



THE SYMBOLIC WARFARE OF 9/11: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENEMY IMAGE AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS OF THE UNIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

ARTAK S. KHACHATRYAN*  

PhD in History, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

ARAIK E. MKRTUMYAN**  

MA in History, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

ABGAR N. BARSEGHYAN***  

MA in History, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

MKHITAR R. GABRIELIAN****  

PhD in History, Yerevan State University; NAS RA, Yerevan, Armenia

Abstract

This article examines the 9/11 attacks not merely as a military event or act of transnational terrorism, but as a transformative symbolic performance that fundamentally reconfigured the architecture of global political meaning and redefined global political identity. Utilizing a cultural-anthropological framework, the study analyzes the transition from a single day of violence to a twenty-year Global War on Terror. The research focuses on the mechanisms by which the enemy image is constructed and the institutionalization of a permanent state of exception within the liberal world order. It argues that these processes operated not only through formal policy instruments but also through diffuse cultural and media practices that normalized exceptional governance across societies. By examining the intervention in Afghanistan, the authors demonstrate how security-driven discourses reproduced new forms of ethnocentrism, mass surveillance, and Islamophobia. The study concludes that 9/11 catalyzed a profound internal crisis of liberal governance and the emergence of novel modalities of global control.

Keywords: *September 11, state of exception, enemy image, cultural hegemony, Islamophobia.*

* Artak S. Khachatryan is a Junior Researcher at the Laboratory of Ethnographic and Anthropological Studies, YSU, and an Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, YSU. **Email:** artakkhachatryan@ysu.am **ORCID iD:** 0009-0005-5607-5903

** Araik E. Mkrtumyan is a Junior Researcher at the Laboratory of Ethnographic and Anthropological Studies, YSU. **Email:** aemkrtumyan@ysu.am **ORCID iD:** 0009-0005-7268-3925

*** Abgar N. Barseghyan is a Junior Researcher at the Laboratory of Ethnographic and Anthropological Studies, YSU. **Email:** abgar.barseghyan@ysu.am **ORCID iD:** 0009-0008-4789-4730

**** Mkhitar R. Gabrielyan is an Associate Professor and Dean of the Faculty of History at YSU, Head of the Laboratory of Ethnographic and Anthropological Studies, and a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, NAS RA. **Email:** m.gabrielyan@ysu.am **ORCID iD:** 0009-0005-2698-6052



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Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, cannot be reduced to conventional military operations; their significance extended far beyond the realm of warfare.¹ The tragedy that claimed the lives of three thousand people has often been interpreted as a profound cultural and symbolic confrontation that challenged prevailing perceptions of American hegemonic invulnerability,² while simultaneously establishing a fundamental binary in the new global politics: “us” (civilized, free, liberal) versus “them” (savage, extremist, Islamist). In the aftermath, many Western governments and security agencies increasingly embraced the principle of a “state of exception” in relation to terrorism, which precipitated an unprecedented process of securitization.³ Preventive wars, mass surveillance, cultural alienation, and—in some accounts—the gradual internal erosion of democratic institutions emerged as recurring features of the post-9/11 world.⁴

From the perspective of political and cultural anthropology, September 11 can be regarded as a ritualistic performance in which both sides—al-Qaeda and the US—sought to affirm and defend their own identity and authority.⁵ The former sought to destroy highly visible symbols of capitalism and Western hegemony; the latter responded by seeking to restore its “wounded honor”⁶ through a large-scale strategic and cultural counter-offensive, while simultaneously pursuing its long-term political objectives through calculated planning. This counter-offensive, however, quickly extended beyond the immediate reaction to 9/11 and has been interpreted by critics as contributing to a long-term effort to reaffirm and extend US dominance in the global order.⁷

This article seeks to understand how a single day’s military action became the starting point for a twenty-year cultural war, the rise of Islamophobia, the expansion of surveillance, and the internal crisis of the liberal world order. Focusing primarily on Afghanistan as the most direct and enduring site of the “response” to

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2002), 1–4.

² Jonathan Matusitz, *Symbolism in Terrorism: Motivation, Communication, and Behavior* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 15–18.

³ Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 22–26.

⁴ Mark Neocleous, *Critique of Security* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 1–6.

⁵ Siniša Malešević, “Cultural and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Terrorism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, ed. Erica Chenoweth et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 178–81.

⁶ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 45–48.

⁷ James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America’s Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 3–6.

9/11, we aim to demonstrate how the “war on terror” reproduced new forms of ethnocentrism, propaganda, the construction of the enemy image,⁸ and novel modalities of warfare, control, and governance. Despite the extensive literature on securitization, media discourse, and post-9/11 geopolitics, a significant gap remains in understanding how symbolic violence, cultural production, and security practices interact as a unified system of governance. Existing approaches tend to analyze these domains in isolation, overlooking the integrative mechanisms by which political power is reproduced across the military, cultural, and media spheres. This unified system operates through what may be termed a recursive loop of securitization: political power generates a state of exception, which is then culturally normalized through media to manufacture the public consent necessary to sustain that very exception. In this framework, symbolic violence becomes the essential infrastructure that allows material violence to be exercised without traditional democratic friction.

This article addresses the following research question: How did the events of September 11, 2001, facilitate the transformation of a discrete act of violence into a sustained global system of symbolic, cultural, and political control?

The central hypothesis of this study is that 9/11 functioned not merely as a security crisis, but as a catalytic event that enabled the consolidation of a long-term governance model grounded in the construction of an “indefinite enemy,” the normalization of the state of exception, and the expansion of cultural mechanisms—such as media and video games—that serve to reproduce and legitimize hegemonic power. This article advances the claim that 9/11 operated as a form of symbolic violence that enabled the ritualized production of political order, wherein practices of warfare, media representation, and identity construction became mutually constitutive, institutionalizing a permanent state of exception and transforming liberal governance into a culturally reproduced system of hegemonic control, extending security governance beyond conventional institutional limits.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach grounded in political and cultural anthropology. It combines discourse analysis, case-based examination, and critical media analysis to explore how symbolic structures of power are constructed and reproduced. The aim is to identify patterns, narratives, and mechanisms that link cultural production to broader transformations in global governance, rather than to establish direct causality.

⁸ Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 17–22.

The Selection of Afghanistan as the Primary Target of the Counterterrorism War

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US swiftly launched Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan to dismantle the Taliban regime, which had provided sanctuary to al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden. The legal foundation for this action was the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) enacted on September 14, 2001,⁹ which many legal scholars and critics viewed as stretching or reinterpreting existing norms of international law.

From the standpoint of political anthropology, Afghanistan was selected not solely for strategic reasons but also as a site for a ritualistic act of cultural retribution, juxtaposing—in a manner reminiscent of Said’s *Orientalism* and Mamdani’s critiques—the “savage” Orient against the “civilized” West.¹⁰ This intervention reproduced colonial narratives, disregarding local tribal structures and identities,¹¹ while the underlying motivation was the restoration of American hegemony and its punitive persona. Media representations and narratives increasingly reflected and reinforced Islamophobia and symbolic violence—through channels including video games, films, and memes—grounded in constructions of identity, power relations, and discourses.

The counterterrorism war introduced the notion of an “indefinite enemy”¹²—networked, diffuse groups operating without fixed boundaries.¹³ The strategy relied on preventive strikes, generating profound ethical and legal dilemmas, including human rights violations, indeterminate targeting, and the expansion of state power in ways evocative of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.¹⁴ This approach fundamentally altered the post-war global order by institutionalizing hybrid warfare and “special operations” conducted without formal declarations of war. Between 2018 and 2020, US counterterrorism operations reportedly extended to 85 countries.¹⁵

⁹ Authorization for Use of Military Force, Public Law 107-40, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 115 (2001): 224.

¹⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 17–24.

¹¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 235–40.

¹² Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 21–26.

¹³ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 287–90.

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [Левиафан] (St. Petersburg: Azbooka [Азбука], 2021), 5–6.

¹⁵ Stephanie Savell, “United States Counterterrorism Operations, 2018–2020,” *Costs of War Project* (Providence, RI: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown

This policy has been seen as fracturing cohesion within the global West¹⁶ and encouraging other states, such as Russia in Chechnya¹⁷ and China vis-à-vis the Uyghurs,¹⁸ to instrumentalize the threat of terrorism for domestic repression and disproportionate force. Among these cases, the Russian experience in Chechnya provides a particularly illustrative example, where counterterrorism discourse was used to legitimize extensive military operations and internal repression, especially during the Second Chechen War (1999–2009). Framing the conflict as part of a broader struggle against terrorism, Russian state narratives portrayed Chechen insurgents as elements of a global extremist network, thereby justifying large-scale security measures and the centralization of state power. This indicates that the post-9/11 security paradigm was adapted rather than simply adopted across political systems, accelerating the global diffusion of shared governance logics. A comparable dynamic can be observed in China, particularly in relation to Xinjiang, where state authorities have framed Uyghur populations and separatist movements within the discourse of global terrorism. This framing has been used to legitimize extensive surveillance systems, re-education campaigns, and securitized governance practices, often justified as necessary measures to maintain stability and counter extremism.

Similarly, in the Indian context, counterterrorism narratives have been mobilized in relation to Kashmir and broader Hindu–Muslim tensions, where security discourses have reinforced majoritarian political agendas. In such cases, the distinction between counterterrorism and internal political control becomes increasingly blurred, further illustrating how the post-9/11 paradigm has been selectively adapted to local political contexts.

In parallel, conspiracy narratives emerged, including LIHOP (“Let It Happen on Purpose,” positing US foreknowledge and acquiescence) and MIHOP (“Made It Happen on Purpose,” alleging orchestration), reflecting a profound crisis of trust¹⁹ and a critique of hegemony. Notably, this line of reasoning recalls dystopian motifs in George Orwell’s 1984, where a character suggests that attacks on London, and

University, February 2021), 1–9, <https://costsofwar.watson.brown.edu/paper/united-states-counterterrorism-operations-2018-2020>.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West* [Расколотый Запад] (Moscow: Ves Mir [Весь Мир], 2008), 7.

¹⁷ Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky, *Blowing Up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror* (London: Gibson Square, 2007), 109–18.

¹⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 61–67.

¹⁹ Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey Through America’s Growing Conspiracist Underground* (New York: Harper, 2011), 12–18.

the war itself, are state-orchestrated constructs intended to sustain an enduring external enemy image and maintain continuous mass mobilization. In other words, external war functions as governmental propaganda and internal terrorism.²⁰ As of 2025, 9/11 continues to be invoked by critics as a key instrument for justifying hegemonic expansion, although direct evidence of orchestration remains absent.

Liberalism challenges this logic by questioning how threats are constructed and scaled, as well as the internal crises they generate, thereby reshaping philosophical debates on the relations between state, individual, and society. Collectively, these developments reconfigure global security, deepening crises and pervasive fear.

It must be emphasized, however, that the choice of Afghanistan was driven not only by cultural-psychological factors but also by cold political calculations. In 2001, Afghanistan was designated as the primary target of the counterterrorism war not merely due to the aforementioned circumstances but as a result of specific legal, political, and strategic calculations. At the time, neither Iraq, Syria, nor any other state could be credibly linked to the September 11 attacks. This choice enabled the US to pursue immediate retribution while simultaneously advancing longer-term hegemonic objectives.

Afghanistan was the sole country that directly harbored the architects of 9/11. The attacks were planned and directed from Afghan territory, where the operatives also trained (despite 15 of the 19 hijackers being Saudi nationals). Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden resided in Afghanistan under Taliban hospitality and protection. The country hosted al-Qaeda's principal training camps (such as al-Farooq and Khalid), where operatives from across the globe were trained.²¹ The physical presence of these camps provided the tangible evidence required to ground a highly abstract war in a specific, conquerable geography. While al-Qaeda functioned as a decentralized, networked entity, the US military-political apparatus required a localized target to perform its ritual of retribution. By focusing on these training sites, the administration presented a clear mission to the public involving the measurable destruction of infrastructure and the seizing of territory. This spatialization of the threat allowed for a traditional military campaign to be used against a non-traditional enemy. It bridged the gap between the elusive nature of transnational terrorism and the conventional capabilities of a state-based superpower. The Tali-

²⁰ George Orwell, 1984 [1984] (Yerevan: Antares, 2012), 161.

²¹ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 456–60.

ban, controlling approximately 90 percent of the country in 2001, refused to extradite bin Laden even after a US demand on September 21, 2001.²²

The Infeasibility of Targeting Iraq or Saudi Arabia and the Strategic Primacy of Afghanistan

Targeting Iraq or, for instance, Saudi Arabia proved politically and strategically unfeasible. In 2001, Saddam Hussein's Iraq had no proven links to al-Qaeda or the September 11 attacks. US intelligence agencies did not assert Iraqi involvement at the time; such assertions emerged only in 2002–2003, predicated on allegations regarding weapons of mass destruction and al-Qaeda links that were later widely discredited. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 constituted a secondary and distinct decision, driven by oil interests, regional dominance, and other geopolitical objectives.

A comparable tension between symbolic representation and normative legitimacy is identified in Jürgen Habermas' prominent essay entitled "Interpreting the Fall of a Monument," where the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue is interpreted as a moment of powerful visual re-signification that transformed global perceptions of the Iraq War. While the image of liberation generated immediate moral resonance, it simultaneously obscured the underlying illegality of the intervention under international law. Habermas argues that such symbolic events produce an affective reordering of political judgment, in which the "normative force of the factual" risks displacing legal and institutional criteria of legitimacy. Crucially, he identifies in the post-9/11 period the emergence of a new doctrinal logic, whereby hegemonic power claims the authority to unilaterally impose a liberal order in the absence or failure of multilateral legal frameworks. This shift marks a departure from the cosmopolitan project embedded in the United Nations system and reflects a broader transformation in global governance, in which symbolic acts of liberation and security increasingly function to legitimize exceptional measures. In this sense, the politics of representation becomes inseparable from the institutionalization of the state of exception, reinforcing the recursive dynamic through which security practices are simultaneously justified, normalized, and reproduced.²³

There was likewise no credible basis for attributing responsibility for the attacks to Saudi Arabia. Although the majority of the hijackers were Saudi nationals, Saudi Arabia remained one of the United States' closest allies, the principal supplier of oil, and a guarantor of regional stability. Attacking Saudi Arabia would have risked losing access to approximately 25 percent of global oil supplies and disman-

²² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 500–505.

²³ Jürgen Habermas, "Interpreting the Fall of a Monument," *German Law Journal* 4, no. 7 (2003): 701–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2071832200016345>.

ting the entire Middle Eastern alliance network. Politically and strategically, such an action was deemed untenable both domestically and internationally. Instead, the US exerted internal pressure (leading Saudi Arabia to crack down on Wahhabi extremists). Moreover, at the international level, US credibility would have been severely compromised had a key ally been implicated in the attacks. Saudi Arabia, as a longstanding US ally, was politically positioned in a way that made direct implication as a “terrorist state” untenable. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia itself was a target of al-Qaeda (bin Laden harbored deep animosity toward the royal family). For the US, Saudi Arabia served not only as the primary oil supplier but also as the principal counterweight to Iran in the region.

Pakistan, unlike Saudi Arabia, might have appeared more “convenient” for counterterrorism operations (particularly given the ISI’s documented support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda). However, it was an official ally possessing nuclear weapons. An invasion risked triggering a regional war or even nuclear escalation. In Pakistan’s case, the US opted for allied status, applying pressure while compelling General Musharraf to align: on September 13, 2001, he granted airspace access, logistical support, and intelligence sharing. In both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, a multiplicity of political factors rendered their inclusion among the entities accountable for September 11 highly inadvisable and psychologically perilous. Afghanistan thus emerged as the most feasible and least politically costly target.

Afghanistan was framed as a “haven for terrorists threatening global security,”²⁴ a “failed state” lacking a functioning army, central authority, or international legitimacy.²⁵ Intervention there elicited minimal political resistance. The Taliban regime was perceived as the “easiest target”—internationally isolated and radically Islamist. Afghanistan was widely regarded as a strategically permissive environment, characterized by limited conventional military resistance and the absence of effective air defense systems.

In the initial months, US and NATO forces occupied the country with relatively limited organized resistance from the Taliban and allied forces. Beyond its role as a terrorist sanctuary, Afghanistan constituted the geostrategic “heart” of Eurasia. Control over Afghanistan offered a multidimensional strategic advantage, enabling influence over Central Asian energy corridors, the projection of pressure toward Iran and China, oversight of Pakistan’s northwestern frontier, and a geostrategic position adjacent to Russia’s “soft underbelly” in Central Asia. Within this frame-

²⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 61–67.

²⁵ Georges Balandier, *Political Anthropology* [Политическая антропология] (Moscow: Nauchny Mir [Научный мир], 2001), 121–52.

work, US policymakers remained attentive to enduring Russian and Chinese interests in Afghanistan, and the containment of any potential reassertion of Russian influence was consistently framed as a strategic imperative.

The geostrategic and positional factors in selecting Afghanistan had been paramount and openly discussed among American political and military elites since the late 1990s. Afghanistan's location is exceptionally advantageous: to the north lie Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (former Soviet republics); to the west, Iran; to the east, China (Xinjiang and the Wakhan Corridor); to the south, Pakistan, bordering Kashmir and proximate to India. Before 9/11, American geopolitical discourse, drawing on Zbigniew Brzezinski, Project for the New American Century, and RAND Corporation analyses, increasingly conceptualized Afghanistan as a pivotal gateway to Central Asian energy corridors, particularly projected Caspian Sea–Pakistan and Indian Ocean pipeline routes intended to circumvent Russian and Iranian influence. Within this framework, Afghanistan was simultaneously envisioned as an instrument for destabilizing the geopolitical buffer between Russia and China and as a strategically optimal location for the establishment of enduring US military installations, including Bagram, Shindand, and Kandahar. In *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), Zbigniew Brzezinski argues: “Afghanistan could become the beginning of the Eurasian Balkans... whoever controls that territory can influence the entire Eurasian continent.”²⁶

Thus, Afghanistan was chosen not solely because bin Laden was harbored there, but because it was the only country where the US could simultaneously initiate a counterterrorism war and establish a long-term strategic presence at the center of Eurasia²⁷—in the rear of Russia, China, and Iran.²⁸ In this sense, some analysts interpret 9/11 as having provided a “perfect justification” for long-standing strategic initiatives formulated in the 1990s, particularly those associated with PNAC. When the US withdrew in 2021, that overarching strategic project effectively collapsed.

The US fully exploited 9/11 as a “blank check” to advance its long-range strategic objectives—a reality now acknowledged in American political science as the “9/11 enabling event” or “the new Pearl Harbor” (as articulated in the 2000 PNAC report).²⁹ Concrete illustrations include Paul Wolfowitz's statement on the evening of September 11, 2001, suggesting that “now we can do what was previously im-

²⁶ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 124–25.

²⁷ Balandier, *Political Anthropology*, 31–55.

²⁸ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 148–50.

²⁹ Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (Washington, DC: Project for the New American Century, 2000), 50–51.

possible,”³⁰ and Donald Rumsfeld's internal memorandum on September 20, 2001, urging officials to “sweep it all up, things related and not,” reflecting an approach that extended beyond al-Qaeda to Iraq, Iran, and the broader region.³¹

New Forms of Propaganda: Media as an Instrument of Cultural Hegemony

Whereas twentieth-century broadcast media primarily cultivated a passive spectator, the early twenty-first century witnessed the weaponization of video games as an interactive, immersive vanguard in the global cultural war.³² In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the US Pentagon recognized interactive entertainment as the most effective means to militarize younger generations and reinforce the already declared “image of the enemy,” thereby weakening domestic resistance and consolidating public support. This gave rise to the “military-entertainment complex,” a system in which military institutions and the gaming industry collaborate to create virtual spaces that reproduce discourses of global hegemony.³³

Political anthropology permits an examination of video games and media as ritualistic instruments³⁴ that enable players to “participate” in war without real-world consequences, while simultaneously shaping their identity or at least their situational self-perception as “civilized” heroes combating “savage” adversaries. This ritual is grounded in constructions of identity: the player assumes the role of a “white savior” who brings “civilization” to territories, such as Afghanistan or Iraq, in virtual environments. Such games not only reflect Islamophobia but have been argued to actively contribute to it through stereotypes that deepen ethnocentrism and cultural othering.

Concrete examples illustrate this dynamic. Released on July 4, 2002, to capitalize on the patriotic symbolism of Independence Day, *America's Army* was introduced by the Army as a free game³⁵ and served as an official recruitment instrument, with development costs increasing from approximately \$7 million to nearly \$33 million by 2009. Players did not merely shoot; they learned rules, issued and followed commands, and engaged opponents invariably depicted with Middle

³⁰ James Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 287–90.

³¹ Bamford, *A Pretext for War*, 310–15.

³² Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 45–52.

³³ Tanner Mirrlees and Taha Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims: Digital War Games, Islamophobia, and the Global War on Terror,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2021): 33–51.

³⁴ Mirrlees and Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims,” 33–51.

³⁵ Matthew Thomas Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 12–18.

Eastern features—turbans, beards, Arabic or Arabic-sounding shouts directly associated with Islam. As the first state-funded video game explicitly designed for military recruitment and cultural dominance, it marked a novel intersection of propaganda and entertainment.

On a larger scale, the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* trilogy (2007–2011: *Modern Warfare 2*, *Modern Warfare 3*) and the *Black Ops* series sold over 150 million copies. In these titles, the “enemy” almost invariably bore Middle Eastern characteristics, with Arabic dialogue predominating and terrorists frequently uttering “Allahu Akbar” during attacks.³⁶ Existing research in media and game studies suggests that such games frequently construct terrorist figures through Arab or Muslim imagery, while positioning players within the perspective of US special forces or allied actors; in this process, political context is often reduced or abstracted, reframing war as a largely “technical” struggle between “good” and “evil.”³⁷ The game world is presented as pre-constituted and unquestionable, and player actions are framed not as mere military commands but as “missions,” subtly reinforcing a near-sacred duty at the subconscious level.³⁸

These games did not merely reflect Islamophobic narratives; rather, they can be understood as contributing to the reinforcement and normalization of such representations through repeated exposure to simplified and stereotypical enemy images. Millions of young people (primarily aged 12–25) spent tens of thousands of hours eliminating “Arab” characters, which, although virtual, may contribute to the formation of cognitive associations linking Muslim identity with perceived threat. From a cultural anthropological perspective, this exemplifies how entertainment functions as a ritualistic tool to prepare new generations for “perpetual war.” The ritual relies on identity construction: the player becomes a Western hero battling a “savage” culture depicted as inhuman, incomprehensible, and perpetually aggressive. This binary construction is reinforced through the silencing of the adversary. In these interactive spaces, the enemy is rarely granted a voice, a history, or a motive beyond a generic hatred for Western freedom. By stripping the opponent of their humanity and political agency, the media ensures that the player's violence

³⁶ Vít Šisler, “Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam: New Media and the Communication of Values,” in *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption*, ed. Johanna Pink (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 241–45.

³⁷ Frédéric Gagnon, “Invading Your Hearts and Minds: *Call of Duty* and the (Re)Writing of Militarism in U.S. Digital Games and Popular Culture,” *European Journal of American Studies* 5, no. 3 (2010).

³⁸ Cori E. Dauber et al., “Call of Duty: Jihad—How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2019): 17–31.

remains a moral necessity. This lack of narrative depth for the Other mirrors the broader political discourse of the era. Much of that discourse dismissed the root causes of anti-Western sentiment to focus on a simplified battle between civilization and its discontents.

While the causal relationship between media consumption and attitudinal change remains debated, a growing body of empirical research in media psychology and communication suggests that repeated exposure to stereotypical representations can reinforce existing biases.³⁹ Such exposure has been associated with measurable increases in implicit associations between specific cultural or religious identities and perceived threat—often estimated at 10–30 percent, particularly among younger and highly engaged audiences. In this context, video games should not be understood as producing prejudice in a strictly deterministic manner, but rather as participating in a broader ecosystem of cultural reproduction in which existing narratives are normalized, amplified, and internalized.

Video games also operated as forms of “virtual recolonization.”⁴⁰ On maps representing Afghanistan or Iraq, players could “capture,” “clear,” or “police” villages and markets without any political or cultural context. Such mechanics reproduced colonial narratives, positioning the player as a “white savior” bringing “civilization” to “savage” spaces portrayed as deserts, filthy streets, and ruined cities filled with extremists and chaos.⁴¹ For two decades, gaming environments offered a sanitized realm where American power remained invincible, serving as a psychological counterweight to the military's gradual loss of legitimacy and the Taliban's steady resurgence. This digital invincibility functioned as a form of cultural insurance against the mounting failures of the kinetic war. Even as the situation in Helmand or Kandahar grew increasingly precarious, the virtual American soldier remained a paragon of efficiency and technological grace. This disconnect between the pixelated victory and the geopolitical stalemate allowed the domestic public to maintain a sense of national pride and purpose. It buffered the political establishment from the immediate consequences of its strategic errors. The virtual space became a laboratory for a perfect war where the objectives were always clear and the moral outcome was certain.

When the actual intervention collapsed within weeks in 2021, the glaring dissonance between geopolitical reality and triumphant digital narratives laid bare the core function of the military-entertainment complex. Rather than merely compen-

³⁹ Tanner Mirrlees and Taha Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims,” 33–51.

⁴⁰ James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 102–8.

⁴¹ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 85–92.

sating for military defeat on the ground, video game propaganda operated as an enduring instrument of cultural warfare, deeply embedding Islamophobic frameworks of dominance and othering into global consciousness.⁴² The material consequences of this digital othering extend far beyond the screen, manifesting in the systemic alienation of Muslim communities, a documented proliferation of anti-Muslim hate crimes, and the reciprocal radicalization of insurgent factions reacting to Western neo-colonialism.⁴³

Anthropologically, these games produce a militarized identity in new generations while reproducing global ethnocentrism,⁴⁴ wherein Islamic culture is construed as a “dangerous other” and Western culture as the “benevolent savior.” This discourse directly aligns with the PNAC hegemonic project, with games functioning as its cultural arm, legitimizing the “war on terror” in young minds. Video game narratives can be regarded as a cultural extension or continuation of the Afghan intervention, achieving virtual victory where real defeat occurred. This leads to an analysis of hegemonic crisis, in which PNAC’s “new Pearl Harbor” ultimately became the symbol of the very crisis it helped engender.

Similar Dynamics in Film Production

A comparable process is observable in film production, where the post-9/11 period witnessed a surge of counterterrorism action films that not only justified American interventions but also constructed character archetypes in which adversary and ally identities are shaped not by race or religion per se, but by civilizational and political choice. In other words, the “bad” figure is not inherently the Arab/Muslim, but the one who rejects the American order; the “good” is the one who accepts allied status (often as a “little brother”) and assists American heroes. This representational strategy enables such films to preempt accusations of racism through the inclusion of “positive” Muslim characters, yet this positivity is structurally conditional upon their alignment with US authority, thereby transforming apparent inclusion into a mechanism for reproducing ethnocentrism as a form of civilizational hegemony. For instance, in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which depicts the hunt for bin Laden, Muslim CIA assets assist American protagonists, but they remain secondary figures lacking substantive development. The film emphasizes that “bad Arabs” are

⁴² Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 88–94.

⁴³ Dauber et al., “Call of Duty: Jihad,” 17–31.

⁴⁴ Tanner Mirrlees and Taha Ibaid, “The Virtual Killing of Muslims,” 33–51.

precisely those who refuse cooperation with the US.⁴⁵ Similarly, in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *American Sniper* (2014), Iraqi children and women are frequently portrayed as potential threats, while “good” Muslims appear solely as helpers who accept the American order. These constructions reproduce colonial narratives in which the Other is “good” only when subordinated to the hegemon, and “bad” when resistant.⁴⁶

By cloaking racial prejudices in the rhetoric of civilizational alignment, these media properties deflect accusations of Islamophobia; they achieve this by deploying “positive” Muslim characters—such as Nadia Yassir in the television series 24—whose inclusion is structurally marginalized and strictly contingent upon their service to the state. At their core, however, they reinforce that “goodness” is contingent upon loyalty to the American system.⁴⁷ Such characters are routinely cast as “little brothers”—assistants who support the American hero but never assume the lead role. This representational strategy sanitizes the conflict, substituting overt racial or religious animus with a discourse of “civilizational choice” that enforces a rigid binary: total assimilation into Western liberal-capitalist paradigms or relegation to the “axis of evil.”

This model was not confined to American media narratives; it was emulated globally, becoming a standard template for propaganda worldwide. In Russian films (e.g., *Brother 2* and *War*, both 2002), “bad” Chechens or Ukrainians are those who reject the Russian “big brother,” mirroring the American concept of the “loyal Other.”⁴⁸ In Chinese cinema (the *Wolf Warrior* series, 2015–2019), “bad” Uyghurs or Hong Kongers are depicted as disloyal to Beijing, reproducing the same constructions.⁴⁹ In Indian popular cinema, antagonistic Pakistani characters are frequently hyper-Islamized to signify terrorist threats, whereas “good” Muslim characters are defined strictly by their subservience to the Indian state and its protagonists.⁵⁰

This pattern of emulation contributed to a broader global circulation of media representations that frame terrorism through national security lenses in which each

⁴⁵ Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 55–61.

⁴⁶ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 210–15.

⁴⁷ Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 201–10.

⁴⁸ Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 88–94.

⁴⁹ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Dealing with Demand for China’s Global Surveillance Exports” (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, April 2020), 33–39.

⁵⁰ K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, 2nd ed. (Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), 142–48.

state constructs its own “terrorist” as an alien, savage force, thereby reinforcing domestic nationalism and intensifying worldwide othering. Consequently, 9/11 became not merely an American but a global cultural trauma, the reverberations of which persist into 2025. Although the direct impact of such representations on audience attitudes remains contested, research in media effects increasingly emphasizes their cumulative and structural rather than immediate effects: repeated exposure to simplified civilizational binaries may not directly determine attitudes, but it can gradually sediment in-group/out-group cognitive distinctions and normalize security-oriented frameworks of perception. In this sense, film functions as a complementary cultural medium through which hegemonic narratives acquire cultural form, achieve repetition, and circulate across global audiences.

Conclusion

The September 11 terrorist attacks are frequently presented as the “beginning” or a “sharp turning point” in global politics. However, a political-anthropological framework reframes these attacks not as an initial cause, but as a violent catalyst that ruptured pre-existing fault lines within liberal hegemony, security, and identity.⁵¹

The war in Afghanistan emerged as the most protracted and paradigmatic manifestation of this hegemonic crisis.⁵² It demonstrated that technological superiority and military might are insufficient to reshape complex cultural, social, and political systems. Simultaneously, the war evolved from a strictly geographic struggle into a pervasive cultural project.⁵³ By weaponizing broadcast media, video games, and political discourse, the establishment forged a stable image of the “invisible enemy,” thereby securing the indefinite prolongation of the state of exception and justifying an expansive apparatus of domestic control.

In this sense, the “war on terror” transformed from the neutralization of a specific threat into a novel modality of governance, in which the discourse of security superseded law, liberty, and democratic oversight.⁵⁴ The liberal world order, ostensibly universal in norm, began to operate according to logics of exception, selective

⁵¹ Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (Yerevan, 2013), 331.

⁵² Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Crown, 2012), 179–85.

⁵³ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 115–22.

⁵⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), 112–16.

rights, and cultural alienation, thereby deepening the very contradictions it purportedly sought to overcome.⁵⁵

The post-9/11 world revealed that hegemony is sustained not solely by arms but by narratives, images, and symbolic practices.⁵⁶ The Afghan intervention, coupled with its virtual reflections in cultural production, attests that crises of political power are frequently compensated through cultural overproduction. Ultimately, this cultural overproduction fails to reconcile the structural contradictions of the hegemonic crisis, serving instead to postpone their inevitable eruption. The collapse of the Afghan mission in 2021 acted as the definitive breaking point for this postponement. The material failure of the intervention could no longer be obscured by the symbolic success of its media representations. This moment of rupture revealed that a unipolar order cannot indefinitely maintain a state of exception when the ground reality consistently contradicts its foundational myths. The resulting crisis of credibility has left the liberal world order in a state of ideological exhaustion. It now struggles to find a new narrative to replace the framework of the Global War on Terror. That being said, rather than receding into the past as a discrete historical event, 9/11 operates as a perpetual cultural trauma that continually reproduces the logics of global securitization and systemic othering. Thus, the US-led liberal hegemony reconstituted itself by fusing coercive and cultural mechanisms of power, producing a governance model grounded in permanent exception, diffuse surveillance, and the continuous reproduction of an externalized threat necessary for its own stabilization. 9/11 did not simply trigger a war on terror; it enabled the emergence of a self-reinforcing system in which security practices, cultural narratives, and media representations collectively normalized permanent exception and reconfigured the liberal order.

The contribution of this study lies in its integrative framework, which brings together political anthropology, security studies, and media analysis to demonstrate how symbolic violence, cultural production, and institutional practices operate as a unified system. Unlike securitization theory, which primarily focuses on discursive constructions of threat within political institutions, this approach emphasizes the role of cultural and interactive media in reproducing and stabilizing those constructions at the level of everyday experience and identity formation. In doing so, it highlights the cultural dimension of global governance as a central, rather than secondary, component of hegemonic power. In this light, the post-9/11 order reveals a fundamental disjunction between symbolic legitimacy and legal validity. As the

⁵⁵ Richard Falk, *The Costs of War: International Law, the UN, and World Order after Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 59.

⁵⁶ Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, 12–18.

analysis suggests, visually and emotionally powerful representations of “liberation” can reframe political judgment and generate public consent, yet they cannot substitute for the normative constraints of international law. The increasing reliance on such symbolic acts to justify intervention reflects a broader shift toward hegemonic unilateralism, in which the authority to define and enforce order is detached from multilateral legal frameworks. This dynamic reinforces the institutionalization of the state of exception, demonstrating that the durability of contemporary security governance depends not only on material power, but on the continual alignment of symbolic narratives with practices of control.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm that this research did not involve human subjects.

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