

An Interview with Jason Burke

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Madrid11: How do you think we are doing in the war on terrorism?

Burke: It's difficult to give any kind of assessment it depends on what the criteria are for winning and losing.

There's a pessimistic way of looking at it that if our aim is to be free from the threat of radical Islamic terrorism, or even to diminish that threat substantially, then we haven't done particularly well. I don't think the threat level is much lower or higher than it was four or five years ago, which is essentially a low level threat with a potentially high level destructive capacity.



There has been a significant increase in the radicalization, leading to the mobilization of people across Islamic countries. There's no doubt that the current period is one of febrile political activity unrivaled since the early 70s perhaps.

However, there's also a more positive view, and one that I'm increasingly coming around to, namely that we simply have not seen the massive broad uprising of the Islamic peoples that Bin Laden wanted to provoke with 9/11.

As it seems, and despite the fact there has been a fair amount of radicalisation, the vast majority of the 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide have remained largely impervious to Bin Laden's and others call to arms.

Madrid11: In the places where someone like Bin Laden would hope to radicalize people, have you got a sense of the majority of people rejecting him on some level?

Burke: There's all kinds of cultural identity factors that are in play, and it's difficult to discern what is pro-Bin Laden and what is anti-American, for example. Equally, it's difficult to say what stems from a frustrated desire to be more Western and what stems from a powerful desire to reject the West.

In broader terms, there is a significant reaction against violence in countries which come to suffer from it. Saudi Arabia, despite all the various grievances that continue in the country, doesn't produce, or at least foment, Islamic radicalism. In places like Jordan and Iraq, you've seen a strong backlash against violence.

I did a very interesting talk show recently about Iraq, Al-Qaeda, and the death of Zarqawi. It was very noticeable that all the calls we got from Iraq or from the core countries in the Middle East were anti-Zarqawi.

All the callers that said "he's a hero, he will be replaced", came from Tanzania, or London, or Luton or Malaysia. And I think it is probably true that those who are subjected to daily violence, to the reality of violence, react against it, while those who are able to distance themselves, and to see it in conceptual and symbolic terms, don't react against it in the same way.

Madrid11: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, who writes many pieces from Iraq, has argued that people are tired of being pigeonholed into either supporting America or Saddam/Bin Laden. Are people looking for a third way?

Burke: That's exactly what my latest book is about: that third voice, which gets drowned out. Ninety per cent of the Muslim population are moderate. They don't like the Americans, and they don't like the militants either.

When I was in Najaf, I was speaking to an old man in the middle of a destroyed city. His house had been destroyed around him by the Americans and the Mehdi army. He said, "I wish they'd both go away. They're both strangers who came here to fight, I wish they'd just do it somewhere else."

Unfortunately, this kind of view is very rarely heard or listened to.

Madrid11: Do you think this is a result of the polarizing language that is used in the war on terror?

Burke: Yes, and it is painfully obvious. "With us or against us", for example, is not just what Bush has been saying, but also Bin Laden. Bin Laden said that it was "time for all Muslims to define themselves", which is essentially "you're with us or you're against us".

One of the great tragedies is that, as a result, taking a position that is pro-American has come to be seen as being synonymous with being a traitor to one's culture and one's identity.

That's the result of the grotesque strategic errors that have been made in the "war on terror" and those prosecuting it are beginning to become aware of that.

Madrid11: You have argued that the Western view of Islam is fundamentally flawed. What does radical Islam mean to you?

Burke: There is a real problem with vocabulary. We talk of "the Islamic world" in a way that privileges one part of a person's identity over all others. It is as ridiculous as saying the Christian world, or the old (age) world, or the women's world all these are components of the very complex structure that is any one person's identity, which is a very dynamic and evolving entity.

Being Muslim is an element of an identity which is extremely diverse. There are people who see themselves as Muslims, and there are people who see Islam as a cultural heritage. In the case of Arab language speakers, it is often also viewed as a linguistic heritage, a historic heritage.

There are others who see Islam in purely religious terms. But when you start talking about it in religious terms, you then also have to distinguish between the different ways in which it manifests itself in the day to day business of living.

There are differences within "The Islamic world" that are far greater than the differences between "the Islamic world" and the rest. When I sat in a café in southern Thailand - the Muslim part of Thailand - I realized that your average Thai Muslim has far more in common with your average Thai Buddhist than he does with your average Saudi. For a start, they share a language.

Conversely, all over "the Islamic world", wherever I've been, I've had conversations about football - conversations I would be entirely incapable of having in the United States.

Madrid11: Can you give us an assessment of the state of play in Afghanistan?

Burke: It's a very complex situation. I've been going there for 10 years, and even given the current problems, it's a far better place than it was under the Taleban. It now has the opportunities to progress towards stability and prosperity that it simply didn't have in the year 2000, and I'm relatively confident that - eventually - we will see something more or less stable, if not prosperous.

Kabul itself has been transformed. I was very impressed by the amount of Afghan commercial activity. Much of the North and the West are stable it's not Sweden, but it's not bad. The major warlords are not fighting each other any more. There is crime, but it's not rampant. It's extremely poor, and there's a drug problem but - by and large - a belt from Jalalabad round to Herat in the north of the country, including Kabul, is ok.

I was very impressed to see one area in the north of the capital, Jadayi Maiwand, which was completely, to have been raised and rebuilt. It's now a kind of shopping area, literally unrecognisable.

It's always worth looking at the regional picture, and - by and large - the regional powers are keeping their

noses clean. The Central Asian former Soviet republics are keeping out of things, and Iran is certainly not involved to the extent it was six or seven years ago.

Pakistan is more difficult to judge. It's hard to say whether the Pakistani state is involved at a senior and strategic level, or whether there are simply interests in Pakistan that are uncontrollable.

Madrid11: One of your most recent columns highlighted how dazzling the technological advances have been.

Burke: It's astonishing, even mobile phones are working. Six or seven years ago, there were about a dozen satellite phones and about half a dozen lines that went to Pakistan, and that was it for communication with the outside world. It was a black hole. There were no flights, certainly none that you would want to use. Now, Afghanistan is really being drawn into the global economy, with all the advantages and disadvantages that that brings.

Still, there are two major problems. The first is drugs, and the second is what's happening in the south. Both are avoidable. The drugs issue is a very simple one. Opium is a great crop, people are poor. Anything else is completely superfluous. As the Afghans say, "it's not our problem, it's yours". And you can see where they're coming from.

The South is a problem which is entirely self made. The Americans have made a hard job immeasurably harder through a series of strategic miscalculations that are based on a warped understanding of the threat and the situation.

The South was left for five years pretty much without security, any real military presence or development. And - surprise, surprise - the Taleban are back! To me, that isn't rocket science, there was a vacuum that was left in the South, almost deliberately.

I was in Kandahar in 2003, and people were saying, explicitly, that they don't really want the Taleban back, but that if they can offer security and some modicum of governance, then they will come back.

Madrid11: The recent British deployment is a positive step then?

Burke: It's great but it's four years too late. Plus, despite the fact that it has received a lot of attention back here, it's five thousand men in a province with a million inhabitants and the size of England. If we'd been there four years ago, it would have been a lot different.

Madrid11: Why have Western forces managed to achieve such relative success in Afghanistan, and failed so badly in Iraq?

Burke: Afghanistan was easier, in many ways. You had a country that was desperately tired, that was totally worn out, that had nothing, and that didn't like the Taleban at all. The Iraqis didn't like Saddam either, but there was a significant minority who benefited substantially from his regime. That did not exist in Afghanistan.

I was surprised to see the depth of pro-coalition feeling when I got to Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001. They also pursued an intelligent and coherent political strategy very early on - there was a Karzai, who, despite his flaws, was a very useful figure who has done a lot to give a sense of purpose to Afghanistan.

It was just less complex - the populations are similar, 20-25 million - but eighty per cent of the population had never had any electricity at all. Clearly, if you give them a ten watt light bulb, they're going to be overjoyed. The Iraqis were used to a far higher degree of provision of basic services, and therefore the expectations were far higher.

The Iraqis are also far more politicized. The political organisations in Iraq are far more coherent, and Iraq is a strategic environment which is far more heated in terms of the regional picture, than Afghanistan.

There was no army to demobilise, there was no major looting, there was no need to "de-Talebanise" the government, because there wasn't a government. In the end, the series of errors made in Iraq were decisions that didn't need to be taken in Afghanistan.