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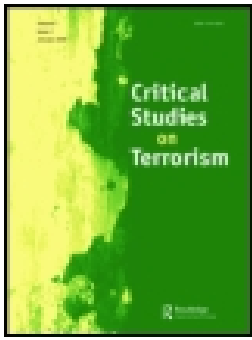
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## 9/11 as a policy pivot point in the security community: a dialogue

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## 9/11 as a policy pivot point in the security community: a dialogue

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Eamonn Grennan, former terrorism and transnational crime analyst with an international organisation, and Harmonie Toros, reader in international conflict analysis at the University of Kent, have worked together for the past several years, primarily as part of a team of academics and policy analysts offering counter-terrorism (CT) analysis and teaching courses on terrorism and counter-terrorism to military and defence officials of NATO and partner nations. This collaboration has led to an ongoing dialogue on terrorism, counter terrorism, and broader issues of international security, including discussions on the relevance of the 11 September 2001 attacks. This piece is the result of a conversation that occurred over virtual meetings and email during the month of July 2021.

**Harmonie Toros (HT):** This conversation started several years ago at the NATO School in Oberammergau discussing the relevance of the 9/11 attacks in international relations, and more specifically CT policy. I argued that it was not the attacks that “changed the world” as we know it, or more specifically the parameters of international terrorism and counter-terrorism, but rather the 2003 Iraq War. I argued that if the response to the attacks had only been the invasion of Afghanistan, we would not have seen such a devastating transformation of the Middle East, North Africa and beyond, and its repercussions on terrorist and counter-terrorist violence. You agreed that 9/11 in itself was not the “starting point” of a new international scene but suggested that it might be interesting to go backwards in time rather than forwards to, for example, the 1979 Iranian Revolution with the start of the Saudi-Iranian struggle for predominance in the region and the emboldening of violent Islamist movements. Despite our respective positions, would you say 9/11 persists are the primary temporal marker and why?

**Eamonn Grennan (EG):** Indeed, 9/11 remains the primary temporal marker for several reasons. In the NATO context, less than 24 hours after the attacks, the Alliance for the first time in its history invoked Article 5 that states that an attack on one of its members is an attack on all its members. This led to the launch of Operation Eagle Assist, support in patrolling the skies of the United States, followed by Operation Active Endeavour, a naval operation patrolling the Mediterranean. However, despite these military responses, the event also triggered a paradigm shift for military planners and war fighters. Much of the senior leadership had a Cold War mind frame and this new form of enemy did not generally fit within existing norms. For sure, various forms of terrorism have existed

long before 9/11 and conventional wars have always had elements of irregular and paramilitary activities, but these generally aligned with the overall end-state. The attack on the Twin Towers had all the characteristics of a temporal marker. It was a visual and exceptional event, it was widely covered by the media, and it occurred within a short timeframe. But when you speak of temporal markers you need to think of *for whom* it is a temporal marker. Is it a temporal marker for those fighting terrorism or for the terrorist? 9/11 may not have meant anything for an ISIS fighter but it meant something to western governments and policymakers. On the other hand, a temporal marker for an armed group could be the death of someone influential to their cause.

**HT:** Prior to the outbreak of COVID, I was beginning to think that the “era of terrorism and counter-terrorism” as primary security threat for western states was finally coming to an end and therefore, that we were also witnessing the end of 9/11 as the primary temporal marker for international politics. It seemed to be increasingly replaced by Russia as the primary security threat – for better or for worse. With the arrival of the COVID pandemic, I then wondered if health would become the next primary threat, with the start of COVID taking over as a new temporal marker. But neither of these would fit the conditions you lay out of sensational, widely covered, and taking place within a short period of time. Russia as a threat does not have a temporal marker as such, and COVID fits the first two but not the last one. Will the next temporal marker be something different, maybe a cyber one?

**EG:** It is possible that we will see a significant cyber event in the near future that will have long-term negative effects on society. There is already a recognisable temporal marker for cyber. The Stuxnet virus represents a moment when societies saw how the virtual can cross into the physical with clear and destructive outcomes. Over the past two years, there have been several events which have really highlighted the vulnerability of the information systems and the supply chains that we rely on.

**HT:** I think what temporal markers such as 9/11 do is also try to create the illusion of a unified experience – a “we are all in this together.” It creates a sense of a common purpose that justifies collective action against those who have hurt us.

**EG:** A declaration of war, a declaration of peace, the use of an atomic weapon, the fall of the Berlin Wall – these are all moments that people mark because they are specific and recognisable. 9/11 also occurred within a clearly defined timeframe. It is possible to note the time each tower was struck. This then allows one to ask the questions: Where were you and what were you doing at that time? How did it make you feel? Being able to answer these questions matters because it reinforces the marker and creates a relatable experience. It is not necessary for this connection to occur at the time of the event because it can happen retrospectively so long as a clear temporal marker exists. A good example of this are the many dates marked by various cultures and religions. Most of these dates precede anyone living today but they are still celebrated as though a clear personal connection exists.

**HT:** I agree. The unified experience didn't exist on the day of September 11. I have written of how I, in New York at the time, was mostly struck by how life “went on” despite the attacks and the towers collapsing, how I made it to work on time that afternoon taking the

subway. There's an interesting series of short films (11 9"01) that came out in 2002 in which the event means very different things for very different people: from the elderly grieving widower who, with the collapse of the towers, finally gets light into his bedroom and thinks it is a sign from his dead wife, to the young boy in Burkina Faso who hopes to be able to find Osama bin Laden to get the bounty announced for his arrest to pay for his mother's medication. We didn't have a unified experience that day. Indeed, maybe a cyber-attack that suddenly shuts down some central economic or social behaviour across countries would give a greater unified experience than the September 11 attacks ever did. Not all will be affected equally of course, but I can imagine the same question being asked: "Where were you when..."

**EG:** Another key aspect to these events being notable as temporal markers is the way they can be represented in binary terms. For example, it can be presented as two distinct time periods, i.e., before the event and after the event. This binary representation can also be used to create a clear "us" and "them" with no other options. This binary framework also allows for complex issues to be crudely reframed in simplistic terms. This device is used by a range of stakeholders – from political power to the media – to create what can be described as a "policy pivot point" that cannot be ignored, even by those who know that the turning point is being overstated. 9/11 became one such marker.

**HT:** Yes, even in the security community, there seemed to be a recognition that 9/11 was being overstated but with an inability to counter it. This is likely because 9/11 had such extraordinary political value. A temporal marker has to have a political function. The power of 9/11 as a temporal marker – or indeed a "policy pivot point" – corresponds to the extraordinary political function it played. And it has yet to be replaced by any marker as politically valuable.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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