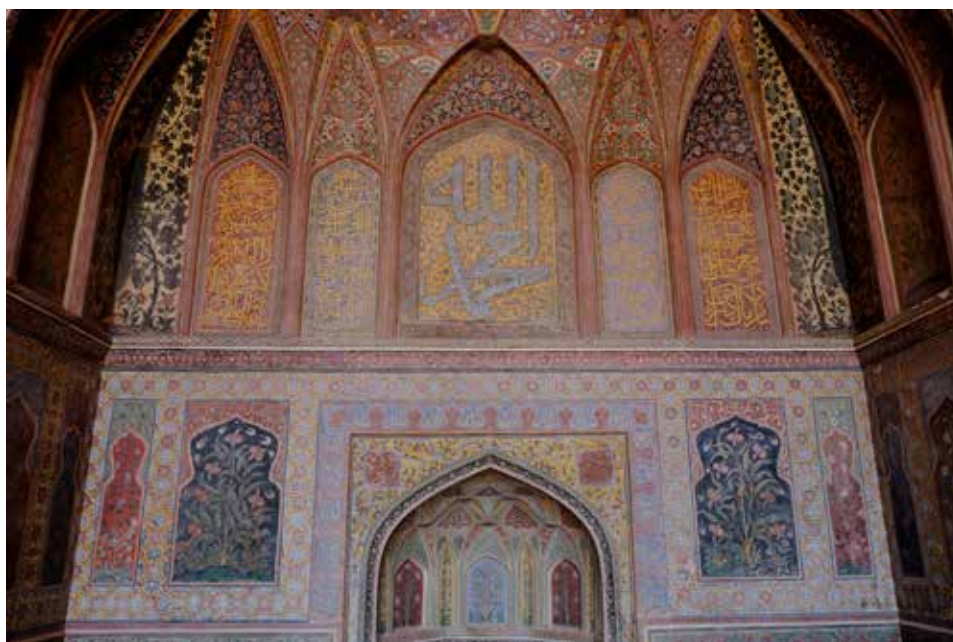


Virus and Terror

How the similarities between these two epoch-making crises are forcing us to change our thinking

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Prayer niche of the Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore, Photo: Stefan Weidner

In March, with the coronavirus crisis fast becoming impossible to ignore, I was taking part in a residency program at the Tarabaya Cultural Academy in Istanbul, working on my new book (due out in early 2021) about the aftermath of the terror attacks on 11 September 2001. When the corona crisis broke out, my work suddenly seemed irrelevant. It is virologists who are in demand now, not Islam scholars. And the post-9/11 epoch has come to an end.

For many in the USA, however, the corona crisis has been reminiscent of the period following 9/11. Aside from the fact that both 2001 and 2020 mark such abrupt and decisive turning points, might there not also be deeper connections and commonalities between them? It is this question – which will form the conclusion to my book – that I am currently grappling with.

The first question we all need to ask ourselves is how much control the state should wield in emergency situations, and what the dangers are,

in terms of data protection and the rights of the individual, of every citizen being treated as a potential threat, a potential spreader of the virus. This could lead to people having their movements monitored by tracking apps, as will soon be the case in Turkey, where anyone



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travelling by public transport will have to request a barcode so that everybody they have come into contact with during their journey, even just incidentally, can be traced. The restrictions currently being imposed upon us also raise the highly charged question of which aspects of our former way of life are indispensable and ‘systemically relevant’ in the long term. Or, to put it another way: to what extent are we prepared to accept a state of emergency, and for how long? In Egypt there were no football matches for years after the revolution, because those in power were afraid of the fans. In Afghanistan, the risk of violent attacks brought public cultural life to a standstill long ago. Now we find ourselves in the same boat.

The mentality with which many Western politicians have reacted to the virus is the same one that largely doomed the USA’s counterterrorism efforts to failure: a mentality of war and confrontation. During the corona crisis, Germany – on account of its past – has been a

laudable exception to this rule, just as it was in 2003 when the Iraq War was declared: our politicians have steered clear of warlike rhetoric. The black-and-white logic of confrontation is as useless against the virus as it is against terrorism. One thing which terrorists and the virus have in common is invisibility. Just as every Muslim was once seen as a potential terrorist, now every citizen is seen as a potential carrier of the virus – any one of us could become collateral damage in this war, and many already have.

This pervasive culture of blanket suspicion and general uncertainty is also a frequently underestimated source of psychological stress. Politicians try to respond to it with measures that suggest they are in control. But nobody yet knows which of these measures are actually useful or appropriate. The populism that sprang up in the wake of 9/11 and in connection with debates about Islam and immigration, meanwhile, is jeopardizing the effective containment of the virus by promoting distrust of the state (even if the fact that coronavirus measures are being thoroughly scrutinized is no bad thing).

If we look at current events in a broader, world-historical context, it is clear that the virus and terrorism are both unwelcome side effects of globalization. After 9/11, the response was a defiant “And now with a vengeance!”: a further acceleration of growth and international interconnectedness. The virus has abruptly halted this development. This time, we need to take the opportunity to change our thinking if we want to avoid similar crises in future. The idea of colonialism as a precursor to globalization should form a key part of this analysis. Just as terrorism is a deformed scion of past anticolonial liberation movements, real biological virality was both a driver of and an impediment to colonial conquests – with Native Americans falling victim to it on the one hand, and Europeans dying of tropical diseases on the other. The concept of virality also helps us to better understand modernity – which, in its march towards ever-faster communication, has infected and recoded almost every society in the world. Some have done very well out of this, while others have been plunged into an identity crisis by the conflict between the traditional and

the modern. This has led to terrible turmoil and division within these societies; Turkey is one example.

The spread of the virus and terrorism can also be explained, I believe, by problems of political legitimacy in the countries where they originated. A lack of participation and democracy fuelled the rise of terrorism in the Islamic world. The response to the virus in China – censorship and denial initially, then aggressive countermeasures – is also the result of a political system which lacks democratic legitimacy and therefore fears for its own survival. But the state’s paranoia and censorship were what enabled the virus to spread in the first place. Due to the stringent measures now being adopted all over the world, we are seeing a crisis of legitimacy in democratic societies too, as they suddenly find themselves having to respond in exactly the same way as China. In order to avoid the ‘contagion’ of such misguided policy in the future, it will be advisable to observe a kind of international social distancing when dealing with undemocratic political systems.

Finally, it is clear that nationalism (whose resurgence began with 9/11 and the populism fuelled by the terror attacks) has become a key factor in the way states have responded to the corona crisis. Almost all borders have been closed, there is little international solidarity, nobody is paying much attention to the refugee crisis anymore, and tackling the pandemic is treated primarily as a national task. The corona crisis is sowing the seeds of another virus, that of isolationism, which bodes no good at all.

The virus and terrorism are a prism. They split our societies into their spectral colours and show us who we are, the elements we are made up of, how the hardware beneath our attractive yet deceptive user interfaces really works, and what our priorities are, once we get beyond rhetoric and wishful thinking. And while this spectrum analysis is going on we look at each other, scratch our heads and wonder what sort of a world we will wake up in tomorrow.